

**Coming around to belief**

*John 20:19-31; Acts 5:27-32*

“What is the point of being a Christian?...Are our lives shaped by some ultimate goal that gives them meaning or not? Christianity is either an attempt to answer this most fundamental question or it is nothing....There is a curious song from the time of the Black Death in the C14th....which tells of a young lad who dies and is confronted by a knight who represents the devil.

*‘Oh where are you going’? Said the knight on the road,  
‘I am going to meet my God’, said the boy as he stood,  
And he stood and he stood, and it was well that he stood.  
‘I am going to meet my God’, said the boy on the road.*

In this time of plague, the devil tempts the boy to believe that his life is not going anywhere beyond the grave. But the boy keeps on travelling, ‘with a strong staff in my hand’. He resists the temptation of despair and carries on his journey to (God’s) Kingdom.”<sup>i</sup>

This is a question that faces many people today. Are we going anywhere? Are we pointed to any ultimate goal? If not, what’s the point of getting out of bed in the morning. Some don’t like to ask the question, for fear that the answer may be negative. But the question is really about whether or not we may dare to hope. If there is a point to life, if there is a point to existence, if there is a point to faith and what we believe, then we are called to do something about it, and to respond to it.

In that same upper room where the disciples shared the Last Supper with Jesus, where that first community of believers disintegrated and collapsed in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the cross of Calvary, here we now find them on that first Easter night huddled together, in fear. Fear still about the death of Jesus, but fear also about the stories of the resurrection, and His coming back to them.

Whatever we make of this part of the Easter story, with its faith and its doubt, its questions and its answers, it demands a response from the disciples, and from Thomas the questioner in particular. It demands a response from us. What did it take, does it take, will it take, for us to come around to belief?

For the disciples was it Jesus simply standing before them and, rather than judging them and condemning them for the desertion and denial of Him in His hour of need, is it the first words Jesus speaks? "Peace be with you." Not fear, not guilt, not shame, not despair, not anxiety, not anything but, "Peace." It's the first word to them and the first gift of Easter.

For Thomas, who wanted to touch and handle Jesus to be sure that He really was real, a week later it was the same response from Jesus, "Peace be with you." And as far as we read, there was no need to reach out and touch. It was enough to hear, "Peace", and to receive, "Peace."

And for those of us living well after the crucifixion/resurrection events, what did it take, does it take, will it take, for us to come around to belief? It's a problem as old as the first Christians. It's why John writes in His gospel, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe..."

What will it take for us to come around to belief? What will it take for us to see God? Are we hesitant because the image seems fuzzy? You'll maybe know the story of the little girl, working away at a drawing in her classroom. "What are doing?" her teacher asks. "I'm drawing a picture of God," says the little girl. "That's impressive," replied the teacher, "but I'm sorry to say that people all over the world have been thinking about that for thousands of years, and nobody, not even the wisest and most holy, knows what God looks like." "Well," said the little girl. "They will in a minute when I've finished."

What will it take for us to come around to belief? Perhaps you are put off by the divisions in religion, either between different faiths or within faith. In her wonderful memoir, *Hell and Other Destinations*, Madeleine Albright, the former US Secretary of State, who died last month, gathered Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders around her table to discuss what religious leaders might do to ensure that religion brought people together instead of causing them to bash their neighbours' heads. Why can't we all get along? she asked. She knew that each of the major religions is a many-splintered thing, and that we shouldn't judge world faiths by the actions of their extremists and fundamentalists, many of whom have little real understanding of what their faiths were really about. There is a difference between certitude of religious belief and certitude about how to apply those beliefs to current events. Madeleine Albright asked about religious

literalism, the theory that despite its many contradictions, every word of Scripture must be true. I certainly contrasts with the cynic's quip that the Bible is 100 percent accurate, but only when thrown at close range.<sup>ii</sup> For Albright, who came from a Jewish background and eventually grew into Christianity, she said that she had "a temperament inclined to faith." The Bible, with all its challenges, comforts and confusions, kept her thinking, and wondering, and doubting, and believing. She came around to belief because, for her, religion attracted truth-seekers and corresponded to the human desire to feel part of something larger and more universal than themselves. Religion wasn't the only way, but it was a means of coping with questions about life's origins and purpose.

Coping with questions, however, is not the same as finding answers. There are many who come to Church who harbour doubts. We need only look at the growing scandal of Downing Street, or the horror of Ukraine, or the isolation many still live with on our own doorstep, to be left wondering: is there a God? What difference does this God make when there seems to be so much wrong in our world.

Madeleine Albright struggled with this and summed it up in an honest few words: "I pray daily to a God Whose existence I cannot verify and Whose form I cannot grasp. My prayers are for people I know (and many I don't) who are ill in body or mind, or who are threatened by war or some other source of hardship. My devotional routine makes me consider with sympathy, for a minute or two each day, those whom I might otherwise forget. Such thoughts sometimes lead to a visit, a call, a note, a favour, an appeal, perhaps a charitable contribution, or a bit of community service. Multiply my tiny experience by that of the billions of others who pray and suddenly this possibly imaginary God is as powerful and influence for good – real, tangible good – as any forth on earth. Does that prove God exists?... if prayer has benefits, and it does, why not give a little credibility to the source of devotion?"<sup>iii</sup>

I wonder for how many coming around to belief is not the result of the grand gesture, or the Road to Damascus experience. Rather it is the little kindness, the little hopefulness, the little steadiness, the little love, the little words of "Peace be with you" that calm and comfort and compel us to

commit what we have, what we do, who we are, and what we believe to be important, to the Carpenter from Nazareth.

Coming around to belief. Have you; will you? "Peace be with you...Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, What is the Point of Being a Christian? p9

<sup>ii</sup> Madeleine Albright, Hell and Other Destinations, pps105-107

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid pps 112-113