

*A sermon on “Faith, Belief, and Bigotry”, preached by Dr Ralph Walker, Emeritus Fellow and Lecturer in Philosophy, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, on Sunday 25 October 2015.*

“Your faith has made you well” Jesus says to the blind man, Bartimaeus, in today’s Gospel. What sort of faith does Bartimaeus have? The Church exhorts us to have faith, but it also asks us to believe quite a number of things, some of which we shall rehearse shortly in saying the Creed. What is the relation between faith and belief? Bartimaeus does not need to believe very much, for Jesus to say that he had faith.

Some people nowadays say that you can have faith in God, or faith in the Kingdom of Heaven, without having any beliefs at all about them: you don’t even need to believe they exist. They think of faith as simply hope: a hope which leads you to act *as if* you believed these things, but a hope for which you have no grounds at all. To have this sort of hope, even without any belief, is a good thing, for it can give your life a valuable shape. But it is not right to call it faith. It is not what the Church means by faith, and it is not what Jesus means by faith. Faith must involve *some* belief, but perhaps not very much. What matters more is trust. Bartimaeus calls Jesus “Son of David”, which shows he has some belief, probably a very vague one, about Jesus being a special sort of person. But he goes further: he *trusts* in Jesus, and trusts enough to ignore the many who rebuke him and tell him to be silent.

Faith is a kind of trust. You can’t trust someone, or have faith in them, without believing something about them; but it needn’t be much. And faith implies something less than certainty. If we’re certain that someone will do something, we wouldn’t say we had faith in them to do it. To have faith in someone is to rely on them, without absolutely *knowing* they will do what we want them to. It implies that we have a degree of confidence in them that goes beyond the evidence. And it must be a positive outcome that we expect from them – something desirable, like Bartimaeus’ gaining his sight. We don’t *trust* someone to do something that is bad, or *have faith* in them to do something bad. Moreover, faith typically involves action on our part: we need to do something about it, to act in a way that is going to depend for *its* success on the person we have faith in.

Historically the Church has expected us to *believe* a great many things, some of them quite difficult to understand. Bartimaeus had none of these beliefs, though Jesus said Bartimaeus had faith. The beliefs the Church is most concerned about are expressed in the Nicene Creed, which we shall be saying shortly – those of us who want to, anyway. But in First Week Fr Michael told us it was all right to keep silent if there are things we are not happy with. And there are things in the Creed that disturb many who believe in a benevolent God and think of themselves as Christians; many who indeed are Christians.

Throughout history Churches have attached great importance to such statements of belief, although they have often been the source of vitriolic dispute between rival Christian groups. These were at their height around the time our Creed dates from, when bishops excommunicated one another enthusiastically; a little later one Pope was publicly flogged and exiled to die in poverty. Controversy raged over almost every point, and the question whether the Holy Ghost proceeded from the Father only, or from the Son as well, is still in dispute

between the Eastern and Western Churches. It was the main cause of the Great Schism of 1054. Of those who take a position on such things, very few understand what is at issue. Nevertheless the Church, officially at least, expects us to believe all that the Creed says. Does it actually matter whether we do or not?

In the past many people used to think that you incurred God's wrath unless you believed all those things and quite a few more. Some people still do think this. But they cannot possibly be right. How could it matter to God if we don't have a correct understanding of the complexities of his Trinitarian nature? Complaining that people don't understand you is characteristic of immature teenagers, hardly to be expected of God. Indeed, not even immature teenagers get angry because there people in the world who don't know of their existence; if God punished people merely because they didn't believe in his existence, he would be worse than Stalin. What matters to God is that we should live our lives well. It *can* matter to God that we believe in him, though, just because, and only because, a knowledge of his existence and his presence with us can help us in living our lives well; and because our best guidance in that comes through recognizing the good news of the Gospel. But on the complicated issues of theology, the Gospels contain nothing whatever.

