

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Help my unbelief

Bob Smith

Mark 9:24; Hebrews 11:1

When Mother Teresa, thought by many to be the epitome of true Christian faith, received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work amongst the poorest of the poor, she reminded the assembly that the approaching Christmas season should remind the world that “Christ is everywhere - in our hearts, in the poor we meet, in the smile we give and in the smile that we receive.”

Yet three months earlier, in a letter to her spiritual director, she wrote: *“Jesus has a very special love for you. But as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see. I listen and do not hear.”*

It now appears that this remarkable woman, who seemed so close to God, was living out a very different private spiritual reality, one from which God seemed to have disappeared; like the man in the Bible who said to Jesus; “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” And in this, I suspect that both he and Mother Teresa are like many of us.

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The Bible tells us that *“Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”* It also says *“without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

That being so it seems inconceivable that someone like Mother Teresa should have written more than forty letters to her spiritual confidants revealing that inwardly she lived in a state of deep spiritual pain. In one letter she confessed that once it had driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God.

However, despite the darkness and the doubt, she never did stop believing, and that’s what makes her faith all the more remarkable; because it’s not necessarily hard to believe when you don’t see anything – after all, that’s what faith is – *“being sure of what we don’t see.”* But it is hard to believe when you don’t feel anything.

So how do we really know that faith in a Supreme Being who rewards those who earnestly seek him, is anything more than wishful thinking? For me, the traditional arguments for the existence God are quite convincing; but I have to admit that not everyone finds them so.

But what I do find most compelling is that there is something at the very core of my being that knows there is a reality beyond the reach of my five senses and longs to be in touch with it. It’s what the French philosopher Pascal called “the God shaped hole in every human heart,” and it’s clear that most people feel it too, which is why there has never ever been a truly atheistic society – even the Soviet Union which purported to be one, disintegrated after a mere seventy years, and was never able to eradicate people’s belief in God, which is why faith flourished again once that political system collapsed.

People may have all sorts of views about God, ranging from the loving, personal God of Christianity, to the *Force* of the Star Wars movies, but one thing common to most of us is that something within us that knows intuitively that there is a supreme intelligence out there somewhere and longs to make contact with it.

However, the Bible goes even further and says that for believers, the real evidence is a conviction deep within us that is given to us by God's Spirit. *"This is how we know that he lives in us,"* the Bible says. *"We know it by the Spirit he gave us."* And *"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."*

Mother Teresa, even in her darkest hours of inner turmoil, never lost that conviction, or the memory of times when she had felt the presence of Christ so real that she had been overwhelmed by it. And we too, when we go through times of wondering if God really is there, need to make ourselves remember those other times when we really did know. As someone once said, you have to *"Remember in the darkness what you knew in the light."*

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Do you know that there's a close relationship between how we feel spiritually and what's going on within us emotionally? The reason why many of us may feel spiritually empty is often because we are emotionally depleted. Doctors tell us that there's a direct relationship between the amount of adrenaline our bodies produce and the amount of stress that results, leaving us feeling empty, depressed and even burnt out.

People who long for a close relationship with God often drive themselves to work hard doing what they believe is God's work in the world and consequently are very vulnerable to this, and can easily succumb to a crisis of faith because of it. They wonder where the joy and sense of God's presence has gone, and may find themselves wondering if everything they have believed in really is true. But the reality is they are not spiritually bereft, just emotionally exhausted.

A few years ago I met up with the man who had been my first pastor and spiritual mentor, and I had not seen for thirty years. When I began my training for the ministry he took up a very important leadership role interstate and did a significant job helping the church achieve some important goals.

Thirty years later, I ended up doing the same job and was keen to meet up with him again. However, I learned that he had asked to be taken off our mailing list and, from little things people mentioned to me, I started to worry about what had happened and whether he had gone through a crisis of faith.

Well, two years later we did actually meet and he told me his story. He told me that he had started to experience some unusual physical and emotional symptoms that his doctors couldn't explain. As time went by these became worse and no-one seemed able to explain it.

