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A missionary in Africa was translating John's gospel into the local dialect. He encountered many problems with certain words. One such word was 'to believe'. There was no exact word in the dialect, so he approached one of the natives for help. When he explained his problem, the native replied without hesitation: 'to believe' should be translated: 'to listen with the heart.'

When the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith I don't think they were referring to academic knowledge that one can get from reading religious books or even from studying the Bible. Faith also involves 'prayerful listening with the heart' to the words of Jesus and being inwardly transformed by them. One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is knowledge. Knowledge in the Bible means entering into communion with a person – in this case, the person of Jesus.

That doesn't mean that learning about Jesus in the Bible is unimportant but at some stage or other the message needs to drop from my head into my heart so that I can make it my own.

Recently I was looking at a DVD of Jeff Cavins, a fairly well known catholic evangelist, and he posed the following question: "am I a fan or a follower of Jesus"? A fan will be a great admirer of Jesus, very uplifted with the stories he told and struck by the miracles he worked. But being a fan doesn't necessarily draw me closer to Jesus as a person or even inspire me to follow Him. A follower, on the other hand, will go much further, firstly by taking the words of Jesus to heart and then turning their lives over to Him.

I believe our faith will also remain somewhat academic until it's been stretched. Jesus will sometimes invite us to step out from

our comfort zones, like when he asked Peter to walk on the water, or when He asked the rich young man to give away all his wealth and follow Him. We know Peter was a fan of Jesus but having the courage to step on to the water shows that he was also striving to become a follower. Can we remember a time when Jesus invited us, as it were, 'to step on to the water'? What was our response? The rich young man turned down the Lord's invitation to follow Him and walked away a rather sad man. He may have been a fan of Jesus but becoming a follower was a bridge too far.

Another indication of a growing faith is when we no longer feel uncomfortable about practising our faith in public especially among those who are no longer church-goers. St Paul says in the reading today: 'never be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord'. A few years ago Pope Benedict, said that some people mistakenly believe that by letting Jesus have a special place in their lives, they might end up being diminished or deprived in some way. But he assures us that we would lose nothing of what makes our lives free, beautiful and great.

Our faith in Jesus will only 'fan into a flame' when we move from the notional to the real, from being a fan to being a follower, from shallow faith to deeper involvement.