

Things to Consider

- ▶ One of the problems we all face is that we want to reduce God to our size and somehow make Him in our image. We think it makes Him more manageable and perhaps more pliable, not understanding that God is always working for our good. God is fire, or electricity, things that can be dangerous if treated carelessly. Albert Einstein is supposed to have said 'I sometimes think we are just holding the lion by its tail'. Belden Lane says, 'There are times when you've no idea of the mystery you have encountered in the wilds. You've met something you cannot fathom'. Such is God.
- ▶ The paradox is that there is another side to this unknowability and sense of danger that is there with God. We see this reflected in 1 John 3.2-3: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when He is revealed, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is. And all who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.'
- ▶ 'God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding: pour into our hearts such love toward you that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

(Common Worship, Daily Prayer; Collect for Trinity 6)

- ▶ 'Lord of all, our breath and being comes from you, yet our earthly end is dust; as you loose the bound and feed the hungry, so bring us in your mercy through the grave and gate of death to the feast of eternal life, where you reign for evermore.'

(Common Worship, Daily Prayer; prayer following Psalm 146)
AtG/B26/MBH

Attending to God

'The splendour of that which lies hidden from sight
... "Now we see through a glass, darkly"'



Any census is likely to tell us that most people believe in God. However, if we pushed them on this as to what exactly they meant, we are likely to discover that their belief is very varied and in the head. 'In the mind' is the common way of understanding belief in Western societies. I want to move to a different place, one where we live this out in a different way, rather than simply as intellectual assent of the mind. An illustration may help.

Dr John G Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides and he wanted to translate the writings of John into the local language but he discovered there was no word for 'believe' in that tongue. This created a major problem, for it is a key word in John's gospel occurring more than 90 times, and so he was forced for a time to lay aside his translation work. One day one of the local workers came into his office and sat down and putting his feet on another chair used a word that meant, 'I am resting my whole weight on these two chairs'. Paton knew that he now had his word. In his translating, whenever he needed a word for believe he used that word's meaning 'I am resting my whole weight'. In effect, trusting.

This is what we should be meaning and doing when we say 'I believe'. It should not be merely intellectual assent, something of the mind, but rather coming from the heart as we 'trust our whole weight' to it. In his letter to the Romans Paul says 'For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved'. (10.10)

Belief and Faith are two words often incorrectly used interchangeably. 'Faith' is the content, the doctrine, the teaching itself, and 'belief' is our response, or assent, to this content or teaching. It is important to know what we believe and why if we are 'trusting our whole weight' to something. What belief we have will determine what direction we go in life.

I do not intend to give a summary of the key elements of our faith, but 1 Peter 1.3-9 speaks of the 'now' as it points us even to the future resurrection. In addition, Colossians 3.12-17 speaks of the present, attitudes, and behaviours towards others as we seek to model Christ. With all of this, 'hope' is a virtue we will try to live out.

James Alison tells us, 'Hope is not about something in the future, but more like being stretched into a capacity to enjoy what is, to create the sort of present that is able to enjoy God'. Expanded, our hope is to embrace and live life fully now, in the present moment, but done in such a way that we look to a distant horizon that will one day take us fully into God's presence and the life beyond death. It is a paradox to be lived: now, but not yet fully.

When we speak of the next life that is to come, we can struggle to comprehend it for we speak of things beyond our knowledge and awareness. We are like small children who only have some vague awareness of what it means to be an adult.

Six months before he died the great theologian, Thomas Aquinas, had a vision of the next life. Afterwards he said to his secretary, Brother Reginald, 'Everything I have ever written seems like straw' and he never wrote another word. In fact, what he had written voluminously was not 'straw' but profound theology. Yet in the end compared with what awaits us, his words seemed to him to be like straw.

As St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13.12 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face-to-face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.' (NRSV) The Authorised Version puts it, 'For now we see through a glass, darkly ...' And so we do.

Like Thomas Aquinas, Paul too seems to have had some kind of vision pertaining to the next life, though he relegates it to a third person rather than himself: 'I know a person in Christ who ... was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat' (2 Corinthians 12.2,4).

Our problem as humans is that we look at all this one dimensionally when in fact in the next life we will view it perhaps four dimensionally, or even five and understand! It is simply beyond our ability to comprehend.

An illustration highlighting our human dilemma may help. Imagine a small baby still in its mother's womb and further imagine that you could have a conversation with the child. You might ask, 'What do you think life will be like after you are born?' to be told it would be dark and wet, for this is all that the baby has ever known and so could not possibly imagine life as we know it. Then imagine you persist with your questioning: 'And what and how will you eat?' 'Fluid through an umbilical cord into my stomach'. The imagination would not stretch to the rich varieties of food that we enjoy or even eating through the mouth.

This too is our dilemma. As we think about the resurrection life, life beyond death, our imagination struggles and fails. We can only ever imagine bigger and better of what we have now.

The good news is that, as St Paul says, quoting an unknown ancient author: 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him ...' (1 Corinthians 2.9). This is what is offered to us freely – as a gift. Our taking seriously both God and our spiritual journey, living it out in our day-to-day life, will draw us ever nearer to the One we love and worship.

Nor do we make this journey alone for we are in God's company, and also joined with both the living and departed. Moreover, as Deuteronomy 31.8 in the context of the Exodus from Egypt reminds us: 'It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed'. Isaiah reminds us (in speaking of Israel) that God called us before we were born (49.1) and we are inscribed on His hand (49.16). Truly, we are known and deeply loved.