Still, the Church tells us that we ought to accept its Creeds out of faith, because they are true, even if we do not fully understand them. It is not as if we don't understand them at all. The language is allusive and metaphorical, as poetry often is: "begotten of the Father before all worlds", "light of light", "proceedeth from the Father and [perhaps] the Son". Here ordinary language is trying to get to grips with something that is not ordinary, but these words do convey something, even if we can only see it as through a glass darkly, to use St Paul's words. So the Church is asking us to trust those who have handed these theological formulae down to us; and perhaps that is not unreasonable, despite the disputes of the early centuries, for the Creed has been endorsed by a long tradition since then. After all, very many of our beliefs are taken on trust. I believe that the existence of the Higgs boson has been established, but I have no clear idea of what a Higgs boson is, or of what would count as establishing that there really are Higgs bosons. I take such things on trust, having heard them from other people: people whom I have good grounds to believe to be much more knowledgeable than I am about these things.

But it is not satisfactory to leave it there. I ought to try to get a better understanding of bosons; and to do that properly I should have to understand whether the evidence for them is really good enough. And in such an important matter as the Creed, we have a pressing obligation to try to understand those theological claims that the Church wants us to believe. This is something we must do in a proper spirit of enquiry – fully open to the idea that when we comes to understand them, we will think they are not true, whatever the Church may say. For it is in the nature of faith – of religious faith at any rate – to seek understanding. The phrase "faith seeking understanding" – "fides quaerens intellectum" – is particularly associated with St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109, but it encapsulates something very important about faith that I have not touched on so far. Faith may be based on evidence that is weak or incomplete, but proper faith can never be irrational. It must seek a rational basis; it must take seriously every rational argument against it as well as for it, and it must be prepared to alter its position if reason requires it. This is intrinsic to religious faith,

and the recognition of it goes back well before St Anselm; it goes back to the Gospels and before.

In saying these things I am setting aside what people sometimes call “blind faith”. Blind faith is not really faith at all, because it involves no trust, and above all no openness to argument. It is not faith but bigotry. It is an unfortunate thing that in religious matters so many people close their minds to argument, and become bigots, preferring to persecute their opponents rather than to debate the issues. Persecution is now less fashionable in the West than it used to be, though of course it flourishes elsewhere; but TV evangelism in the States, and advertisements on the sides of buses here, seek to get people to make an equally non-rational commitment to a blind faith that refuses to listen to argument. Such calls to blind faith have long come from bigoted proponents of Christianity and Islam; nowadays they come from bigoted proponents of militant atheism too.

Bigotry is out of place in religion. St John’s Gospel begins, in the usual translation, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. It could equally be translated, “In the beginning was Reason, and Reason was with God, and Reason was God”. St John is equating the Word with Christ, who is the Divine Wisdom, and the Divine Reason. Reason as we can grasp it falls far short of the Divine Reason, but it is given to us in order that we may form our beliefs carefully, and examine them carefully, assessing evidence of every kind, so as to attain to the truth as far as we can. That of course is what this College is for, and this Chapel likewise. They exist to help us work things out for ourselves, as carefully and dispassionately as possible, not only in our academic subjects but also in those matters which are most important in life. That means reviewing religion, agnosticism, atheism, and trying to work out where the truth lies. Many years ago, a previous Dean of Divinity here gave a sermon for Freshers, in which he sketched a rough caricature of the Old and New Testaments as many people unreflectively think of them, and then said: “Most of you believe all this. I had rather you were atheists. If you leave this College believing just what you believed when you came, you will have wasted your time here”. He was absolutely right.

Faith is always open to argument, and has nothing to fear from it. It includes such belief as is necessary in order to have trust. What ultimately matters is trust in God and the rational order of things. Belief in theological details is a secondary matter. But a fuller reflection on them may enhance our trust, and may lead to a better understanding of what God wants from us. For that reason we should treat the Creeds, and religious doctrines more generally, as an exercise: a set of ideas to be explored, and to be explored fearlessly, without feeling that we have to end up agreeing with them. For faith is the polar opposite of bigotry. Faith seeks understanding, and is always open to assessment and criticism by the light of that reason which is God’s great gift to every human being.