

*Easter 2 2014*

Before I actually worked as an editor at a publishing house, I thought it must be the most glamorous job in the world. The reality was very different. Like most jobs, 90% of it depended upon detailed meticulous repetitive work. Nothing anyone could have said would have persuaded me of this before I started – I believed what I chose to believe. I had to experience it for myself to change my mind, but without that initial belief in the glamour I would not have wanted to work there in the first place.

What we believe is not completely determined by experience, but it is most certainly influenced by it. If you read C.S. Lewis's two books, *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed*, you will discover a stark contrast between the books. The former was written in 1940. It is a cerebral, tightly argued study on suffering and pain and our response to it. 'A grief observed' was written over 20 years later, after his wife died. That book begins with the words 'no-one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.' It is a raw personal account of his experience, through which he revisits his theology of suffering. Unlike 'a Problem of Pain' it does not attempt to provide neat answers, but there is a strong sense that without the thinking that he had done twenty years earlier, his faith might not have held up in the way it did. He would not have had the mental framework with which to understand and process the powerful feelings that threatened to overwhelm him.

One thing I am frequently asked by people who are not Christians, is 'why do you believe?' This is quickly followed by their own reasons for disbelief, which are usually based upon the cruelty of mankind, the cruelty of the natural world and the injustice that appears to permeate all aspects of life. If they have had no experience of God, any explanation is reliant upon reason, with reference to scripture and tradition. Reason is incredibly important, but it can only go so far. This was the crux of Thomas's problem. His fellow disciples had seen the risen Christ. They had had the experience and they attempted to convince Thomas. Yet this was so outside of his own experience that he could not believe – at least not until he too had seen and touched Christ, until he had shared that experience with them.

Jesus says 'blessed are those who have not seen yet come to believe.'

There are many routes to faith. For some it is entirely cerebral. Faith becomes almost an act of will. Let's face it, most people have not had direct experience of Christ. They have not touched the wounds, seen the wounded side, heard his voice. Yet many of these same people have turned to Christ. They have decided to accept that Christ is the Son of God, that he is our Saviour, our way to eternal life. We find a huge amount of supporting evidence from those who did meet the risen

Christ, from the gospels and the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul and others. Yet despite this, it is quite hard to sustain faith solely by an act of will and, occasionally, people will become quite authoritarian, providing a rigid framework for their faith by treating scripture as absolute literal truth and somehow glossing over the internal contradictions. Usually though, the experience of loss, or pain, or beauty or love, matures such faith, bringing a depth that is prepared to live with uncertainty. The experience may not be directly of Christ, yet it brings one closer to the reality of his death and resurrection.

For other people faith is entirely experiential. They have had a religious experience. That too has its dangers. It can become their own view of reality, no-one else's matters. Tradition and reason become irrelevant, and scripture is subservient to beliefs. Imposing discipline and obedience on such a faith is hard, and when the going gets tough people may fall away like the seeds sown on stony ground.

In attempting to share our faith we have to be prepared to understand why we believe, and the role that reason, scripture, tradition and experience have played. It is often incredibly hard to put into words. Telling someone 'because I always have', or 'because it is true' or 'because Jesus saved me' probably won't alter the mind of an avowed atheist. In talking to people who have no experience of God, we must depend upon reason and listen, accept the experience of others even when it differs from our own, attempt to understand their reasoning, and to interpret that in the light of scripture, our own thinking and experience, and the experience and reasoning of Christians throughout the ages. We must be interpreters, helping others to understand and appreciate the world around them.

When I think about my own path to faith, I see that it was one of making connections, or rather of having those connections made for me.

As a child, the bible stories were just that – stories, strange tales alongside fairy stories. As an adult I became aware of the importance of justice and love as absolute values. I asked myself where they came from, was it simply an evolutionary advantage to have a society based upon these values? I was also increasingly aware of the effect of certain types of music and poetry. It literally seemed to lift my soul to a new plane. Why? What was happening? In the natural course of growing up I experienced sorrow, grief, the aching sense of loss and longing. Yet these strands of thinking did not lead me to God. It was only when someone suggested that I went to church that connections were made. Three words made the connection for me. God is love. That was and is my starting point. Each year as I discover more about scripture, more about the teaching of the prophets, more about the life of Christ, more about the experience and thinking of the apostles, and more about the traditions

of the church, new links are made. I came to understand that music opens a window and lets in some of the eternal truths about life and love, and that is why I can be moved to tears. I began to realise that hope was not an empty desire but a way of living. Above all, I saw that to be fully human was to participate in the divine.

I could not have made those connections if I had not been invited to go to church. I needed someone to help me see the relevance of scripture, to acknowledge that the centuries of tradition had something valuable to offer. All the fragmented feelings and scraps of knowledge were gathered together and made a picture – a picture that initially was out of focus, but each year gets clearer.

We are all called to be interpreters for other people, enabling them to make those connections that lead them to an understanding of Christ, by listening, by engaging in debate, by inviting them to share our experiences. The risen Christ may not stand in front of us and show us his wounds, but he is with us, and when we become aware of his presence, what we feel is his peace.

Every person we meet is challenged by the injustice and cruelty present in the world, by the seeming incongruence of a loving God that accepts not only his own suffering, but that of all creatures. Enabling people to know that suffering never has the last word, helping them to experience the undefeatable power of love is to provide them with a gift beyond price. This is too important to keep to ourselves. There are many that like Thomas say they cannot believe without proof. When the connections are made for them, they, like us, will say 'My Lord and my God'. Amen.