

## **Were my faith to be taken from me**

Good morning.

Some questions do not go away. They loom large for thoughtful people especially in the critical times we live through now. They are questions about truth - how absolute, how provisional; and about authority - received from the past or presently imposed.

For a religious person, high on the list are questions about God; God's very existence; questions also about the nature of humanity and its future. Such questions often have a dark side; they question our capacity to inflict violence on one another, written, verbal, or actual. The reality is some are not troubled; these questions they say, are without meaning; they are impossible to answer; they are unnecessary.

Faith, is one response to this raft of questions. I think that the opposite of faith is not *doubt*, as some would have you believe; the opposite of faith is *certainty*.

Faith is *not* the irrational reaction of blind optimism; nor absolutes displayed by the immature when confronted with the complexities of daily living. These might be expressed when you hear, 'It will all turn out right in the end; it is God's will', or worse, and extremely bad theology, 'This is sent to try us'.

Questions of purpose and meaning - which must include why there is suffering and pain - haunt every generation; they do not disappear and they demand an answer.

What I [struggle to] say, is that faith, is our ability to say a provisional, a tentative 'yes', to these questions of purpose and meaning. There is a purpose. There is a meaning.

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Isaiah Berlin said that, 'we should not build our future on a foundation of unexamined assumptions'. I say Amen to that. I am very conscious that the way I speak about faith now, is different from the way it was spoken some 40, 20 years ago by my Father, a priest then, now retired, or even 10 years ago by some of my colleagues.

It is not fashionable at all, yet it is still easy, even in today's cynical, sceptical, unfaith, generation, to say, with St Paul, that first Christian creed - 'Jesus is Lord.' You might even retort that these are the words of a professional Christian. Well, that *is* a considerable burden.

Like Christians the world over, I have admired the courage and integrity of Archbishop Desmond Tutu; he faced down oppression. As a young priest in the 1960's he worked in a parish in Surrey - yes, this county. Later, he said how hard he found it to be a Christian in England. In South Africa everything was so clear cut, he said. Standing against oppression and tyranny sharpened spiritual values. He was right and still is right, from my experience.

For a long time, Christians throughout our nation have been inclined to spiritual stagnation and inertia, than the confidence and pride of our faith; we have been tossed about in the rough seas of scepticism and popular fashion. Spectacular sanctity appears in short supply. Spectacular wickedness is not.

Yet the Christian, who is exploring the possibility of God through mystery and meaning, will remain ever optimistic; will long for, and work for a spiritual awakening. Christian communities must re-empower spiritual imagination; must recall themselves and others to wonder, to mystery, and to awe. I know that sometimes when you speak of your faith there is sometimes little understanding on behalf of the listener. You too listen with incomprehension when you try to understand those who seem to live without belief. It feels as if you are speaking a different language. This is not new; you cry with the poet, centuries before Christ when he said, 'how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137.4).

You speak of prayer - that other person will understand meditation. You may speak of religion - the other speaks about spirituality. Words like evangelism, mission, faith or miracle are heard, as the cries of a decaying and dying Christianity. But the Christian person knows differently; the task for the faithful is to re-interpret the *mystery of life* itself, with all its complexities, as religious mystery; it speaks of the Creator in the cauldron of human activity. The Christian, works to recover, a sense of religious obligation, to temper and discipline selfishness.

Pilgrims in the Christian faith, do not walk the road to be religious; indeed you will remember, it was the religious of his day that condemned Jesus; 'why is it,' they asked 'that your teacher eats with tax collectors and sinners'. (Today I suspect the list of sins would have something to do with sex and greed rather than tax). The reason you are Pilgrims, is because *your* Christian faith, makes more sense of more things about the world and about yourself than anything else. For us of faith, there is a higher probability to God existing than not - but you not betting on that with your life, you are betting your life, on the *sure and certain* hope of eternal life.

What you do is explore God. Deep, deep faith, is a relationship with God, and a mystery. You say, God came in Christ, yet Christ laid no claim to equality with God. He said he was a servant; yet Christ is what God is like. The Christ who came into relationship with those Disciples in distant time and distant land, is Christ today, is still Lord, to the glory of God the Creator.

In the end, I have to say, I do not know why I believe; I only know I cannot not believe. I know too, within the Church I love so much (but which I also have misgivings about, but that is for another conversation with you), I am given intellectual, moral, emotional space to believe. In the treasure trove of history and place; of community and music, there is great beauty of place, and great dignity of liturgy, to express the mystery we call God. For all that, I am so grateful, and I would lead you to gratefulness too. I am grateful for those around me now who sustain my faith; for those whose faces and names are known to me alone over the years whose faith has upheld me; I am grateful for the hand of God upon me as I have been able to discern it. I believe and I sustain my belief against the counter pressures and temptations that are constant for me as well as for you.

As I end my talk, I do not end on a pious high note about the blessings of belief but only say that were my faith to be taken from me I should find the world a terrible desert, a moral vacuum and one great question mark with no possibility of answer.

In the absolutely fantastic Book of Proverbs it says: 'The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.'

[*Proverbs 19.21*]

Like those Disciples long ago, when Christ says 'follow me,' I am content to follow, not knowing what the future holds, but knowing I walk beside the man from Galilee; my hand is held in his - in God's; and when I feel the hand not there, I know I am being carried.

Thank you for listening.

## **Prayer**

Let us pray.

Lord, knowing you hold me,  
I give you my hands to do your work.  
I give you my feet to go your way.  
I give you my eyes to see as you do.  
I give you my tongue to speak your words.  
I give you my mind that you may think in me.  
I give you my spirit that you may pray in me.  
Above all, I give you my heart  
that you may love in me your Mother/Father and all humankind.  
I give you my whole self that you may grow in me,  
so that it is you, Lord Jesus,  
who live and work and pray in me;

But the honest truth Lord, I can't do it all the time.  
So please, continue to carry me when I need to be.  
And when you put me down  
or I leap back down  
I will be ready  
and will continue your purpose,  
and give my whole self to you, Lord.  
Amen.

[*Adapted from The Grail prayer*]