A Sermon preached by the Revd John Witheridge at Matins on Sunday 19 March 2017

1 Kings 18: 20-24, 36-39     John 20: 19-end
Suspension of Disbelief

‘Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.’

I

If we think of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, we think of a great Romantic poet, the writer of ‘The Ancient Mariner’ and ‘Kubla Khan’. But Coleridge was also a brilliant literary critic, philosopher and theologian; his books on faith, and Church and State, had an important influence at the time. T.S. Eliot described Coleridge as ‘the greatest of the English critics’; certainly his essay on Hamlet has never been bettered. His book, Biographia Literaria, was published 200 years ago in 1817. It’s an unusual mixture of literary opinions and autobiography, and it contains the phrase I want to preach about this morning, the phrase ‘suspension of disbelief’.

What Coleridge is talking about is the importance, especially in the theatre, of being able to forget, or overlook the fact, that we’re sitting, watching actors on a set on a stage. If we’re to enter into the full experience of drama, we need to believe for the moment that these are real people, living real lives. We have, in other words, to suspend our disbelief, in order to believe the unbelievable.

I want to suggest that this phrase ‘suspension of disbelief’ also describes what many of us do as Christians. On the surface we seem sure enough of our faith. We think we know what we believe, and we can say our prayers, and recite the creeds. But if we’re entirely honest to God, and to ourselves, (and Lent’s a good time to try), we know that we have our
doubts and uncertainties. There are doctrines that we’re not sure we really believe. And there are obstacles to faith that gnaw away at us, and make us wonder, deep down, whether we can be as certain as we’d like to be. The fact is we suspend our disbelief. We put it to one side, we bury it, we ignore it, we consign it to the mind’s cellar, like unwanted furniture. And there it sits, in the dark, draining our Christian confidence, and sapping our spiritual energy.

I want to explore three sources of scepticism, three barriers to belief that I think are most likely to worry thinking Christians today. I’ll suggest my own ways of answering them, but I don’t claim that answers are easy. What I do think is important though, is facing our doubts, and not being afraid of them. They need to be brought up from the cellar from time to time, given some light, and dusted down. You’ll find, I’m sure, that when uncertainties are thought and prayed about, their sting is drawn. Remember Tennyson’s words: ‘There lives more faith in honest doubt, than in half the creeds.’

II

My first source of unbelief is relativism. The day before he was elected Pope Benedict in 2005, the then Cardinal Ratzinger said the greatest challenge facing the Catholic Church is what he called ‘a dictatorship of relativism.’ He meant an approach to truth that is now widespread, and taken for granted, an approach that says that truth can only be true in the context of particular cultures and histories. No truth can be absolute, timeless and universal. It all depends on where and when you live.

So, in matters of Christian belief, we know that the doctrine of the Trinity, say, is the product of Greek philosophical interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures, under pressure from the need to combat heresy, and secure unity in the Roman Empire. It can be argued that the Trinity makes sense only in this context, and can’t hold much, if any truth, for us, 1600 years later. And the same is the case with ethics. The 10
Commandments, it can be argued, can have authority only in the context of ancient Israelite religion and Mesopotamian law codes. These commands concerning theft, murder, adultery, and the rest, cannot possibly be binding on people in different places, and at different times.

So, truth is up to you. If you think something’s true, or if you think certain behaviour is right or wrong, then that’s fine – for you that is, but not for me. It’s what Ratzinger called in his Church, ‘cafeteria Catholicism’ – the tendency of believers to pick ‘n mix among the Church’s teachings.

All this rubs off on us. Historical criticism of the Bible is now part and parcel of how you and I read the Scriptures. We know now that the Bible should be read and understood in context. We must, for instance, interpret Jesus’s teaching in the setting of first century Judaism. That’s right and proper, but there can creep in with this an uncertainty as to whether or not Jesus’s words can really apply to us, in our very different time and place. And if the creeds are the product of Greek philosophers engaging with the Jewish Scriptures, then where does that leave us who inhabit a totally different world? What, asked Maurice Wiles, in his 1971 inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Divinity, what has Jerusalem and Athens, to do with Oxford?

For some, relativism is to be rejected on the grounds that relativism, by its own definition, cannot be absolutely true. My own answer, for what it’s worth, is simply this. Just because we better understand the complicated processes by which ideas are formed, doesn’t mean to say that at least some ideas are not absolutely and universally true. They may need translating. They may need reinterpreting. But at heart, some truths are true for all of us, and always will be. It’s perhaps for the Christian partly a matter of faith as to which truths these are.

