May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, Trinity has produced a saint! Who knew! … looking around the place?

Well if you’d done just that – looked around – precisely 200 years ago, on a Sunday evening in mid-October 1819, you would indeed have seen John Henry Newman, an eighteen-year-old undergraduate, sitting in this very chapel, in these very stalls. He will have worshipped with almost the same words as we do this evening. And he will have wondered, like you, what his life should be about.

Perhaps, with you, he will have swept out once the service is finished, his gown billowing; making his way across Durham Quad to dinner. And some time later, perhaps he too will have wandered up to the Porter’s Lodge to check his pigeon-hole, and thumbed the flyers inviting him to consider a career in fin-tech solutions, the Big Four, or City Law.

Newman followed a different path. He had already experienced a powerful conversion as a teenager just before coming up to Oxford: a deeply Protestant conversion where he was overwhelmed by both his own sense of sin and God’s forgiveness of it through Christ’s atoning death on a cross. For Newman, the appropriate response to God for such forgiveness was a changed life, a life of the mind pursuing holiness and right belief.

In time, Newman’s understanding of what holiness looked like, and indeed, the source and consequence of right belief, would, famously, evolve. Newman’s odyssey from Hot Prot, Bible-thumping, Trinity teenager to become the leading light of the Church of England’s smells and bells brigade, and, from thence, into the Roman Catholic Church, winding up a Cardinal – was the most notorious case of ‘I changed my mind’ in nineteenth-century England.

And yet, you may be wondering whether anything about Newman – his life as a Christian, and now his being made a saint – had much to do with mind at all. Why are we celebrating him in a university, a supposed seat of rationality, you might ask? Isn’t this talk of faith and saints the opposite of reason – a negation of what we’re here for?
That first line of our New Testament reading seemed to say it all: ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’. That makes faith sound like hoping on illusions; setting all your store on something you can’t even see or prove by evidence. Newman can’t have been much of an advert for the Oxford mind, you might conclude: if he concerned himself so much with faith.

Well, tonight I want to persuade you otherwise. I want you to sweep out of this chapel, gown billowing or otherwise, willing to change your mind: about what you think faith is, what reason is, and what you think your life could be about.

And I’m going to do that with the help of a couple of sermons on that verse from Hebrews, preached 180 years ago, about 200 metres that way in the University Church, by one John Henry Newman.

I

For Newman believed these two ‘habits of mind’ as he called them – Faith and Reason – are both more similar and more contrasting than many people really assume.

Faith is not the opposite of Reason – a kind of blind knowing that avoids entirely the testing of testimony or seeking proof like Reason demands.

Nor is Faith simply a weaker version of Reason – one that accepts less or a lower level of evidence, making do with vague or defective proofs.

Nor, even, is Faith a minor add-on to Reason, where, say, most of what you believe is a structure built on Reason, and Faith is a kind of moral quality overlying it. This would suggest we make up our minds by reasoning on evidence, and tack on Faith for morality, and may be the nice music.

None of these definitions of Faith quite cut it for Newman; nor the way they allege Reason works either. People of faith do take evidence seriously, Newman pointed out. But there was clearly something happening when one person considered something good evidence of a religious truth, and another person wasn’t convinced. That isn’t just a case of weaker proof, or the two agreeing most of the way by Reason, and one tacking on morality.

No. The difference, Newman argued, was the way their mind was disposed beforehand, how their heart was configured to receive the world and venture within it. Newman described Faith as: ‘the reasoning of a religious mind, or of what Scripture calls a right or renewed heart.’

Reasoning, Newman observed, actually depends on a whole set of antecedents, or things assumed before and during the mind’s processing of evidence – an argument developed after Immanuel Kant. ‘Reason does not really perceive anything’, Newman went on; ‘but it is a faculty of proceeding from things that are perceived to things which are not’. Reason certifies the existence of things we have no sensory evidence for – time, for instance; or perhaps even love between two people, which transcends the sensory experience. Reason works with hypotheses of things already known, already assumed to be true.

