

Sermon by Dr Bruce Stevens at Wesley 9am Service, 29th January 2017

How and why do we believe? (I Corinthians 1: 18-31)

Stalin heard **Maria Yudina** playing Mozart's Piano Concerto 23. He rang the radio station and asked for a recording. The manager of the station said yes, of course, but no recording existed. So they called the orchestra and pianist back, worked all night and the recording was sent to Stalin the next morning. Maria attached what can only be described as a suicidal note, "Thank you for your aid. I will pray day and night and ask the great Lord to forgive you for your great sins. The Lord is merciful and he will forgive you." Stalin was found dead later that day and the record was on the turntable.

This story captures pretty much everything I find **puzzling about God**. There is genius in Mozart, beauty in the performance, evil in the dictator and his great sins against the people of Russia. There is an act of courage, even suicidal madness, by a great artist. There is obvious devotion and faith in God. There is even some form judgment in the death of a ruthless dictator. But Stalin lived 75 years, ruling for about 30 years, perpetrating genocide on his own people. How does all this make sense?

What do you believe? How would you develop your own creed? Could you say "I believe in God..." At what point would you stop in the Apostles Creed?

How do we even approach the act of belief: **accepting something to be true**. In the Corinthians reading Paul offers three lens to look at a claim: "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" (1Cor 1:20) Paul is essentially asking for the so called 'smartest' in a society to come forward: religious and community leaders, academics and lawyers. But they are silenced before what God has done "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1:20).

In our post-modern, even post-truth age "Has God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

The centre of **Paul's claim** follows, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1: 22-23). Augustine doesn't get much good press these days. But arguably he was the finest mind for the first 10 centuries after Christ. He thought a lot about language, distinguishing *res* or reality from *signum* or sign. God is reality and pretty much everything else is sign. Christ is unique, because he participated in our world in a real way but it a pure sign of who God is. Augustine makes a wonderful point, also found in the prologue of John's gospel, that **Christ is the very language of God**. After this theological detour, I will get back to the text.

Paul was saying that the good news of Christ doesn't make sense to anyone. Rowan Williams in *The wound of knowledge* (1990, 2nd Ed) highlighted the difficulty of early Christian preachers proclaiming the "paradox of God's purpose made flesh in a dead and condemned man" (p. 13). Williams added the implication that "God is present in and works in human failure and helplessness" (p. 16). The more you think about Paul's message the stranger it becomes.

What did the **early audience expect**? **Jews** expected “signs” as the mark of divine authenticity. A miracle worker. A religious celebrity, at best a messianic figure to throw off the political oppression of Rome. **Greeks** wanted sophisticated teaching in the Stoic or Epicurean mould. Paul would have none of that, he was not a ‘spin doctor’. He did not run focus groups to design an attractive advertising campaign. He had a message: God had become vulnerable in Christ. As the great 20th C theologian Jurgen Moltmann said, “God pushed out of the world and onto a cross”. That was the astonishing claim made by the early church.

Now of course this could be simply wrong. But how would we judge that? What lens do we bring to a truth claim? Do we follow the early Jews and believe the sensational? About 60M voters did that in electing a president for the USA. Do we claim to be rational and scientific? The modern equivalent of ancient Greek philosophy. Or do we accept on the basis of religious authority – ultimately a claim that someone has received a revelation, which is what Paul is on about. Many millions of Christians would accept this path to believing, many millions would identify as fundamentalist but also many with a thoughtful orthodoxy.