III
My second source of scepticism is, to use the philosophical terms, **empiricism or positivism**. In other words, the scientific outlook, that has for more than a century been entirely natural for all of us. We are brought up not to trust in any truths that can’t be proved by the evidence of our senses. If you can’t see or touch or hear something, it doesn’t exist. That, of course, was also Thomas’s problem in today’s treading. ‘Unless’, he says, ‘I see in Christ’s hands the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ This dependence on our senses is a huge barrier to religious belief, indeed to belief in God, and one of the main reasons why faith has declined.

Two Christ Church men are famously associated with empiricism: John Locke, the great Enlightenment philosopher; and A.J.Ayer, whose bestselling book *Language, Truth and Logic*, published in 1936 when Ayer was 26, applied empiricism to language. Logical positivism argued that sentences that are not logical, or cannot be verified, are meaningless. That rules out statements like ‘God exists’, or ‘charity is good’. Religious and ethical language, argued Ayer, is devoid of meaning. ‘All utterances about the nature of God’, he wrote, ‘are nonsensical.’ (153).

You don’t have to be a philosopher to have absorbed the lack of confidence in theological discourse that logical positivism injected into our bloodstream. We’re all of us wary of talking about what we think God is like, or what we think God is telling us. We’re embarrassed because we’re not sure that what we’re saying makes any real sense. We’re afraid others will think we’re talking nonsense, and we’re not sure they’re not right.

The empirical approach to what’s real is so all-pervasive that we can’t escape it. But, as with relativism, we ought to be able to see its limitations. We know from our own experience, and from the experience of others, that truth is not apprehended only through logic or scientific proof. ‘The heart,’ wrote Pascal, has its reasons, of which reason knows
nothing.’ Feelings, intuitions, imagination, beauty, music, works of art—all these make very real to us truths about ourselves and the world around us - a world, visible and invisible.

In Evelyn Waugh’s novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, much of it set here in Oxford, the undergraduate Charles Ryder queries his Christ Church friend Sebastian Flyte’s Christian beliefs:

‘But my dear Sebastian, you can’t seriously believe it all.’

‘Can’t I?’

‘I mean about Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass.’

‘Oh yes, I believe that. It’s a lovely idea.’

‘But you can’t believe things because they’re a lovely idea.’

‘But I do. That’s how I believe.’ (p.84)

Those of us who have faith, those of us who’ve felt the love of God, or experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit, know them to be real and true. We can’t see them, we can’t touch them, but they’re there nonetheless. ‘Blessed are those who have not seen,’ says Jesus to Thomas, ‘and yet believe.’

IV

Last, but by no means the least of the causes of disbelief, is suffering - what in his famous book, C.S. Lewis called ‘The Problem of Pain’. Lewis had had an unhappy childhood, and had been severely wounded in the First World War, so he knew what he was writing about. For us too the extent and intensity of human suffering makes it hard at times to believe in the good and loving God we call our Father. Pictures of suffering bombard us – images of starvation, homelessness, and the wounds of war. If in our country anaesthetics and drugs spare us from many of the pains of the past, we are faced instead with the indignities
and dementia of old age. Richard Harries, a former Bishop of Oxford, has written this: ‘It is not the alleged meaninglessness of Christian beliefs, or the impossibility of proving the existence of God, but the fact of suffering which is the most powerful factor making for disbelief in God. It is not logic but anger which makes some of the most honest and sensitive souls rebel.’

There have been all kinds of attempts to justify the ways of God to man, but none have really explained how to square a loving God with human misery. Lewis, for instance, saw suffering as sent by God to strengthen our faith. I don’t think that explanation will do. It doesn’t account either for the evil of suffering, or for the love and compassion we see in Christ. You will have your own thoughts on this dilemma, and it’s important to consider them. For me, there’s no theological answer. No talk of a fallen world, or human freedom, or a creation in travail, can square the circle. But what we do have at the heart of our gospel, and too often overlook, is a God who shares our suffering, a God who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, a God who himself hangs and suffers with us on the cross - and rises in triumph. God in Christ rescues us from the awful loneliness and Godlessness of suffering.

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In these barriers to belief, these suspended disbeliefs, which can nag away at our Christian confidence, there’s another literary phrase we might consider. This one is Keats’. It’s the phrase ‘negative capability’, and it reminds us that very often there aren’t complete answers to any of these obstacles. ‘It struck me,’ wrote Keats, ‘what quality went to form a Man of Achievement – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’

Our own doubts and uncertainties need facing from time to time. They need thinking and praying about. But they also need us not to fret but to
trust; and to put our faith and patience in the love and truth of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen