

Why do I believe in God? Why the God of Jesus?

Lent 5 Wesley Uniting Church 21 March 2021

Readings: Hebrews 5:11-14: “About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you become dull and understanding. Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk is still an infant, and is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature. For those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.” The author of the book of Hebrews is confronting his first century readers telling them that they have not grown up, they are still in need of milk as if they were spiritual infants, and have not progressed to the solid food of an adult faith. How was he judging this?

Perhaps there is a clue in the reading from Jeremiah which the prophet talked about the covenant but with an unexpected shift, “After those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:33).

This leads to two important questions: (a) In what way has our faith changed since we were either children or first believed? (b) What do we believe and why? Is there something that might be said to be written on our hearts?

As I wrote this, I had the fanciful image of St Peter at the pearly gates asking me the very same questions. Well, how would I answer?

I became a Christian 50 years ago and I am still a believer. This surprises me because most my friends are either agnostic, and reject the notion of God or loosely aligned Christians who doubt almost everything in the creeds.

Today, **I still believe but perhaps differently.** If you asked me 50 years ago why I would have been quick to answer. I would have said that being a Christian was the most rational of decisions. I was reading Francis Schaeffer and Oz Guinness at the time, so I suppose I had a kind of belligerent Christian faith and a message to match! In those five decades I spent years studying mostly theology and psychology something has profoundly changed in how I believe. I started off on one side of the chasm, one side being clarity and certainty. The chasm was deep with doubt and uncertainty, but, somehow, I found my way across a narrow bridge to faith on the other side of doubt (I kept the uncertainty). But I still believed with what was best described by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur as a “second naivety”.

So now what do I believe and why?

1. I believe in God

Basically, we all look and **see the same things**. In the night sky I see countless stars and I know that billions of galaxies stretch in every direction. Unimaginable space measured in millions and even billions of light years. I accept that the beginning was a big bang, with an unimaginable explosion of energy 13 billion years ago, and that life emerged on planet earth and humanity has reached a level of intelligence and consciousness that is simply amazing. The technology and theories of science have established all this ‘beyond reasonable doubt’.

The great sceptics **Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens** would agree with everything I have just said. Where we part ways, is that they look at all this and see an object, or a thing; I look and see something that demands an explanation. I don’t want to over simplify this, maybe there is an in-between position as expressed by one of my walking group friends, Yolie suggested, “The universe invites speculation.” Reflect for a moment, where would you be on a spectrum of seeing the universe as an object, something to think about but not necessarily arriving somewhere, or carrying meaning?

I see design and purpose. If you see design and purpose it is the start of a religious quest. The fundamental question is *why* and this by its very nature requires a religious answer. The scientific one will just not do.

Because design and purpose come to the forefront for me, **I believe in a personal, good, and all-powerful God.** I am a theist. I fully accept the rationality of not believing and even the impossibility for some of belief in the face of human evil and adverse natural events including the trials of tsunamis, bushfires and COVID 19. Sometimes, even for the most devout, it is hard to believe. But if we ask the subversive question *why*, we must ‘land’ somewhere.

What has remained the same about my beliefs? What has changed? I think I’ve always had the basic conviction that the universe and the miracle of life demands an explanation. That sustains my religious outlook. But now I am highly suspicious of a rationalistic view of things and I have a much greater tolerance for doubt. What we know for certain? Perhaps not a lot but we must believe something.

2. Why the Christian God?

Cardinal Cushing, when he was a parish priest went to a man who had collapsed with a **heart attack**. He knelt by the man’s side and asked “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” The man struggled to raise himself, opened one eye, looked around and said, “Here I am dying he asks me a riddle!”

Many people would agree with the dying man that the church has been guilty of making everything too complex. One of my good friends is John, he was previously a professor of mathematics at ANU. I consider him a *real* academic, a member of various academies and scientific societies, etc. He is somewhat puzzled by my faith. On a number of occasions, he has asked me why do I believe in the Christian God and not something else?

He is right of course. There is something arbitrary about entering the vast **supermarket of religious beliefs** and choosing one item from the shelves to base your life on. But I accept that once you are on a religious quest, perhaps because you want design and purpose, you have to make a specific choice. You may settle on one of the major faiths: Buddhism, Islam, Hindu, Judaism or Confucianism. Or possibly alternatives such as paganism, Wicca, or New Age. We might wander down the aisle of Christian faiths: Roman Catholic, Baptist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Pentecostal or Uniting just to name a few. I find myself in this aisle and I could align myself reasonable comfortably any of these Christian denominations. I find myself drawn to the broadly Christian and even traditional view of God.

Again, I ask myself why? **I no longer believe that Christianity is the most rational** of religious faiths. Almost all have strengths and weaknesses, arguments for and against, but I think for me the decision is somewhat **aesthetic**. Yes, you heard me right: aesthetic. I ask myself *what is the most attractive picture of God?* So ultimately, it's not a supermarket I walk into, but an **art gallery**. Which faith gives a picture of God that inspires me, resonates with my values, and calls for my lifelong commitment?

It is the **incarnational aspect** of the Christian faith that draws me. God became one of us, and experienced life as a human being. This profound identification with our fallibility, limits and needs is a uniquely Christian view of God. The ultimate vulnerability of God. This identification extends to human anguish in the passion, rejection, and even a criminal's death. No other faith has anything remotely similar. We can, in Christ, hope for a bodily resurrection and eternal life in the presence of God. But that is not what draws me, it is the idea of God seeing life through the eyes of the human Jesus.

In the end I think I am proposing a poetic view of ultimate truth. The romantic poet **John Keats** expressed in his 'Ode on Grecian Urn':

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

I understand this to say that what I find most beautiful is most likely to be true – at least for me. Perhaps that is why started my religious journey 50 years ago, studied various

disciplines and ended up in an art gallery. So, what has changed? What is written on my heart? I have arrived at the aesthetic appreciation of the truth of God in Christ. I suspect that I am highly idiosyncratic in this, but I be happy to tell Saint Peter if I see him anytime soon.

Conclusion

I would like to acknowledge a number of **conversation partners**, who inspired me to write this sermon. John, the mathematician, I have mentioned. Joelle is another. Geoff Page the poet. From this congregation Robert Henderson, a retired UCA clergyperson and chair of elders here. He took a few months to crystalize his 'faith statement' and while he ended up in a different place theologically, we have exchanged ideas with mutual respect.

I think that my faith has been clarified in conversation with **thoughtful people**, who can be trusted to not 'pull any punches'. I owe many people a debt in this regard.

So a final thought, I know it is traditional to give up something for Lent: wine, chocolate or ice cream. I have never been very good at that so I will recommend that you **add something for Lent**. Find yourself a conversation partner whose beliefs you don't share and discuss what is 'written on your heart'.

Dr Bruce A Stevens (PhD Boston University 1987) was Wicking Professor of ageing and practical theology at CSU (2015-2019). He was ordained in the Anglican Church and is currently a supply ministry St Margaret's, Hackett.