

“I believe, Lord! Help my unbelief!”
4th Sunday of Great Lent, St. John Climacus
By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev
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Church of St. Nicholas the Wonder-worker

We heard the Gospel reading today about a boy who is mute and possessed is brought by his father to our Lord Jesus Christ (Mk. 9:17-27). The boy's father turns to our Lord for help. The Lord answers him: "All things are possible to him who believes." And this man answers: "I believe; help my unbelief!" After this the Lord heals the boy, who from infancy suffered from serious illness.

This dialog between the Lord and the father of the child speaks about many things. The Lord calls upon us and expects us to have faith, a faith which is sincere, resolute and unquestioning. This isn't the only time that the Lord questioned people who came to Him and asked for healing about whether or not they had faith, because faith is a guarantee that a miracle of healing will occur. God is always ready to come to us to help, to make a miracle and to heal, but our assistance is necessary in order for this miracle to occur. The nature of that assistance is that we must firmly and resolutely have faith in the omnipotence and love of God. Thus, our Lord says to His disciples: "if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move" (Mat. 17:20).

Faith is the foundation of the religious life. If we do not have faith, we are like a house that is built upon sand. If we do not have faith, then we do not have the inner core on which life should be based. In the world, many people who are unbelievers or who have weak faith suffer greatly, because within them there is emptiness. Only faith can fill human life with deep substance and meaning.

There are many people who, just like the father of the boy in today's Gospel, can turn to the Lord with the same words: "*I believe, Lord! Help my unbelief!*" These people seem to be on the borderline between faith and unbelief. Perhaps they are trying to have faith in God, but doubts gnaw at their heart. Maybe they are trying to live a religious life, but the seed of true faith within them is drowned by the cares of this age. Perhaps their soul yearns towards God, but the world around them works in opposition to their striving for the spiritual life. This is especially characteristic of the youth of today. It happens often that parents raise their children in the faith, but school tears them away from it. However, sometimes the opposite happens. Sometimes the children of unbelieving parents who study in an atheistic school end up turning to God. It also happens sometimes, that a person with deep religious faith who went to church for his entire life and would receive Holy Communion cannot free himself from doubts, and his faith does not remain firm and resolute.

Most of us are familiar with the works of the great author Dostoevsky, who had a deep faith, was Orthodox and was a member of the Church, but the question for him of whether or not God existed was never fully settled. Like many people of his time, he was on the borderline between faith and unbelief. He thirsted for God with his whole heart and with his entire being, but his intellect did not always respond to his internal searching. Additionally, it is as if all of his writings were an attempt to convince himself and others in the existence of God.

There is a scholar in Cambridge who is a very ill man.¹ He is paralyzed and unable to speak or to write. He writes his books with the aid of a special computer which has been created for him. He wrote a book called "A Brief History of Time," where in a form that is easy to understand he expounds the fundamental concepts of modern scholars concerning [theoretical cosmology] and the origin of the universe. He doesn't consider himself to be a believer and apparently does not believe that God created the universe, but every chapter of his book ends with the question: does God exist or not? And he demonstrates that scientific knowledge does not contradict faith, although he himself stands on the borderline between faith and unbelief.

What can help us to cross over from borderline faith to a faith which is firm and resolute? Above all, what can help us is the life of the Church and participating in her Holy Mysteries. Many people today say that they believe in God but they don't go to church, because they believe that God is in their spirit [and that is all they need]. In reality, God *is* in their spirit, as He is in the spirit of *every* person, but this is of very little use to them. A true religious life begins not when we rationally decide whether or not God exists, but when we begin to *live* our lives in accordance with the commandments of God. It is insufficient to only believe in God and say that God is in our spirit. It is also necessary to always remember God, to live with Him and to communicate with Him through prayer, the Divine services and the Holy Mysteries of the Church. It is necessary to live according to the commandments of the Gospel, to do good and to turn away from evil.

The Church gives us many ways which can help us to follow the Christian path to God. And today, as we celebrate the memory of St. John Climacus, it is as if the Church reminds us that the path of the Christian life, the path to perfection, is a very lengthy path that can only be followed in increments, one step at a time. The writings of the Holy Fathers, such as St. John Climacus and many others, whose works have come down to us, are maps that guide us. They help us to distinguish between good and evil, light and darkness, right and wrong, truth and delusion.

In the modern world everything is confused and distorted. Often something that is not at all good is presented as being good and as an example to follow, but in reality it is something that is not good and should not be followed. Therefore, we should draw our instruction for the spiritual life from the teachings of the Holy Fathers.

Let us turn to the writings of the Holy Fathers when we search for the answer to the many questions concerning our life today. Let us follow the path outlined for us by Christ Himself, His disciples and the Holy Church. And let us ask the Lord that this path will lead us to a resolute and firm faith, and that by following this path the gates to the Kingdom of Heaven will be opened to us.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen

Translator's note

1. Vladika Hilarion is speaking about Stephen Hawking, the English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author who was still alive at the time when Vladika gave this sermon. Professor Hawking was director of research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology at the University of Cambridge at the time of his death on March 14, 2018. He died from motor neurone disease, probably ALS, from which he suffered for over fifty years.