

The Age: The best of our belief

Date March 31, 2013

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Faith has its challenges, but the struggle is always worth it.



Illustration Mick Connolly

It is never easy to have faith, and was probably never meant to be. It may seem particularly hard today, assaulted on all sides by rampant secularism and aggressive atheism. But compared with the challenges other generations of Christians have faced - thrown to lions, tortured on racks or burnt at the stake - it does not seem quite so bad.

Yet we have our challenges: different, but perhaps just as difficult.

How easy is it to be a Christian when you hear atheists claiming science has answered all the questions, and we do not need faith any more to plug the gaps?

How easy is it to be a Christian when those who have been abused by the clergy tell their stories loud and clear, as tell them they must?

How easy is it to be a Christian when we hear the North American right peddling a judgmental form of Christianity that seems to be the exact opposite of what Jesus lived and taught?

How easy is it to be a Christian when the message of Jesus holds a mirror before our eyes, exposing our limitations, and showing how we participate in a culture of abuse: towards asylum seekers, towards people who labour in sweatshops, towards our environment?

It is not always easy to believe. And those of who do believe go through feelings sometimes of despair (at being misrepresented), anger (at what some exponents of Christian faith think they can say and do) and pain (at where we have gone wrong).

Sometimes, when we look gloomily at the violence and suffering around us, even Christians can find it hard to believe in any sort of God - let alone one who is involved in our lives. Most Christians feel like that some days. On other days, however, it seems quite easy to be a Christian. When we look at the violence and suffering from another viewpoint, a more hopeful one, it seems inconceivable that there should not be a God: personal, intimate, engaged with the world at every turn. It seems extraordinary that death should mean the end of everything: of our own lives, of the lives of those people and animals we love, of the rich cultures of the world in their diversity, of the beauty and wonder of the earth.

It seems extraordinary that there should be no consolation for those who have suffered innocently and died: the children who have been abused, the poor who have been defaced, the people who have lived their lives in the darkness of despair, the animals who have been harmed.

From this perspective, it is not difficult to believe in a God who loves the world passionately, who created it and will remake it. It is not difficult to believe in a God who has become human, one with us in our pain and struggles. It is not difficult to believe in a God who has suffered with us and for us on the cross, whose resurrection has opened endless possibilities for new life and hope.

If it is challenging to believe and have faith, it is even more challenging not to believe and not to have faith. Why would people want a world without a loving creator, source of its life, restorer of its beauty, healer of its wounds?

To know and love this God - the God whose face Christians see, above all, in Jesus - is the greatest joy life can hold. There is nothing to compare with it. It means participating in the church's year as it rolls through the seasons, taking us from longing in Advent to suffering in Lent to celebration in Easter.

It means meditating in silence on the divine mystery that is present within and around us. It means sharing in the intimacy of a community that spans heaven and earth, the living and the dead.

Yet Christianity is not alone in holding such convictions. In view of the increasingly secular nature of Western society, Christians often find themselves in sympathy with

other faiths and other religious traditions.

Like Christian faith, these religions too are trying to say that there is a profound mystery to human life that cannot be ignored.

They too acknowledge that there is a transcendent reality to be known and worshipped in and beyond the everyday. This is not to say that all religions believe the same thing. Christianity, for example, is a religion of the body as much as it is of the spirit or soul. It believes that the events of Easter - the death and resurrection of Christ - make possible a new destiny for human beings and for creation, a transformed future in which all things will be made whole.

Not all religions share this worldview. But that does not mean we cannot learn from each other or recognise what we share in common. Christians have gained much, for example, from Buddhism and its profound understanding of meditation. We share with Judaism and Islam a common belief in one God, the same God, a God to be loved and worshipped, and a God who is the source of ethical values such as mercy and justice.

Christians are in constant dialogue with other faiths. We need this dialogue in order to deepen our mutual understanding and respect for each other, particularly in a world where secularism runs rife and where too many wars are carried on in the name of "religion".

For Christians as well as for people with other religious beliefs, faith has its challenges today, even without lions and racks and bonfires. It is not easy to be a religious person of any kind in our world. But those of us who are religious experience in abundance the blessings of our faith.

For Christians, the purpose of faith is not to make insecure people feel secure in their world of illusions or to fill up artificial needs that are not real. Faith exists to put us in touch with the One who is the origin and goal of all things, the source of boundless love and peace and pleasure.

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