



## 8.30am Holy Communion Trinity XI 2019

Many gifts came with the Protestant reformation, but one of the not so helpful spin outs of that particular scrum is the way we think of 'belief'.

What does it mean to *believe*? Living in the west in the centuries following the Reformation and the Enlightenment we instinctively slip into thinking of belief as something that happens in my head. We do this without realising that this is not necessarily what belief meant to Jesus and those who wrote the scriptures we read that word in. St Paul writes to the Church in Corinth of the core of the Christian belief unfolding in the Early Church. Elsewhere he will write that it is by this faith, this belief that we are saved.

These texts will inspire the Protestant reformers to recalibrate a corrupt and laborious medieval economy of salvation. 'We are saved by grace through faith not works and indulgences and the all that!'

Because of our recent intellectual history, our instincts when it comes to belief are *solitary*: they're mine, I am the gate keeper of my beliefs. And they are *head-bound*: ideas, theory, things of which I conceive and that I scrutinise. They are propositions that I chose to sign up to, adapt or ignore.

This landscape for belief is part of the reason for the strange place we find ourselves in which surveys tell us that most people believe in angels and heaven, both not Jesus.

Likewise, people say things like 'the woods are my cathedral' and 'you don't need to go to Church to be a Christian'. These systems of belief suit us, because we remain in complete control - like the consumers we have been trained for generations to be.

The trouble is, because it all happens in my head and I remain in control - the whole thing is limited by my experiences and prejudices, my learning and abilities and convenience. Head belief and my belief quickly become all about me, and of very little actual substance or growth.

And I'm not quibbling over an unimportant detail.

As we've said, Salvation is at stake! If it is by our belief that we are given eternal life, then we'd better get straight what we mean by belief!

The Reformation did much, thankfully, to dispense with the notion that God is counting up our good deeds. Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that God doesn't play that game.

But some Protestants have now gone too far the other way. Because it's about head-based belief you just have to think the right thing about Jesus and you're 'saved'. Both the publican and the pharisee assented intellectually to God's existence. They both 'believed' in that sense, but only one was justified.

Even less satisfactory, some teach that you just say a prayer 'the sinners prayer' and you're sorted.

None of that is what St Paul or Our Lord meant when they said 'believe'.

So what is a grounded and balanced understanding of Christian belief as we read it in the Scriptures and our tradition, and live it in our lives?

Christian belief then is a matter of *relationship*. Some have called it 'swimming in the river'. It isn't actions we do or things we think. It is a whole life lived. A life purposefully lived being swept up in the current of this river; that is to say, the reality of this great love story of which we're a part. Heaven is perfect union with our creator - to believe is to begin that relationship in a full fat, caffeinated way on this side of death.

To swim in this river called belief is to make it the place and way and context of our living. This current has been flowing for 20 centuries and long before that. Baptism, Eucharist, the other sacraments. That is to swim. Prayer in the day, chatting to God, and listening to Him. Loving service. Family, friends neighbours, encouraging others in faith and hope and love. To belong to Christ's body the Church with energy and affection. Those things aren't the test of our belief, they *are* us believing. If we swim in this river they are the most natural things in the world to us. Belief, then, isn't what we do or what we think, it is who we are and who we are becoming - in relationship with God, who desires nothing more than our being with Him.

God loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.