

THROWING YOUR LIFE AWAY?

Two cows are standing in a field together, chewing grass and exchanging confidences. The first cow says to the second cow, *“I am concerned about these stories of mad cow disease. Suppose you or I were to catch it and go mad? Are you not worried?”*

The second cow finishes her mouthful of grass and looks calmly at her friend.

“Why on earth should I be worried about mad cow disease? I am not a cow. I’m a penguin.”

It is a frightening thought, is it not: that you could be completely mad and not realise it? You could be quite convinced that you were normal and that everybody else was slightly unhinged whereas in fact you were the person who was insane.

On a lesser scale think, for example, of elderly people who are not able to cope with everyday living as well as they used to but who insist that they are perfectly capable and that it is we who are being over-anxious.

Or think of a friend who has fallen in love with someone whom everyone else can see is bad news but who insists that the beloved is unjustly maligned and that none of his other six wives ever really understood him.

Think of the people who fall over and over again for get-rich-quick schemes which it is blindingly obvious, are doomed to fail; think of people who go round putting everybody’s backs up and then cannot understand why they have no friends; think of those who struggle with eating disorders or alcohol addiction whilst insisting vehemently that they don’t have a problem – it is everybody else who will not leave them alone. It is quite possible, is it not, to get things badly wrong, and not realise it.

And perhaps one of the most frightening areas of concern here is that of religion. You could devote your whole life – because faith is about your whole life- to a religion which made perfect sense to you at the time, only to find that you had thrown your life away on a lie, a mistake, an illusion. It is a challenge which is bound to come our way sooner or later: when we ask, how can we be sure our God is real?

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Did you notice in our Gospel reading how Jesus barely wasted a thought or a breath on King Herod? *“Herod wants to kill me- so what? Tell him to get lost. He does not frighten me.”*

Now surely Herod, as King of that region, did pose a threat to Jesus. Remember, he had executed Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist. But Herod was a weak, cruel man who cared nothing for his own people and who was content to be used and paid by the Romans to be a puppet King. His threat to Jesus was only a physical one. He could threaten Jesus with death but his judgement would make no difference at all to Jesus’ inner conviction that he was the Son of God and that he was called to do the work of God. Nor would Herod’s actions convince other people that Jesus was not of God. If anything, John the Baptist’s credibility had increased since his execution. This was why Jesus was able to dismiss Herod as beneath any serious notice. Nothing Herod said or did could stop him from fulfilling his mission.

The early Christians took much the same view of political leaders. Everywhere they went Christians encountered hatred, intimidation, death threats, and, for many, torture and execution. But this did nothing to diminish their belief in God or their loyalty to Jesus Christ. Of course they were afraid, horribly afraid of pain and death- who would

not be- but they could not be intimidated into giving up their faith. Why should their faith in God be affected by people whose only weapons were hatred and violence? St Paul wrote that “*nothing can separate us from the love of God- not trouble or hardship; not persecution and starvation, not danger or death. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*” And they were. The early Christians were famous for their courage, their forbearance and their love. And, as the saying goes, “*the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.*” When people saw the courage, forbearance and love of the Christians over against the cruelty, injustice and corruption of their enemies, they sided with the Christians and so the church grew.

None of us would like to think that we were in danger of being imprisoned for our faith, of suffering unjust discrimination for being Christians, of being threatened with pain and death; but being hated by violent, intolerant people is not usually enough to give us any serious doubts about the validity of our faith. Jesus said once not to be afraid of those who could only kill the body. We are afraid but we know what he meant. Physical threat is not enough by itself to invalidate faith. It is not powerful enough to make us really stop and ask *is our God real?*

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Far more serious threats are those which attack the heart, the mind and the soul.

- when good, responsible men and women can point to passages in the history of the Christian church where intolerable cruelty, widespread corruption, and generations of prejudice have flourished in the name of Jesus Christ and ask you how you can possibly teach that Christianity makes a better world;
- when conscientious, careful scientific research states that there is no physical proof whatsoever for the existence of God;
- when the combination of these two factors produces Richard Dawkins who says that bringing your children up to be religious is nothing more than a form of child abuse and he can draw on any number of unfortunately true horror stories of Christian upbringing at the hands of harsh, narrow-minded, hypocritical believers who raised their children in an atmosphere of perpetual fear and guilt, leaving them with serious psychological problems.
- when people you love and respect tell you that, as far as they are concerned, you are deluded in your faith and they can find nothing convincing or helpful in it for themselves;
- and perhaps hardest of all, when confronting a tragedy rocks your own belief in a loving God to its very foundations; and when you have no answers to give to good people who are suffering and asking you where is God?

These are the times when we stop and ask, *is our God real?* When our minds can produce no rational or historical proof of God’s existence; when our hearts are torn apart by people’s suffering and loss; when our souls are desperately searching for the God we thought we knew and he is not there. These are the moments which make us wonder- am I throwing my life away?

Did you notice that Jesus was far more distressed about the people of Jerusalem than he was about King Herod? The people of Jerusalem were just ordinary people who, for generations, had had to live through some appalling situations. They had endured one occupation after another; they had seen their city destroyed by enemy action more

You might say that stories like these are too old to be verified and so are no more than religious propaganda. But research has been going on since the beginning of the twentieth century into human spiritual experience- people who claim to have encountered a power, a presence in their lives which can only be called divine. The two key researchers were Sir Alastair Hardy- an eminent scientist in the field of zoology and Dr David Hay. Their research, conducted amongst a huge number and wide variety of men and women- most of whom claim no affiliation to organised religion- shows that despite an increasingly secular and cynical culture, spiritual experience is widespread, far, far more common than anyone would ever have guessed. It happens to people in good times and bad, it happens in beautiful settings and ugly settings, it happens without any warning or particular effort on the part of those concerned. Somehow God is making himself known and, according to the latest report, even as allegiance to organised religion continues to decrease, so reports of personal spiritual experience are on the increase.

To say that in the time of ultimate challenge to our faith we do nothing might sound suspiciously like a cop-out, especially coming from a minister who should surely be offering explanations and answers and coping strategies. But I am not sure. Maybe it is only when all our arguments have failed, when our strength is gone, when the faith we have built up has shattered to pieces, that God, the real God, can make himself known to us. Maybe it is only when life as we have always known it falls apart that God can create the miracle of new and everlasting life. Maybe it is only when we have finished hurling the brickbats of our doubts and fears, our anger and pain at the image of God we have in our lives and we see that image destroyed that we are able to look up and see the real God still standing there; scarred and wounded but ultimately indestructible.

“An honest religious thinker,” wrote Wittgenstein, *“is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.”*
Amen.