28 January: Choral Matins
The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
Jeremiah 1: 4–10; Matthew 7: 15–21
The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology
Divine Epiphanies: ‘On the Faith of Feet’

Footprints of the Buddha. Found at Amavarati, India. c.AD 100–300. Carved limestone.
© Trustees of the British Museum

This is the third sermon in the “Divine Epiphanies” series, where we reflect on some of the objects that appear in the Ashmolean Museum’s current exhibition, “Imagining the Divine”. The object that I’ve chosen appears above. It’s called “Footprints of the Buddha”, it’s made of carved limestone, it was crafted sometime between AD 100 and AD 300, and it was found in India at a place called Amaravati.

In the history of Buddhism, images of the Buddha’s footprints were for a long time the primary focus of meditation for the faithful. Quite what the footprints signify no one really knows. Presumably, however, they signify a call to follow the Buddha, to follow in his footsteps, to imitate him. Indeed, this practical, action-oriented interpretation is confirmed by the concentric circles imprinted on the soles of the feet—circles that depict the “wheel of the law”.

The call to follow by observing in practice the norms or laws or patterns of the Buddha has its obvious equivalents in Christianity—in Jesus’ injunction, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (16.24), in the late medieval theme of the imitatio Christi, and in the Mennonite Nachfolge or ‘following after’ Jesus.

This practical, action-oriented view of religious faith finds expression in this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew. For there we heard Jesus say, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7.21).

On the one hand, this is surely common sense. Surely all of us would agree that what we do is more important than what we say, more important than our expression or articulation of what we believe.

On the other hand, it’s also troubling. It’s certainly troubling to people like me who earn their daily crust by thinking, writing, and teaching theology. It troubles those of us who spend some of the precious hours that God has allotted us in struggling to articulate what Christians ought to believe about God and the world, and why they ought to believe it. This morning’s Gospel poses a question to us because it appears to downgrade the importance of right belief and confession.

Now at this point it’s just possible that you might not be overcome with sympathy. After all, the discomfort of theologians is a rather trivial drop in the ocean of human suffering. But if right now you’re feeling detached and safe, let me pull you a bit closer to the heat.

For the assertion of the priority of practice over profession of belief doesn’t just pose an awkward question to theologians. It also poses one to Christians in general, because Christianity is a much more theological religion than most—certainly more than Judaism or Islam (and probably more than Buddhism, too, although I don’t know it well enough to speak with confidence). Both in the past and in the present Christianity is much more given over to theological enquiry and speculation and controversy. I don’t think that either Judaism or Islam have anything like the classic Christian creeds that we churchgoers recite daily. In the heart of Judaism it’s not a creed that stands, but the
Torah, the Law. And Islam is quite well understood, I think, as a kind of radical simplifying of mind-bending Christian theological belief—say, in the Incarnation of God and in God as Three in One.

So, “the feet of the Buddha” and this morning’s Gospel pose both to theologians in particular and to Christians in general the uncomfortable question of whether we overrate the importance of what people say they believe. In response to that question, I have four thoughts to offer you.

The first is that I do think that beliefs are important. What we do and how we do it are shaped by how we see or understand things, by what we think is real, by what we believe to be important and valuable. What we believe determines whether we do anything at all, what we do, and how we do it.

For example, are we like the university student who, staring beerily into his late-night curry, once said to me, “Life is just a matter of what you can get away with—and it’s awful”? Or, in contrast, do we see our lives as moral adventures in which we are called to grow in wisdom and generosity? And are we able to believe in a more-than-human power that will bring our immature and fragmented lives to completion after death, enabling us to unravel the knots we couldn’t untie, bringing to good the wrong turnings we took and couldn’t reverse, finally closing the wounds that never really healed? Life as a matter of what you can get away with, or life as a moral journey with hope of arrival: it matters which we believe.

What we believe and what we don’t believe does matter, because it shapes how we live and what we do—and I don’t for a moment imagine that our Gospel reading this morning means to imply otherwise.

