

The Basics of Christian Belief...

I seem to have been preaching since the beginning of the year about the basics of Christian belief. First, how everything starts not with our opinion about God, but with the Being of God himself. Secondly, how Christian belief consists entirely in deciding to root ourselves in God. It is a kind of surrender to the truth – like giving yourself up to the police. But people tell me from time to time that believing the Christian faith is the hard bit – because Christian doctrine is a tall story. Well is it? What many don't seem to understand is that you can't just hang around in a vacuum. You have to believe *something*. Something has to be taken from granted as you stroll between *Tesco's* and Sunday lunch with Aunt Mavis. So if people won't believe Christianity, what *will* they believe? Chesterton said, *When men stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing; they believe in anything.*

Some believe in *Feng Shui* - which I'm told we have to pronounce *fung shway*. This is the household-management scheme whereby you pay someone a terrific amount of money to tell you it's bad vibrations to put the aspidistra next to the wide screen telly. Many believe in their star sign – pampering their vanity with the conceit that objects in distant Sagittarius are taking an interest in their prospects in the National Lottery. Millions of people believe in the soap operas. Millions more can't tell the difference between soap operas and real life. For many there is no difference. Then there are those who believe in the diets and the fads – F-plan; five pieces of Virginia Bottomley every day keeps the Grim Reaper at bay; reflexology: people who have the utmost difficulty believing the Creed have no trouble at all with the idea that if you rub your little toe it repairs the back of your neck.

But now let's turn to the really stupid beliefs. There's materialism – the idea that reality is little bits of stuff, matter. And all matter is by definition in space. But the thought that there is only matter – materialism – is not in space. So even the affirmation of the materialist philosophy is a contradiction. Besides, materialism is only an aberration in the history of human thought. From the ancient Greek atomists to the modern physics of Werner Heisenberg and Wolfgang Pauli reality is far more mysterious than mere lumps of stuff.

If there is a belief even more self-refuting than materialism it is the idea of progress – the opinion that we are getting better all the time. This is the cherished view of all the media commentators and politicians of all parties. The idea of progress is an ugly superstition and flies in the face of experience. The progressives always refer to what's past as *outmoded* – a revealing word in the mouths of those enslaved by fashion as much in ideas as hemlines. They dismiss great civilisations of the past as *medieval* and *primitive*. They think that the past was hideously barbaric but that we are *enlightened*. Try reminding them of the gulag and the holocaust, Stalin's mass murder and the concentration camps. Try reminding these progressives that more people were killed in the Second World War than in all the other wars put together humankind has ever experienced.

Or let them examine their own darling, precious souls. When they look inwards, do they detect no greed, lust, envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness? Has

wickedness been recently abolished by permission of the great progressive thinkers of our age?

It is hard for those who live near a police station to believe in the triumph of violence...do you think that lions no longer need keepers?

The modern bishop rises in the General Synod and thumbs through the papers that had irked his wife; he speaks about torture (he is against it); and after lunch at the Athenaeum, he will appoint an ecclesiastical commission for the late repudiation of Original Sin.

But most people don't reject Christianity. They just don't think about it. There are people who are too *respectable* to soil their fingers with Christian dogma. The very word *dogma* repels them. They fear it means something that is demanded of them. They're right. They think of dogma as something *indecent*. They feel it's much too *extreme*. They prefer a bit of this and a bit of that, on the one hand this and on the other hand the other. Astonishingly, they think it's more reasonable – and certainly *nicer* – to believe anything and nothing rather than believe something definite and particular.

But dogma is a gift. It means the given truth. Given to us by God. For us men and for our salvation. As Chesterton said, *Dogma is the spike which fits exactly the hole in the world*. Christianity teaches that some things are true and that holding to what is true determines the whole course of the human soul. Not *whosoever will be saved it is necessary above all things that he thinks as he damn well likes*. But *Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly*.

Those words are the opening of the Athanasian Creed. They appear in Thomas Cranmer's Prayer Book. The word *Faith* has a capital *F*. And the word *Catholic* has a capital *C*.

Well then, having discussed the rest, let's return to the best. What is the Christian Faith and what does it require of us? I want to dwell on this for the next ten years, so I don't have to teach the whole of it in one morning. The faith begins with the existence of God. It does not begin with our belief in the existence of God. It begins with the truth of His existence. And, since it *is* true, it follows that we should believe it. Let's get this straight: it really is this way round. God first: our belief in God as a consequence of that supreme reality. The existence of God is a dogma. That is it is something *given* to us.

And we apprehend the existence of God by faith. Ah yes – faith (they say) that's the troublesome bit! As if faith were something tacked on at the end. Something you can't prove. Something that goes beyond reason. Something that, like the Red Queen in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* asks you to believe six impossible things before breakfast. That is not what faith means at all. Faith does not mean something pious and pathetic and Patience Strong. It doesn't mean either a vague inclination – as one might be inclined to believe that second favourites tend to do well at Ascot in races longer than five furlongs.

Faith means *keeping faith*. God keeps faith with us, and we are commanded to keep faith with him. Note: this is not an invitation to entertain an interesting possibility, an option for living, an example of a philosopher's right to do as he likes with his own mind. Faith in God – keeping faith with God – is one of the Ten Commandments. *God spake all these words: I am the Lord thy God – thou shalt have no other gods before me.* And if there is anything that upsets modern types even more than belief in God it is the idea that they can be *commanded* to do anything. They vainly believe in their own sweet autonomy and making up their own mind.

But cheer up! Because God is the good God, he ensures that his gift of dogma is a gift of love and joy. If we take God at his word, if we keep faith with Him – which is what the Bible and the Creed mean by belief in God – then he takes away from us all anxiety about our status here and hereafter. *If a man believe in me, says God, I will make my dwelling with him. I will be his Father and he shall be my son. And again, I am come that ye might have life – and have it more abundantly. That your joy may be full. And your joy no man taketh from you...*