

Faith

Faith and belief are at the heart of Christianity, and we talk about them more than any other religion. Faith in God – in Christ – in the forgiveness of sins and the coming of the Kingdom. We are encouraged to have faith, and every Sunday we say the Creed, which begins, ‘We believe in one God’. And Christians are often criticized for believing impossible things, like the Virgin Birth or the physical Resurrection. So today I want to explore a bit what we mean by faith and belief.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew words which we translate ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ mean variously ‘to nurture’, ‘to take refuge in’, ‘to have confidence in’, ‘to trust’; ‘steadfast’, ‘reliable’ or ‘loyal’. So when the Hebrew Bible talks about someone ‘having faith’ or ‘keeping faith’, they usually mean that the person is trustworthy or true. Faith is a relationship, and both human beings and God can be faithful. God is loyal and trustworthy towards Israel, and asks the Israelites to be the same to him.

Two characters in the Old Testament were regarded as patterns of good faith – Abraham and King David. Abraham put his trust in God and was loyal to him all his life. David also trusted God, and let God work in him to make Israel great. In both men, trusting God leads to obeying God and letting themselves be used by God, and that also becomes part of faith. The other people who are famous for their faith are the prophets, and they too trust God and let him use them. They bring another dimension into faith – hope. Because prophets tend to be called when Israel is in trouble, and by their faithfulness they help Israel change for the better.

In the New Testament, the Greek words which we translate ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ also basically mean ‘trust’, ‘trustworthy’, ‘reliable’, ‘loyal’. Then Christians add a couple of extra dimensions to faith. For instance, when Jesus says, ‘Repent and believe in the good news’ (1.15), ‘believing’ means turning to God and away from your bad ways. So part of faith becomes that moment of conversion to God, the act of putting your trust in God. And sometimes in the NT, ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ seems to mean belief not in a person or a relationship, but an idea. So when St. Paul says (Rom. 10.6), ‘If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’, he seems to be saying not only that we should trust Jesus but that we should believe certain things about him.

That is what’s known as propositional belief – ‘I believe that the earth is round’; ‘I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow’ – those are propositional beliefs – and these are really what get Christians into trouble with non-believers. Because people say, ‘How can you believe in bizarre things like miracles and heaven and hell?’ You may notice that I slipped there from talking about ‘faith’ to ‘belief’, and that is significant, because in English we are very unusual in having two words where most languages just have one. Nowadays we tend to use ‘belief’ particularly to mean ‘propositional belief’. And that is where we make a historic mistake.

When the word ‘believe’ first appears in English in the Middle Ages, it has two forms – ‘believe’ and ‘belove’ – which mean the same thing: ‘to hold dear’, ‘to prize’, or ‘to give your heart to’ something. Over time, ‘believe’ gradually changed, from meaning ‘to give your heart’ to, ‘to take something to heart’, ‘to accept’, ‘to trust’ or ‘have faith in’. (We still use it that way: if I say, ‘I believe in you’, I don’t mean I think I can

prove you exist, I mean, I have confidence in you.) And finally, only in the last 150 years or so, belief has also come to mean ‘to know’ or ‘to think that something is so’.

When the first Anglicans, at the Reformation, translated the Creed into English and said, ‘We believe in God’, they did not mean, ‘We think it’s a fact that God exists’. They meant, ‘We give our hearts to God, we trust and hope in God’. And that makes perfect sense when you remember that the Latin word they were translating was *Credo – credo in unum Deum* – which means literally ‘I give my heart to the one God’.

In Christianity, the idea that we know things about God, or Christ, or salvation, in the same sense as we know the world is round, is not what believing in God and Christ means. And to say that our beliefs are absurd, on the basis of a wrong understanding of the word ‘believe’, is just a mistake.

Belief is a hunch that there is more to life than meets the eye. It’s an echo inside us of something that seems to be not us – a rumour of angels – that sudden trembling in the fabric of waves and atoms that says, look for a deeper meaning... And faith is a movement of the heart – from putting our faith in this world, to putting our faith, our trust, our hope in something else, which we call God.

You may be thinking at this point that I said that ‘belief’ in the NT does sometimes mean propositional belief – belief in certain ‘facts’, as it were, about God and Christ. That’s true, and if you give your heart to something, you do in practice believe – or hope – that it is real. And if you put your faith in someone, you believe that there’s a reason to do it. But when we say that we believe in miracles or the Resurrection, we don’t mean that we think we can prove them.

We mean that we have been moved – for mysterious reasons – to listen for God – to put our trust in Jesus Christ – and because we trust them, we are prepared to take on trust things that have been revealed and reported about them.

Some of the things our faith asks us to take on trust are extraordinary. We may find them very hard to accept or understand. But our instinct about God is an instinct that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy – things we just don’t understand, and may never understand, and have to take on trust.

It’s a risk. Giving your heart away is always a risk, whether it’s to another human being or to God.

In 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul links faith with hope and love, and when we think of all the things that faith involves – trust and obedience and loyalty and turning away from this world towards a mysterious Other – we can see why love and hope are entangled with it. You can’t put your trust in something without giving something of yourself away to it. You can’t take a risk without hope. You certainly can’t give your heart to someone without both hope and passion.

And as in any human relationship, the only real test of godly faith is in the relationship itself. If we flourish in it, and if it radiates out from us to touch the people that we meet and makes them flourish, then we can have some confidence in it. So Paul ends 1 Corinthians 13 by telling us that of faith, hope and love the greatest is not

faith, but love. Because if we have love, then we are faithful, whether we know it or not, whether we understand it or not. If we have love, then God's faithfulness works through us, whether we feel it or not.

If we have love, then, as Paul says, 'all things work together for good' in us (Rom. 8.28). Which is more than anything what we hope for in our faith: that through it we will be a full part of that creation which, on the day it was created, God saw was good.

Amen

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