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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 gets from reading religious books or even from studying the Bible or from your R.E. lesson. 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 completely.

I believe our faith will also remain somewhat academic until it's been confronted in some way. 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 all his wealth to the poor and follow Him. We know Peter was a fan of Jesus but having the courage to step on to the water shows he was prepared to risk his life on becoming a follower. Can we remember a time when Jesus invited us, as it were, 'to step on to the water'? What was our response? I often say to couples co-habiting; 'if you love your fiancé why don't you 'step on to the water'

and make your vows before the Lord. What's stopping you? The rich young man turned down the Lord's invitation to follow Him and walked away a rather sad man. How many men called to the priesthood are like that young man.

Another indication of a growing faith is when we no longer feel uncomfortable about practising our faith or witnessing to it especially among those whose faith is lukewarm. 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 a shallow cultural faith to deeper commitment.