

A CHILD FOR A LAND OF SHADOWS

The other day I was sitting with a group of mothers talking about our children's belief in Father Christmas. How long, we wondered, can you sustain this belief in them? At what age will they realise that Father Christmas is only a story, a well-meaning game played by adults, a nice idea but an impossible one?

Well I think I must have broken the record for the youngest child to disbelieve. I was not two years old when my parents had to tell me the truth about Father Christmas, for the simple reason that I had screaming hysterics at the thought of a strange old man coming into my bedroom in the middle of the night, even if he was bringing presents with him. But most children do believe in Father Christmas until they are five, six or seven. Perhaps even older, especially if they think they can exploit the situation. After all, if you say you believe in Father Christmas, you will not only get a present from Mummy and Daddy and a present from Granny and Grandpa; you will also get another one from Father Christmas himself. Children are not stupid...

It was a casual, after-lunch conversation I was having – do your children still believe in Father Christmas- dear little innocents- how sweet that you can still tell them all this rubbish and they swallow it without question- when they grow up, they cannot believe how naïve they were then it suddenly occurred to me- what exactly do I think that I am doing? I stand in a pulpit, looking at sane, rational, educated adults who live in a scientific age and I talk to them about a baby born two thousand years ago who was called the Son of God. I tell them stories of shepherds seeing angels singing in the sky and of astrologers following a new star to find a baby King. I make them listen to the words of a man who lived three thousand years ago, promising light in a land of shadow and I say that this was what that baby was all about. I talk of a God who cannot be seen or scientifically proved to exist and how this was all his doing. And I expect these sane, rational, educated adults to believe all this. What precisely is the difference between this and Father Christmas?

For a moment I could see where Richard Dawkins was coming from when he declares that religion imposed on children is a form of child abuse (I don't know what he thinks about Father Christmas) and that religion for adults is a sign of a sick mind. As he says, we could make up a religion about anything. We could worship a teapot and tell everybody that it was a divine teapot. We could worship Father Christmas and have a jolly old man with a sack of presents standing where the cross now

stands. Why should one set of ancient stories be more valid than another? Why should it be foolish to believe in Father Christmas, yet wise to believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God?

You are probably thinking that it is a bit late to be asking this at half-past eleven on Christmas Eve but on the other hand, can you think of a better time to sort this out?

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These words were found written on the wall of a concentration camp:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining

I believe in love even when I cannot feel it

I believe in God even when he is silent

Two of the most powerful arguments against the existence of God are lack of scientific evidence and the presence of so much evil in the world. Evil does not get much worse than a concentration camp. And I would also guess that physical evidence for the existence of God is nowhere in quite such short supply as in a concentration camp. Yet belief in light, in love and in God was still found there.

Right from the start we, the human race, have had what you might call a kind of “light” in us; a light of faith, of hope, of wisdom, of pure love which no-one has ever been able to explain and which nothing has quite been able to extinguish. Even in pre-historic days, when life was short and little more than a painful struggle for survival, men and women looked up at the sun and saw it as more than just a source of physical light and warmth. It also stood for something in them, yet greater than them, which they could hardly understand. But still they created sacred places and special rituals in which they felt they could somehow be united with this higher power.

And so it has gone on ever since. On the one hand the human race appears to be just a higher form of animal life- wanting only to eat, drink, be comfortable, have lots of sex, and group together in small, exclusive communities.

Yet on the other hand there has been this mysterious “light” in us. I cannot think what else to call it.

It is an impulse that calls us away from the even best of physical and material pleasures, searching for something more;

It is an urge to love and care beyond the call of duty or self-interest;

It is a passion to work for peace and justice in the world even when we know that we stand to gain far more in material terms by supporting warfare and injustice.

It is an optimism which has kept us dreaming of a better, kinder, more beautiful world even during the worst horrors of human history.
 It is a deep need to relate to a power that is stronger than we are.
 It is a tiny spark of faith which has caused so many people to hold onto a belief in some kind of god even when Richard Dawkins does tell them that they are sick and silly.

The accepted gods in today's society are money, sex and celebrity but even the people who have all three in abundance tend to find them not quite enough. There is this persistent light inside us which somehow none of these things can fan into flame and keep alive.

We do not often understand this inner light of ours; we frequently ignore it; it even scares us at times; we play it down when we are in company with other people, thinking they will laugh at us (and of course they are thinking exactly the same), but still it won't quite go away.

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Two thousand years ago there were many people of different races, different cultures and different religions living in the countries around the Mediterranean Sea. And when St John wrote of Jesus Christ as “the true light that gives light to every man and woman” all these people knew exactly what he was talking about. They had gone to meet with Jesus Christ because they had felt a powerful connection between that light which was struggling to shine inside them and that light which was so clearly blazing out from this obscure, wandering preacher. None of their cultural gods- of money, sex and power- and none of their religions had sparked off this light inside them in the same way as Jesus Christ. No-one was putting pressure on them to listen to him. No religion had brainwashed them. It was he, the man himself, who drew them to him. His light called out to their light.

It was as though they had been walking in a dark place, struggling to see their way forward by the light of the one tiny candle they were carrying. Then they saw the light of Jesus, they reached out their candles to this light and as the lights connected, they blazed up into amazing brightness and everything around them and about them started to make sense. As St John also wrote- he, Jesus, gave them the awareness that they were children of God.

And this has continued, all these centuries after Jesus lived, died and was said to have risen again. Millions of men and women have found him to be a living reality, to connect with them as the Son of God and to give them the conviction that they too are children of God.

The teaching of Jesus about the love of God, the forgiveness of God, the saving power of God has made sense to them.

The person of Jesus, the way he lived out what he taught, even to death on the cross has made sense to them.

The victory of Jesus over all evil and even over death has made sense to them.

The person of Jesus Christ has proved to them that this light inside them is not an illusion or a con-trick. It is real, it is holy, it is special and it is our connection with a living God.

This is why I stand here making no apology for telling you ancient stories which no-one can prove to be true; for reading you teaching which is three thousand years old and from a totally different culture; for preaching a god who cannot be seen. I talk of these things because I know that they make a connection with what is real and true and holy in you right now. I know that the light in you can be connected to the light in Jesus Christ and that through him you will know yourselves to be children of God. And at a quarter to twelve on Christmas Eve, that is, I think, something awesome to celebrate.

A child was born for a land of shadows. A child was born to bring the true light of God into the world. And in every life he touches there is a spark of divine light which he blazes into brightness.

Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ becomes a child for a land of shadows: a child to offer hope and inspire faith; a child to search for truth and stand up for goodness; a child to work for peace and to stand by forgiveness; a child to bring love and to trust in the power of God's love over all other strengths.

Jesus said, *"Let your light shine before the world, that all may see it and praise the God of heaven."*

In a world of shadows, let us carry the light of God in the name of Jesus Christ and give our world something to celebrate.

Amen.

