

Sunday Week 2 Michaelmas Term 2010

*When the Son of Man comes will he find any faith on earth?*

Well, will he? There are many in our society, and not least in this University, for whom the answer would be, "I hope not." Well-known voices in the academic community tell us that faith equals benighted superstition, self-delusion, the triumph of the irrational; they insist that its consequences are the spread of ignorance, and, worse still, the denial of individual liberty and the repression of minorities; its name, they argue, is a cloak for the practice of such wickedness and cruelty that would vanish away, were humanity only to grow up and leave religious faith behind it. I stress *religious* faith, because, of course, the so-called 'new atheists' – though atheism never went away – are men and women of faith. Their faith is in the finality of what is visible and material; that everything that can meaningfully be said about the world and the place of humanity within it can be deduced from strictly physical or biological data. (I do not, of course, suggest that all physicists or biologists come into this category.) The search for moral truth, the longing for beauty, the need to give and to receive love: these personal as opposed to material explanations for human behaviour and human aspiration (which the Christian roots in humanity's creation in the image of God who is Truth, Beauty and Love) can all, for the *Ditchkins* of Terry Eagleton's splendid polemic, be accounted for through the material combinations of bodily function, the flow of electronic impulses around the nervous system, the heady admixture of chemicals in the brain. It is as if *Romeo and Juliet* were a textbook on the side-effects of hormones.

This faith in the inadmissibility of metaphysics is not new, though it has a stronger celebrity cast of advocates right now than has been the case for some time. Its joylessness, its aggressiveness, its own logical incoherence have been well demonstrated by others – not least Dr Keith Ward, sometime Regius Professor of Divinity in this University. I pursue that line no further now. But there are many alternative 'faiths,' which the world values, and in which we Christians, who might robustly take on the 'new atheists' over their fundamentalist materialism, more easily collude. Amongst these we might mention faith in personal and corporate enrichment - using that word to include economic gain, but not only that - as the irresistible means whereby human flourishing is achieved; and faith in personal freedom, at least to the point of not actively harming others, as an intrinsic good to be valued above all else. It is difficult, very difficult, to live, even as a professing Christian, without making most day-to-day choices and decisions and not taking either or both of those principles for granted; yet a moment's thought, of course, reveals neither to be especially compatible with the Gospel. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the Church calls her saints those whose lives have, in some particular way, been lived in opposition and contradiction to these, the world's foundational values.

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Our answer so far, then, is – yes; all kinds of faith; but not the kind he is looking for. What kind of faith might the Son of Man be hoping to find? Christian tradition understands faith to be the first of the theological virtues: it is therefore a gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit, a work of divine grace. Faith is the prerequisite for hope and charity, or love. Before we may hope for the attainment of our future good, before we can love what is good and right, we need to have the faith to know for what purpose we are

created, what constitutes our final end and destiny, and what path will lead us to this end for which we are made. Christian faith – as opposed to the faith of the materialist fundamentalists – disposes us to give our assent to things unseen; it enables us to assent to the truth which will bring us to salvation: truth about God, God who is Trinity, and about Jesus Christ as the way to the Father. *Firmly I believe and truly, God is Three and God is One*, we sang at the beginning of this Mass – giving voice to an act of faith. By faith, we understand God Himself to be our end, our goal, our destination; by faith, we are, as it were, ordered or orientated towards God, as lesser waters search always for greater, as a stream flows inexorably towards the sea. By faith we anticipate, in our lives in the here and now, the Kingdom of Heaven; and that very anticipation again directs us towards, and makes us yearn, for the vision glorious.

That anticipation, that sense of yearning, of incompleteness and unfulfilment, characterised so perfectly by St Augustine when he says of God that ‘our hearts are restless till they rest in Him,’ points out to us very clearly that faith is the beginning of our path to God, the beginning of eternal life, and not its completion. There is a ‘not-yet’ quality to faith; it is about what is glimpsed, not what is possessed: *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. The Gospels make us sharply aware that mere faith alone is not enough; famously, even the demons believe. The gift of faith, the habit of faith, must make us moved to acts of faith; in the language of the virtues, faith must result in hope (hope in the attainment of our future good, however difficult that may appear) and hope in charity, those acts of love, that disposition of loving, which will make us more receptive to those divine promptings by which we will indeed enter into that blessedness for which we are made, and in which, by faith, we believe.

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Is all of this what Our Lord had in mind when he told the parable of the unrighteous judge to his disciples, and concluded it with that question? In one sense, of course not; yet the seeds of our account of the place of faith in the Christian life, on which the Church has reflected over the centuries, can be found on the pages of the New Testament. Faith, for each of the evangelists, is about far more than mere assent to a number of propositions; in fact we can go so far as to say, that is precisely what it is not. Faith is intimately linked with action: faith can move mountains; to the one of who believes, all things are possible. Faith saves: faith and healing go together again and again – *Go in peace, your faith has made you well*; or, as we might as easily translate it, your faith has saved you. Our Lord demands faith. The disciples wake Him from sleep as the storm rages about their boat; he calms the winds and the waves, and rebukes them with the question, *Where is your faith?* The miraculous calming of the storm confirms who Jesus is; it illustrates the power which resides in Him. This is the faith which the Son of Man looks for, faith in Himself, and in his claims.

So, will the Son of Man find any faith on earth? Will he find us living in anticipation of our true end – union with the God in whose image and likeness we are made – or conducting our lives as if some other purpose, some other destination, were more urgent or important or compelling? Will he find us living in the conviction that Jesus Christ is Himself the way, the path, which will lead us to our true home?

The plain teaching of the Church is that the gift of faith, once infused and implanted in us, can never wholly be lost; even if it grows cold, even if it fails (and even for a long period of time) to be translated into those acts of charity, that love, by which alone faith remains a truly living thing. But we know that faith waxes and wanes, that the flame burns more or less brightly in us as each new day comes; and that the burning less brightly is all too common.

Our Lord prefaces his parable in today's Gospel by telling the disciples of the need to pray constantly. Prayer, prayer which reminds us of that fundamental orientation to God in Christ which orders our lives aright, is the best means of giving the flame of faith a good supply of oxygen. The habit of prayer, the routine of prayer, saves us from the frailty of our own intentions and resolutions, and unites us with a community of faith, living and departed; with all those who have run this race before us, and have maintained their faith in God and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord. Prayer supports us, as Aaron and Hur supported the arms of Moses, allowing the grace and power of God to work through us, even in our own hour of weakness.

Will the Son of Man find us faithful? In their underground tomb of 69 days – a gift for a Christian metaphor if ever there was one – the Chilean miners, so they tell us, prayed – in some cases, discovered prayer for the first time. We will not, pray God, find ourselves so hard pressed. We do not need to be in the tomb half a mile below ground to be moved to pray. Every morning, and every evening, in the Chapel just behind me, at the morning office and at Evensong, and in the reception of the Sacrament (not just on this Lord's Day, but any and every day) we can join in the prayer of the Church: a sign of faith, an anchor for our faith, an inspiration for faith which will result in charity. Does it seem a small thing? Will the Son of Man find any faith when he comes?

If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, nothing will be impossible to you.

Amen.