

# The dynamics of belief

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Readings: Mark 9<sup>14-27</sup>/John 6<sup>28-34</sup>/Romans 10<sup>5-17</sup>/Psalm 22<sup>1-11</sup>/

There can be little doubt that at the centre of Christian faith lies this single mysterious word – **believe!** Belief, according to the NT, is the great hinge of faith. Everything rides on belief from our salvation to our continuing walk of faith to our piety and even to our hearing from God. Belief finds its way to the heart of all these things which make up our faith. And yet, when you think about it for a moment, we often seem to have little control over what we believe and how strongly we believe it. I mean, is it really the fault of the father of the epileptic boy that he doubts a man whom he has just met and whose own followers have been singularly unsuccessful in removing this terrible disease from his son for the last 24 hours or so? Is it really such a bad thing that he doubts. And yet, this is the first thing Jesus falls upon when questioning the man...

And he said, "From childhood. <sup>22</sup>It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to him, "**If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.**" <sup>24</sup>**Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"** (Mark 9)

Perhaps the most unreasonable thing Jesus ever did was to ask people to believe. Thomas Aquinas, the Italian Roman Catholic priest, philosopher, and theologian who lived in the early part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century once said this of faith... "**To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible.**" So the question becomes if, without faith or belief, no explanation is possible, how can Jesus ask a man or a woman to believe? If there is no rational pathway to belief, how can we expect those who do not believe to find themselves believing?

Let us remember again that there can be no contention over the fact that Jesus places belief squarely at the heart of all faith. Belief is it! Belief is the stuff God is after. Belief is, if you like, the journey and the goal all wrapped up in one. That is why Jesus says to us in that passage from John today, "**This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.**" (John 6) The whole work of Christian faith is to believe in Jesus – the One whom God sent. And again in Mark 16 Jesus underlines the necessity of belief when he says, <sup>16</sup>**The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.** (Mark 16) And if you think that Jesus' words are hard then don't look at what later giants of the Church said because they, if it were possible, seem to go even further. Augustine, for example, says this,

**"Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand."**

In other words, not only is belief necessary for the walk of faith but it actually underlines our understanding of God. We must **believe before we can even understand!**

Blaise Pascal is considered one of history's greatest scientists. A committed atheist and a wonderful logician Pascal's conversion came not through his scientific queries or his logic but as a result of a near fatal accident. When his carriage was once suspended on a bridge leaving him hanging between life and death, the only thing Pascal could think of was the Christian conviction of his sister and the witness of Christ she had in his life. He was the inventor of the barometer. He was tremendously brilliant as a philosophical scientist. But the one thing that kept piercing his heart was not the beauty of the scientific laws he had discovered and made use of but the Christian witness of his sister; her driving conviction that we were made to worship a loving Creator God. As Ravi Zacharias says of this incident, **“God has given enough reason in this world to make faith a most reasonable thing. But he has left out enough to make it impossible to arrive at faith and to live there by reason alone.”**

So on what basis, then, is belief possible? Why do we believe and, more to the point, how can we become and remain believers. I ask this question because I have a growing suspicion that we all come to God as flawed believers; as people with a similar mix of faith and doubt as had the father of the poor boy in our reading today did. Furthermore I believe we do not leave this flawed state we at first we believe in faith in Jesus Christ once we take up Christ's offer. Somehow the challenge to believe remains.

[8]When I first learned to swim I was put into a pool which was much less deep than I am tall. I was told that I would be able to learn to swim if I only listened to and believed in my swimming coach. And I believed him. I believed him because my parents told me to believe him, because I had no reason not to believe him (no person had drowned while in the charge of this man!) and my parents were watching and I had some hope that they might intervene should I get into trouble. (Little did I know...) Eventually, however, two of those crutches for belief were taken away. My parents eventually got tired of watching me learn to swim and left my life hanging by the merest thread in the charge of this man and secondly I was put into water that was deeper than me. [9]By that stage my belief had grown but if you'd thrown me in the deep end at the very start I suspect I would have resisted all attempts to teach me to swim for some time. You see, what belief I had would have been shattered. Belief wavers. It is not an on/off switch. We do not either believe in something or not believe in it but we **grow in belief**. And this is why we must take seriously the Bible's instructions on how to nurture belief and on how belief works. So how does it work?

Belief revolves around three central things in the NT. The first is a relationship of trust. Who do I trust is a key question in relation to belief but perhaps an even more important question is 'Can I trust?' You see trust also requires practice. It is not something we come to naturally. People who've been abused and let down all their lives will have a huge problem trusting anyone. And even as Christians if we've suffered serious abuse at the hands of someone we should have been able to trust this will seriously compromise our ability to believe. As C. S. Lewis says this about belief...

“Believing things 'on authority' only means believing them because you have been told them by someone you think trustworthy. Ninety-nine per cent of the things you believe are believed on authority. I believe there is such a place as New York. I could not prove by abstract reasoning that there is such a place. I believe it because reliable people have told me so. The ordinary

person believes in the solar system, atoms, and the circulation of the blood on authority-- because the scientists say so. Every historical statement is believed on authority. None of us has seen the Norman Conquest or the defeat of the Spanish Armada. But we believe them simply because people who did see them have left writings that tell us about them; in fact, on authority. A person who balked at authority in other things, as some people do in religion, would have to be content to know nothing all his life."