Faith, then, for Newman, was an exercise of Reason – this moving in steps from something perceived to the imperceptible – but one which works with particular hypotheses. The
religious mind acknowledges the influence of hopes and fears and existing opinions. From this it speculates and commits itself in the future even when it cannot make sure of it.

This is why the letter to the Hebrews talks about faith as ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’. Faith concerns hope – a grounded, trusting desire, and a belief that what cannot be wholly perceived is nonetheless there, independent of sensory certainty.

All this, Newman acknowledged, might be taken to confirm that faith is indeed *irrational*. Not that it has no grounds in evidence; but because it appears dependent on what he called a bias of the mind, before evidence.

And yet, Newman insisted, there are plenty of other exercises of Reason that are, when critically examined, unreasonable or biased – at least, to those of a different mind. So many people draw different deductions from common facts: they see the same sky and assume different weathers; they see the same actions of individuals – the same political leader, say, and while some infer moral greatness and admirable leadership, others see... the opposite, and dismiss their opponents’ reasoning.

We also know our individual sensory perception is open to deception: magicians would soon be out of a job if not; and memory can prove unreliable. All this implies Reason really is a processing of perception subject to distinct mental perspectives. As humans we must assume something to prove anything, and gain nothing, least of all certainty, without a degree of stepping forward to test our pre-judgements about the world.

**II**

Newman’s point in all this was: don’t be surprised to find the evidence of Christianity does not perform an office it was never intended to. The evidence of Christianity is not going to prove Christianity for certain to anyone who does not yet have the mind willingly configured or open to it. Studying the universe will not lead everyone to Reason a Creator God. Atheists look at the same evidence, and come up with a philosophy equally consistent with the phenomena of the natural world, Newman declared, two decades before Darwin.

But what, then, should those atheists, those still unconvinced by Christianity do?

Newman’s answer was: examine your own Reasoning – the way you process perception and experience, and so seek to find certainty in life. Are you expecting God to offer some bold proof right in front of you? Would you only ever venture to believe if you expected to be sure? Newman wondered if such a way of living might actually be like crawling along the ground, when really, you were made to soar.

What if God does not deal in big evidence. What if God’s way is to speak less loudly the more God promises. What if God intends us to risk it all, as by such risks we win a greater prize. God lovingly puts it into our hands to examine this life and existence with our best judgement, reject this and accept that, inviting us to strain, openly and keenly for that whisper, that glancing touch, that glimpse of glory, that tells us love and holiness create, redeem and sustain this reality.
For Newman, it seemed appropriate that Divine Truth should be attained by this subtle and indirect method, a method less tangible than others, less open to analysis. Because it showed Faith to be a process of Reason where so much depended on the character of the mind itself.

For a mind which sits back and expects to be wowed by proof, or a Reasoning which is reserved, cold and critical, will not be open to receive the grace which shapes the prejudgements of the religious mind. It lacks the character of courage, a willingness to risk, to venture, to let its own love draw itself towards the very love that called it into existence.

For Newman, the mind which seeks God is a generous mind, open, and hopeful. We might compare it to the character of someone ready to risk being loved entirely for who they are, not bound by what they can prove; and open to returning love with all of themselves, trusting they will never lose out by loving so deeply.

III

Which is why Newman concluded his sermons on Faith and Reason by evoking our Gospel story – that time, early in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus stood in Simon-Peter’s boat, and having taught the crowd, he turned and said: ‘Put out into deep water and let down your nets’.

Simon’s answer was essentially: ‘we’ve tried that, mate; we’ve been searching all night, and ain’t caught anything’. But then he went on: Because you say so, I will do it. I will put out into deeper water. I will search some more, even in the depths I cannot see, because I trust you.

And that is what Newman invited his hearers to do in 1839 – and what I invite you to do tonight, and throughout your life. To put out into deep water, and let down your nets. To let your life, and your reasoning, engage with the fullest depths of reality. To ensure the character of your mind is one that is open and adventurous, and biased in the best possible way: to love and hope.

Because it is with such a mind, I trust, you will discover abundance in those depths. And you will proceed in your own way – like Simon, like John Henry Newman – from the perceived to the imperceptible, from guilt to assurance, from fear to hope, and from a sense of individual sin to the communion of saints.

Amen.