What I think our Gospel reading does imply, however, is that what we say we believe isn’t always what we really believe. This is my second thought. Let me give it some flesh. When I was a chaplain of Oriel College in the 1990s, we used to hold very formal, very traditional Anglican choral evensongs every Sunday evening during term time, as well as on special occasions. After one of these occasions, I was standing in the undergraduate
bar (as was my happy wont) and a female student came up to me and said, “Chaplain, I wanted to tell you that I really, really enjoyed the service—but my problem is that I feel such a fraud, because everyone in there believes, and I don’t”.

I can’t remember exactly what I said to her then, but if I were saying it now, it would be something like this: “Don’t think of belief in black or white terms. It’s seldom a matter of simply either believing or disbelieving. Most people in chapel (like most people in churches and cathedrals) believe more or less, and some believe less than more. Very few will recite every clause in the creed with equal conviction. So let me welcome you to the real, human Christian church, where everyone is somewhere en route, sustained and guided by fragments of belief”.

That’s one thing I would say, but the other is this: “Take seriously the fact that you went to chapel. And take seriously the fact that you took the courage to come up to me, in the middle of the bar, and in the sight of all your mates, to tell me how much it meant to you. It could well be that your feet already believe what your head has yet to”. That puts the point metaphorically, of course. The literal truth is that our minds are many-layered, and at a deeper level we can believe something that at a more superficial level we doubt or deny.

So, I don’t think that our Gospel reading is implying that belief is unimportant. Rather, it implies that what we do is a more reliable expression of what we really believe, than is what we say.

My third thought follows directly from this one. If human believing and disbelieving is as complex and subtle and many-layered as I suggest it is, then when we encounter other people—other Christians or other non-Christians—we should hesitate to take their labels, or even their overt self-descriptions, very seriously. What I mean by that is not that we shouldn’t respect them, but that we should be exceedingly slow to jump to conclusions from them.

For example, when someone tells us that they’re an atheist, what are we entitled to conclude? Is it that they’re absolutely convinced that there is no benevolent super-human power, or is it just that they refuse to believe in a mean-minded, authoritarian, kill-joy
God? In which case, they’d find many Christians standing shoulder to shoulder with them. But suppose that they’re adamant in protesting that they don’t believe in any kind of god, might it nevertheless be that their lives and commitments and actions actually betray a high esteem for human dignity, and a hopefulness about human destiny, that need a God to make sense? Remember: sometimes feet believe a lot more than minds know or mouths confess.

That’s my third point: if what we say we believe isn’t the final word on what we really believe, then it follows that we should be very careful—and patient—in how we read each other.

My fourth and final thought has to do with the eucharist. If there’s often a discrepancy between what we really believe and what we think and say, if our minds and mouths often lag behind our feet, then how much of a creational barrier ought churches to put in the way of those who instinctively want to take part in the eucharist?

Let me be clear: this is not a rhetorical question, but a genuine and open one. I myself don’t have a settled answer to it, and of course I take the point that we shouldn’t encourage people to go through the motions of doing what they don’t understand.

But the point is that there are different levels of understanding, and some of these are not at all articulate. So if someone is deeply but inarticulately moved to respond to the manifestation of God’s forgiving love in the ritual replay of the Last Supper, who are we to forbid them because they haven’t yet been baptised and signed up to a creed?

Now, I’m proud that the Anglican church operates a generous policy of admission to the eucharist: active Christians of all shapes and sizes are welcome. Nevertheless, I do wonder whether there should be a creational gate at all. I fear that such a gate might constitute a skandalon, a needless obstacle between God’s children and their salvation. After all, Jesus’ own practice was to welcome first, and ask questions later. And this, of course, was one of the things that really got up the noses of some Pharisees: to them, Jesus’ God was far too rash and lax. But, then, the question that that poses to those of us who call ourselves Christians is this: Is our God rash and lax enough?
So, there are my four thoughts in response to the verse in this morning’s Gospel that reads, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father”.

First, beliefs do matter because they shape lives and action.

But second, professed beliefs aren’t always the real or the most powerful ones: sometimes dumb feet believe—and believe more deeply and strongly—than articulate minds and mouths.

Third, if that’s true, then let’s be careful and patient in reading each other, not jumping from anyone’s profession of faith or unfaith to premature conclusions.

And fourth, if the practical belief of feet can be more important than the articulate belief of minds and mouths, what does that imply for our churches’ policy of admission to the eucharist?