So trust is implicit in belief. We must be **able to trust and we must have someone we believe is trustworthy** in order that we may believe and in order for belief to grow. God will therefore not leave us in the shallow end all our lives. God's call will be towards greater and greater trust and we in the West face a grave handicap in this area because we've built for ourselves such comfortable existences that we are not forced to trust and we become un-practiced at it. Few of us say to God – put me in a place where I must trust you again God. Not 'may' but 'must.' Put me in a place where I must trust you God so that I may grow not just in belief but in my knowledge of you. Worse than that, in this comfortable environment we have failed to see how damaging our failure to remain trustworthy has been to those around us. Whenever we're involved in a situation where trust is shattered then there is a fall out which damages those around us as severely as is damages those most directly involved.

Knowledge is a further vital aspect of belief. When I speak here of knowledge I am not thinking simply of Biblical knowledge though this is very important. Rather I am thinking of **personal** knowledge of God; of the growing of intimacy between ourselves and God; the sense that God is leading and speaking directly and specifically to us; that our concerns and needs and queries are things that we can take to God and get an answer from God because we are hearing God. This is the content of the knowledge that comes with belief. It is personal and it is specific.

Jonathan Whitfield was preaching to coal miners in England. He asked one man, "What do you believe?" "Well, I believe the same as the church." "And what does the church believe?" "Well, they believe the same as me." Seeing he was getting nowhere, Whitfield said, "And what is it that you both believe?" "Well, I suppose the same thing."

G. K. Chesterton once said this, "The point of an open mind, like having an open mouth, is to close it on something solid." When Fran asks me about my day she doesn't appreciate an encyclopaedic rendition of my diary at 15 minute intervals. When she asks me my opinion about the colour we might paint our lounge wall she isn't looking for a list of possible choices. That sort of knowledge is for robots and computers not for God and God's people. What she's looking for and what God looks for is the knowledge of intimacy, of the pouring out of ones innermost thoughts – good and bad; of complaint, wonder, disappointment, joy, seething anger, soaring love just, I think, as we find in many of the Psalms. Why are these such an important part of the scriptures? Quite simply because they represent, in large part, honest human emotions given in the expectation that God cares about these and wants to respond to such honesty.

Intimacy is the end point of belief. But belief requires trust and how can trust be present; how can trust begin in a relationship with a God whom we cannot see or touch? How can we trust God? The answer is, by taking the first step and by being prepared to take that step. Anything else is to deny trust a chance. Anything else is to actually place our trust in doubt and unbelief.

Anything else is to leave Christ out in the cold. We must take that first step and not only that first one but we must remember that if intimacy is the end goal then we will have a lot to learn about the One who is calling us forward.

I find, to be quite honest, that this is where human arrogance and presumption plays a huge role in my not going forward with God. You see trust that is halted with the first surprise or disappointment is trust that is still born; trust that was never based on any kind of reality in the first place. Consider who it is who is asking us to trust Him. This is the God of **all the universe**, the One who is new every morning, who has created us and who holds the whole universe in the palm of His hand. Tell me really how much of this God you really know? Tell me that you have nothing to learn in regard to this God. Tell me that there should be really no surprises in this relationship; that all your expectations should be fulfilled... and I will tell you that you are worshipping a demon and not God.

With God there will always be surprises; only a demon would desire that we live in comfort with a comfortable God; only a demon would like us to imagine that we knew enough of God not to be surprised every day. Remember this is the God whose love we cannot even begin to imagine, whose wisdom sustains a universe and whose patience allows generation after generation of ignorance to endure for the hope of someone reaching up to Him.

At the age of 16 in the year 371, Augustine sneaked away from his mother in Carthage. During the night he sailed away to Rome, leaving her alone to her tears and her prayers. How were these prayers answered? Not the way Monica [Augustine's mother] hoped at the time. Only later could she see that praying was the path to deepest joy.

Augustine himself wrote, "And what did she beg of you, my God, with all those tears, if not that you would prevent me from sailing? But you did not do as she asked you. Instead, [in the depth of her pain] and in the depth of your wisdom, you granted the wish that was closest to her heart [but one which she, in her desperation, could not utter].

"For she saw [only later] that you had granted her far more than she used to ask in her tearful prayers. You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer placed any hope in this world, but stood firmly upon the rule of faith. And you turned her sadness into rejoicing, into joy far fuller than her dearest wish, far sweeter and more chaste than any she had hoped to find." *John Piper, The Legacy of Sovereign Joy (Crossway Books, 2000);*

You turned her weeping into joy, her deepest grief in victory. You, O God took her little belief, her little trust and you transformed it into a wonderful altar of praise.

**Our God says to us 'Believe! And you will know me and I will be to you more than you could ever have hoped and dreamed'**

May you press into this surprising God and seek to trust Him now believing that He died for you that you might know Him this day and every more.

AMEN