Finally he met a specialist who did understand what was happening. This doctor explained that when a person passes the age of fifty their ability to cope with the emotional pressures of living in the fast lane diminishes considerably. He described it as like having two factories within; one that produces physical energy and the other that produces emotional energy. While the physical one still works at high capacity the emotional one's output is only half what it used to be.

He advised my friend to slow down immediately and get out of the fast lane. But he didn't and consequently suffered an emotional collapse that left him 'emotionally bankrupt.' As time went by he was able to come to terms with this and realise it was not that God had left him, it was just that emotionally he'd got nothing left in the bank.

And still today he is unable to cope with the emotional demand of ministry and things like preaching or leading a Bible study. But one thing that does still remain is a deep inner conviction that God is there for him, even though he may not always feel it. And that is what faith truly is: believing, even when you're not feeling; still remembering in the darkness what you once knew in the light.

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A couple of months ago I had the privilege of meeting the world's most recent winner of the Victoria Cross, our highest award for gallantry in the face of the enemy. His name is Lance Corporal Johnson Beharry; a young British soldier who won his VC in Iraq two years ago, and was the chief guest at the recent Reserve Forces Day celebration.

I asked him what heroes feel when they do their heroic acts, and he told me they feel very frightened. This comment highlights the truth about courage. Courage is not fearlessness – if a person feels no fear then there is no great effort required to face danger. Courage is facing danger despite our fears.

In the same way, faith is not mindless belief – that's more likely to be gullibility. Faith is facing our doubts and digging deep beyond our conflicting emotions to that bedrock conviction that God is there, even though we can't see him and, at that moment may not feel him. And it is this kind of faith, I believe, that speaks most powerfully to people today.

Jan de Hartog, in his classic book *The Call of the Sea* tells about a young English minister who came aboard his ship in Italy, just after the War. He was on a one-man pilgrimage to the Holy Land, riding a ladies bicycle.

De Hartog said; *"He filled our mess room with a kind of tranquility, and yet he was unhappy. He loved the church and believed in God, but had only felt God's presence once and that for a fleeting moment."* It had happened during the war when, as a young army chaplain he had parachuted into the jungle in Burma to join the force known as 'the Chindits'...He had become entangled in the branches of a large tree and had lost his bag containing his communion set.

Later, the troops asked him to give them Holy Communion before setting out on a raid; and it was then that his moment came as he administered the sacrament in a whisper, using survival biscuits and beer served from a cracked cup.

The moment had been so overpowering and the whispered communion out of the cracked cup had so convinced him of the reality of God and the eternal life of the church that he had written to his bishop about it. The bishop, however, was unimpressed and wrote back saying that under no circumstances should Holy Communion be administered in anything but the appropriately consecrated vessel.

So now, confused and alone, he was on his way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem; he didn't quite know why; but he hoped it would help him see things more clearly."

De Hartog finishes the story by saying *"That night, in the mess room, the memory of him was still about; it induced us to discuss religion – something we rarely did. The debate lasted for hours until the Chief wound it up. 'I don't want anybody telling me about God,' he said, 'But if there had to be somebody, I'd want it to be that little man on the bicycle.'"*

Most of us battle with doubts at one time or another, and the examples of faith that speak most powerfully to us in those times are the sort of faith that faces its own doubts and still searches for truth. And that's why Mother Teresa now, through dead, through her letters still speaks.

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The recent publication of Mother Teresa's letters reveals her doubts, but also show her full of trust at the same time. James Martin, editor of the magazine *America*, says: "Who would have thought that the person who was considered the most faithful woman in the world struggled like that with her faith. And who would have thought that the one considered the most ardent of believers could be a saint to the skeptics?" She illustrates how doubt is a natural part of everyone's life, no matter who they are, and that those heart wrenching moments of doubt often become the building blocks of true faith.

It is only as we confront our doubts that we really experience that faith that makes us *"sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"* so that we are able to say, *"I believe in the sun even when it's not shining. I believe in love even when I don't feel it, and I believe in God even when I don't see him."*