13 October 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology
‘On Taking Seriously the Faith of Feet’

“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, … ‘Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner’ Then he said to him, ‘Rise and go; your faith has made you well’” (Luke 17:15-16, 17-19).

The Samaritans were a heterodox Jewish sect, which attracted fierce hostility from orthodox Jews. The origins of the division were political, but the alienation became racial and religious, and sometimes broke into violence. Nevertheless, here Jesus recognises the genuine faith of the Samaritan leper, despite his heterodoxy; just as, according to the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, he recognised the faith of the Samaritan woman whom he encountered by the well at Sychar (John 4:1-38). And, of course, according to his famous parable, it was not the orthodox priest or Levite, but the heretical Samaritan who did the right thing and came to the aid of the robbed and wounded traveller on the way down from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:25-37).

All these cases raise the question of the priority of practice over profession—the priority of what we actually do over what we say we believe. Certainly, this is a question for people like me who earn their daily crust by thinking, writing, and teaching theology. It challenges those of us who spend some of the precious hours that God has allotted us in wrestling with what Christians ought to believe about God and the world, and about why they ought to believe it. This morning’s Gospel poses a question to us because it appears to downgrade the importance of belief and the importance of getting it right. As Jesus says elsewhere: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Now at this point you may well not be overcome with sympathy. After all, the discomfort of theologians is rather a trivial drop in the ocean of human suffering. But if
right now you’re feeling detached and safe, let me pull you a bit closer to the heat. For
the assertion of the priority of practice over belief doesn’t just pose an awkward question
to theologians. It also poses one to Christians in general, because Christianity is a much
more theological religion than either Judaism or Islam. Both in the past and in the
present Christianity is much more given over to theological enquiry and speculation and
controversy. I don’t think that either Judaism or Islam have anything like the classic
Christian creeds that churchgoers recite daily. In the heart of Judaism, it’s not a creed
that stands, but the Torah, the Law. And Islam is quite well understood, I think, as a
kind of radical simplifying of mind-bending, baroque Christian theological profession—
and given the season of the Church in which we are now standing, it’s only appropriate
to mention that one of the most mind-bending of orthodox Christian beliefs is, of
course, the notion of God as a Trinity. (My point is not that the doctrine of the Trinity
is nonsense, just that it isn’t common sense.)

So, this morning’s Gospel poses both to theologians in particular and to Christians in
general the uncomfortable question of whether we overrate the importance of what
people say that they believe. What are we to think about this? How should we respond to
the question? I have three thoughts to offer you.

The first is that I do think that beliefs are important. What we do and how we do it are
shaped by how we see or understand things, by what we think is real, by what we believe
to be important and valuable. What we believe determines whether we do anything at all,
what we do, and how we do it.

For example, are we like the university student who, staring beerily into his late-night
curry, once said to me, “Life is just a matter of what you can get away with—and it’s
awful”? Or, in contrast, do we see our lives as moral adventures in which we are called to
grow in wisdom and generosity? And are we able to believe in a more-than-human power
that will bring our immature and fragmented lives to completion after death, enabling us
to unravel the knots we couldn’t untie, bringing to good the wrong turnings we took and
couldn’t reverse, finally closing the wounds that never really healed? Life as a matter of
what you can get away with, or life as a moral journey with hope of arrival: it matters
which we believe.

What we believe and what we don’t believe does matter, because it shapes how we live
and what we do—and I don’t for a moment imagine that our Gospel reading this
morning means to imply otherwise.
What I think our Gospel reading does imply, however, is that what we say we believe isn’t always what we really believe. This is my second thought. Let me give it some flesh. When I was a chaplain of Oriel College in the 1990s, we used to hold very formal, very traditional Anglican choral evensongs every Sunday evening during term time, as well as on special occasions. After one of these occasions, I was standing in the undergraduate bar (as was my happy wont) and a female student came up to me and said, “Chaplain, I wanted to tell you that I really, really enjoyed the service—but my problem is that I feel such a fraud, because everyone in there believes, and I don’t”.

I can’t remember exactly what I said to her then, but if I were saying it now, it would be something like this: “Don’t think of belief in black or white terms. It’s seldom a matter of simply either believing or disbelieving. Most people in chapel (like most people in churches and cathedrals) believe more or less, and some believe less than more. Very few will recite every clause in the creed with equal conviction. So let me welcome you to the real, human Christian church, where everyone is somewhere en route, sustained and guided by fragments of belief”.

That’s one thing I would say, but the other is this: “Take seriously the fact that you went to chapel. And take seriously the fact that you took the courage to come up to me, in the middle of the bar, and in the sight of all your mates, to tell me how much it meant to you. It could well be that your feet already believe what your head has yet to”. That puts the point metaphorically, of course. The literal truth is that our minds are many-layered, and at a deeper level we can believe something that at a more superficial level we doubt or deny.

So, I don’t think that our Gospel reading is implying that belief is unimportant. Rather, it implies that what we do is a more reliable expression of what we really believe, than is what we say.

My third thought follows directly from this one. If human believing and disbelieving is as complex and subtle and many-layered as I suggest it is, then when we encounter other people with foreign or alien beliefs—other kinds of Christian, perhaps, or non-Christians, or even non-religious people—we should hesitate to take their labels, or even their overt self-descriptions, very seriously. What I mean by that is not that we shouldn’t respect them, but that we should be exceedingly slow to jump to conclusions from them.

For example, when someone tells us that they’re an atheist, what are we entitled to conclude? Is it that they’re absolutely convinced that there is no benevolent super-human
power, or is it just that they refuse to believe in a mean-minded, authoritarian, kill-joy God? In which case, they’d find many Christians standing shoulder to shoulder with them. But suppose that they’re adamant in protesting that they don’t believe in any kind of god, might it nevertheless be that their lives and commitments and actions actually betray a high esteem for human dignity, and a hopefulness about human destiny, that need a God to make sense? Remember: sometimes feet believe a lot more than minds know or mouths confess.

That’s my third point: if what we say we believe isn’t the final word on what we really believe, then it follows that we should be very careful—and patient—in how we read each other.

So, there are my three thoughts in response to the implication of Jesus’ recognition of the genuine—indeed, extra-ordinarily genuine—faith of the Samaritan leper; namely, that those who appear to have the wrong beliefs might still have the right faith.

First, beliefs do matter because they shape lives and action.

But second, professed beliefs aren’t always the real or the most powerful ones: sometimes dumb feet believe—and believe more deeply and strongly—than articulate minds and mouths.

Third, if that’s true, then let’s be careful and patient in reading each other, not jumping from anyone’s professed beliefs to premature conclusions about their relationship with God. Amen.