I am not going to say there is one right way to believe. But I did some self-examination of how I believe and came to a surprising conclusion. The first few steps are not surprising: there is some value in each approach I have outlined. So essentially:

- (a) We should **leave some room for mystery** in any consideration of God and ultimate truth. After all science keeps surprising us with new discoveries, why should the divine truth be any different? The gospel of the early church was ‘hard to believe’ but arguably no idea in history has had as much impact on Western culture and world history.
- (b) Of course we **should be scientific and rational**. Truth is too important to approach it in a sloppy way. Good theology is the same. It should be at the very least internally consistent, logical and arguable from accepted facts – but not at the cost of putting reality in a ‘straight jacket’.
- (c) Here is my surprising discovery. When **I approach truth I include the emotional dimension**, essentially it has to ‘feel right’. I know, as a psychologist, that decisions made purely on a rational basis are not usually good decisions. This is a difficulty for people with autism spectrum disorder. There is also the test of experience. For most of us the most important decisions we ever made were relational – to marry a person or to enter into a live long friendship, or choose a career path, and who ever did that with no trace of emotion?

So back to God. What is obvious to me after my 66 years is that **everything about life is technical**. There is a cruel randomness alongside a beautiful order, industrial ugliness alongside the greatest reaches of human creativity, rampant human evil along with extravagant generosity, wicked problems alongside miracles of science. We inhabit a world in which Stalin or Hitler or Pol Pot are at home with Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela. I suppose the question I ask is **what kind of God belongs in this kind of world?** I do not think, at least for me, that this is a purely philosophic or even theological question. I would ask what kind of God ‘feels right’.

Of course this is not an easy question to answer. It is always personal, my response, and for what it is worth the only theological assertion that makes any sense is the **absolute**

vulnerability of God. This has come into sharper relief through discussions with a better theologian than me.

Shane Clifton is a quadriplegic. He had a devastating spinal cord injury just before his 40th birthday. He struggles with chronic pain and a profound disability that affects everything in his life. While he is remarkably mobile in his motorized wheelchair he also requires daily intimate care. He has written about his struggles in his blogs and a personal account with his wife Ely in *Husbands shouldn't break* (2015). I have just read his latest theological book on *Crip Virtue* (in press for 2017). He was keynote speaker at the Centre for Pastoral Care and Ageing conference in September and last month we caught up in a whiskey bar in San Antonio, Texas.

If you asked Shane why spinal cord injuries happen, he would say humans are fragile creatures. Under certain circumstances necks break easily enough. He uses the term “dumb luck” and would add that life is somehow worth the risks – even after a tragic accident. This comes under ‘accepted facts’, so I would agree with this. But can anything more be said? Yes, I think so.

God did not just **create a world of randomness**, of natural disasters, where most animal deaths are to predators, where free will has resulted in rampant human evil. Yes, God did create such a world but also inhabited it. That is Paul’s claim, “We proclaim Christ crucified.” A month ago in our liturgical calendar we celebrated Christmas, theologically acknowledging the incarnation, God became human in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. We await Easter when the implications of the vulnerability of God become abundantly clear. So what I want to advance is **this radical vulnerability of God is the only kind of God that makes emotional sense to me.** I have enough philosophy and theology to know that this is a very weak claim, but it is surprisingly important for my believing in God. I can’t accept Paley’s watchmaker God, essentially wind it up and let it tick. I can’t accept the God of a maze in which stumbling humans are left to find the one path to salvation. I can’t accept the God who authorizes a human institution to distribute ‘free passes to heaven’. And I can’t accept a God of positive but gentle influence, the God of countless moral sermons.

The more I think about my believing, the **less I expect anyone to agree with me.** A close friend gently teases me for believing in “Jewish fairy stories”. I suppose my message for today is to examine not only *what* you believe but *why* you believe. I am left with the only message that to me makes both intellectual and emotional sense: Moltmann’s “God pushed out of the world and onto a cross”. Ben Myer has written a book on the theology Rowan Williams. For some reason Williams by himself is difficult, Myer on Williams is profound. Just one example, which I will paraphrase “we are most human when we are wounded, when each self bleeds out into the lives of others.” (p. 17). Christ crucified, God bleeds, and suddenly understanding is possible. Not as a defence of God but as a mark of God’s participation in our world. Or as Paul said long ago, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1: 22-23).

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