

What does it take? 6 Feb 2022.

What does it take for us to really believe?

A atheist guy goes walking in the back country and comes across a grizzly, which starts chasing him. "O God!," he yells, "help me!"

A voice comes from heaven. 'All your life you have denied I exist, and now you ask for help?'

The atheist whimpers. "Yes, I know, I'm really sorry - but is it possible for you to make this bear a Christian?"

'Of course,' says God, and Phoom! - the bear is on its knees.

"Oh thank you, thank you, God!," says the newly converted atheist, and goes over to pet the bear who is muttering to himself. As he gets closer to the bear he can make out the words;

'Thank you, Jesus, for the meal I am about to enjoy...'

I came to the conclusion the other day that if I wasn't a Christian, I would be Greek.

That may confuse some of you until you remember the passage in Acts, where Paul is in Athens. At this point, Paul stands up and says, 'Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription; 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.'

This is the man who, only a few chapters earlier, had been approving the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr.

The conversion of Saul that we can read of in Acts 9 is a sudden and spectacular event on the road to Damascus. It is likely that our own experiences of coming to Christ have not been so dramatic. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that for most of us, our acceptance of the Christian faith has been handed down to us by our families and / or our schools - along with the society we live in. If you are born to Christian or Muslim parents, the chances are that you will be indoctrinated by the tenets of that faith. I wonder how many of us were

actually brought up by either agnostic or atheist parents, with the choice to make our own minds up later, when we had some reasoning ability? Not many, I would suspect.

Does it matter? Yes - I think it does, because as I have said from this lectern before - in order to hate, you have to be carefully taught. The troubles in Northern Ireland would not have happened if the Protestant and Catholic children had gone to mixed schools; the misery and atrocities of apartheid would not have occurred if the children of white, black and coloured had all been to school together; and the pogroms that are now occurring in India between the Hindus and the Muslims would not

be happening if the children had been schooled together.

It has been argued - I think correctly - that there are no children of any specific religion; they are just children. The prejudices that they exhibit are the expressions of their parents' hatred and racism.

I had experience of this when I served in Bosnia and Northern Ireland, and again when I was invited to help staff a hospital in northern Nigeria - which I declined, or I might not be here now.

In each case (and I will spare you some of the bloody details for a change) the children simply did what their parents told them to do; 'Don't talk to those people; throw rocks at

them; smash their windows; throw petrol bombs into those houses; kill their cattle; and to the teenage boys - rape their women; - and so on. Total indoctrination that the 'other' was bad, and only they - and their kind - were any good.

But was it not the same God that each worshipped? Even the Nazis had 'Gott mit uns' on their belt buckles, although admittedly it wasn't a new thing.

Every army likes to think that God is on their side, so one might reasonably despair of a God who cannot make his mind up if he is for us or the opposition. Look what is happening with

the far-right so-called Christian Republicans in the USA right now!

So I must reduce my faith to one thing and one thing only - the person of Jesus Christ. And in order to do that, I must have a profound belief in the reality of the Resurrection. Without that, the wheels come off, the boat sinks, the building collapses, and my faith becomes a house of cards.

That is why this epistle of Paul's to the Corinthians is so vital - even though he only gives one of the arguments for the evidence of the resurrection - that of witnesses of the risen Christ.

No - I cannot explain it - and Dawkins of course poo-poo's it, as he does the whole of the bible with little and distinctly partisan evidence.

The three main claims for the truth of the Resurrection are these - and you need to know them, because you never know when you may be asked for a reason you believe, as 1 Peter 3:15 tells us.

First, the empty tomb; second, the witnesses to the risen Jesus; third, the preaching and witness of the disciples.

Some of these discourses would be more appropriate for Easter sermons, but since we are given an epistle reading today that focusses solely on the appearances of Jesus after the crucifixion, it is germane to include the other arguments briefly alongside.

The empty tomb is well attested. Arguments against it include, i) it wasn't the right tomb and the women were mistaken; ii) the body had been stolen by the disciples; iii) the body had been moved by the authorities; iv) Jesus didn't die, but got up, pushed the stone aside and walked out (to where - and stark naked?)

So the idea of mistaking the tomb is absurd because the authorities or the disciples would have soon corrected that mistake. Stealing the body by the disciples cannot be a serious proposition as 10 of the apostles were martyred for their conviction that Jesus rose from the dead - and they saw and touched him. You don't die a hideously painful death for what you know to be a lie.

If the authorities had moved the body, they only had to produce it to put paid to the fiction that Jesus was alive.

Finally, given the state of Jesus after a full Roman flogging and crucifixion, along with a spear thrust into his side, is it really likely that he had the strength to roll a heavy stone

away from the mouth of the tomb - remember, he wouldn't have been able to even reach the edge of the stone as that would have been on the outside of the tomb - and then stagger out, battered and bleeding, having recovered from his apparent faint, now stark naked - and go where, exactly - and completely unnoticed?

OK - that should deal with the empty tomb. We can be sure, therefore, that it was the right tomb and that it was empty. Let's move on. I will come back to the sightings and meetings with Jesus in just a moment, but let's just lay this nonsense of preaching a fabrication - that has lasted over 2,000 years - to rest.

I can just about - and only just - believe that it might be possible for a person to die for a cause he believed to be true if it was a really convincing lie. But therein lies the rub; he has to believe it is true. If the disciples had known that the story of the resurrection was utter nonsense - because they had made it up - why then would they willingly go to prison, torture, death and dismemberment for a fairy story?

There were enough eye-witnesses around at the time of the beginning of the disciples preaching to expose the lie, if it had been a lie.

Some have tried to suggest that the story of the resurrection is an added gloss inserted

into the gospels a century or so later. But that flies in the face of the witness of Stephen, the first martyr, who died within the earliest days of the embryonic church. Also the witness of Peter and others on the day of Pentecost. These are eye-witnesses of the risen Christ. And Paul's letters, of which many follow his meetings with Peter and James in Jerusalem some 3 years after his own conversion, only serve to reinforce the substantive testimony of the resurrection.

All of which leads us back to the sightings of the Risen Jesus.

The beginning of the epistle has Paul saying that 'what I received I passed on to you.' This

is likely to be the result of his meeting with Peter and James. He reinforces what he was told by these men who were with Jesus through his ministry and knew what he looked like, so they would be unlikely to mistake Jesus for someone else. Paul also claims to have seen Christ himself in verse 8.

It has been suggested that the apparition of Jesus to the disciples is just 'wishful thinking' and a trick of the mind for those who are intensely grieving. I am aware that some may have sensed the presence of someone dearly loved who has only recently passed, but to do it collectively and in identical fashion is pushing the bounds of credibility a bit. Rather

like me coming up to you and saying, 'Wan't that an amazing dream I had last night?'

Most psychiatrists would confirm that although hallucinations do occur, they are not a mass phenomenon; so how do 500 people see Jesus at once?

Even were this not to be true, we are still left with the witness of the disciples that not only did they see Jesus, they also ate and drank with him, and Thomas - at the very least - also touched him.

I personally am not prepared to go to a hideous death for a story I don't or cannot

believe. I certainly cannot explain it, but that doesn't mean it isn't true or it didn't happen.

I think we would all subscribe to the words of Hamlet that, '...there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

My plea to you today is just this; please don't get hung up on religion - I don't even want to be regarded as religious - but I do want to be understood as a Christian.

That is our rock, the Risen Jesus Christ is our cornerstone - and if we lose sight of Him - we lose sight of everything, and your house is not

built just on sand - but on quicksand, and
everything you ever thought you were sure of
will vanish in a moment.

Don't let that happen.