

All in the mind ?

19 2 12

Almighty Father,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross:
give us grace to perceive his glory,
that we may be strengthened to suffer with him
and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory.

Today's text may be found in Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 4 and verse 4: 'the minds of the unbelievers '.

I have a problem. But don't we all ? Actually, I've several but the one which is at the front of my mind at present and one which I'd like to explore briefly this morning is why some folk believe and why others don't.

I think I've always believed. To be precise, I think I've always been open-to-belief. I grew up in a household where my mum did believe in otherness and that, as a family, we lived a life with a sense that God existed and he was part of our everyday life. That was confirmed when I went to school – both in my primary and secondary schools – so belief in deity was a natural part of how I made sense of the world around me. And Christianity for me where I was at the time came to be the obvious way of making sense of God. And you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

So if that is true for me, I guess the opposite might be true for those who don't believe. Belief in otherness, experience of the numinous, recognising God in what they see and hear, in what they think and feel, may simply not be a part of how non-believers make sense of their world. If I see the awesome power of God in the sea here off the Brittany coast, then an atheist or an agnostic might only see the power of the sea and not move from the phenomenon to the author of all phenomena. And so to my text today - 'the mind of the unbeliever'. Is belief and disbelief merely a question of up-bringing, of experience, of how we make sense of what is happening around us? Or is belief and disbelief a question of whether we have the facility or ability to connect with something beyond ourselves, intuitively discern someone who is really there as we are really here.

In today's two passages from 2 Kings 2 and Mark 9, we have examples of theophany, Man's encounter with God. Elijah's translation to heaven and the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain both illustrate how very different people can interpret what they hear depending on where they stand.

Elisha is adamant that he will not leave Elijah. Elisha knows that his master, Elijah, is about to be taken from him. When the moment comes, they are separated by 'a chariot of fire' drawn by 'horses of fire', and Elijah is borne aloft by a whirlwind. Now I've no idea what was literally happening: the language the author of the Book of Kings uses to describe what Elisha remembers may be poetic or literal. I'm not sure. But in the mind of the believer, we have a God-encounter. In the mind of the unbeliever, we have a legend, a myth, a fairy story.

Peter, James and John are on the mountainside, probably Mount Hermon, when Jesus is transfigured – ‘his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.’ The otherworldliness of this God–encounter is reinforced by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the cloud which overshadowed them and the voice of God speaking from the cloud, ‘This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!’ For the believer, what is described is further confirmation of the true nature of Christ: fully God and fully Man. For the unbeliever, what is described might be described as nice symbolism but dismissed as delusional or wishful–thinking or deliberate propaganda.

Then how can we know who is right ? If our faith is real, then it must work for us. If it’s simply wishful–thinking, then, like King Canute, we have no earthly chance of commanding the waves of an in–coming tide to turn back. But if a blind man tells me he cannot see the colour of my shirt or if a deaf man tells me he cannot hear the music being played, though it may be true for him, it will not necessarily reflect what really is the case.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

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H: Sermon 25: All in the mind

