
Grounds for Confidence

Temple Cowley, Nov 15th 2009

in which I argue that having grounds for confidence as we face our death means actively belonging to a church community.

The great Temple in Jerusalem was the sacred place when God ‘dwelt among his people’. At the very heart of the Temple was the ‘Most Holy Place’, which was separated off from the Holy Place (where priests brought bread offerings) by a great curtain. The curtain represented ‘material’ – physical ‘stuff’. The colours it was woven in represented the elements. Beyond the curtain was space where God alone reigned in pure holiness, above and beyond the physical realm. Here was a timeless zone in which all distinctions, divisions, separations became meaningless and everything found its primordial unity and glory. The curtain represented the limits of our mortality.

Once a year, after various purification rituals and sacrifice, and after ‘becoming Yahweh God for the people’ (with the name of God written on his forehead) the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place to offer a blood sacrifice for the unwitting sins of God’s people – the sins they couldn’t do anything about because they weren’t yet aware they were committing them.

Emerging once again from the Most Holy Place, through the curtain, the high priest pronounced God’s blessing and favour. One scholar has suggested that the ordinary priests’ response to this blessing was “His blood be on us and on our children” – which casts that infamous verse from Matthew’s Gospel in a very different light.

The ‘Letter to the Hebrews’ (9 : 11 - 14) in the New Testament makes it explicit that Jesus is the high priest to enter the Most Holy Place once for all, since the blood sacrifice he offered was not that of bulls and goats but his own blood. The writer of John’s Gospel (John 2 : 19 - 21) makes it explicit that Jesus’s resurrected, physical body is the new Temple, to replace the old.

I recently had a close escape. I had agreed to do a funeral at the crematorium but the funeral director had not told me that they had asked the family whether they wanted the curtain closed or not, and the family had responded that they would prefer it left open. The family did not mention it to me themselves, until something they said as I was leaving made me prick up my ears and I asked them. If I hadn’t, I would have closed the curtain on the coffin and they would have sat there surprised and perhaps horrified.

I was *not* happy! But I was also not happy because I think the closing of the curtain is an important part of a funeral. You wouldn’t do a burial and walk away leaving the coffin by the side of the grave. For me it’s an important part of the ritual : this is where we stare at the

curtain and realise that we cannot see beyond our mortality. We act out the hiddenness of the mystery. We commend the deceased to God in Jesus – the only true High Priest that can accompany us through the curtain.

Do we need to be accompanied ‘through the curtain’ of death? Or do we simply transmigrate all by ourselves? Are we immortal? Or is it simply the end of the line? Is there nowhere and nothing beyond the curtain, only extinction? This was the theme of my last sermon here, on the big difference between resurrection and immortality.

Interestingly, in a blog discussion I found a secular (that is, atheist) funeral celebrant agreeing with me – what we agreed on was that human beings are *not immortal*, and the *finality of death must be acknowledged*. We can only see as far as the curtain. We both felt that not to close the curtain was to try to avoid facing it. He wrote

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The un-drawn curtain is all part of the emotionally manageable funeral, too often a trivialised event containing no element of what you so splendidly describe as ‘staring down death’.

How we then *deal* with it as we stare death in the face – how we imagine what is on the other side of the curtain, if you like – may vary. For the atheist it’s a matter of resignation : the curtain is the limit. There’s nothing on the other side. Get used to it. Life can still have purpose and meaning. You don’t have to believe in God.

Well, no, you don’t *have* to believe in God. And you can’t *make* yourself believe in God. You can certainly *explore* belief in God and ask whether it’s reasonable. A lot of people have some very funny ideas about what belief in God involves. They haven’t realised that Christians don’t all believe in a ‘tooth fairy’ god, and that belief in God is perfectly *reasonable*. But it’s one thing to accept that belief in God is *reasonable* – it’s quite another matter to have a *living faith*, an anchor for the soul in Christ.

When *I*, as a Christian, look at the closing curtain in the crematorium chapel, I know that the Christ who is with us has the authority to go through that curtain into the most holy place and come back out again. “I was dead, and now I am alive for evermore; and I hold the keys of death and death’s domain” as it says in Revelation 1 : 18. I do not know what is beyond that curtain; *but I know a man who does*. I

didn't find him, although (like the lost sheep, I guess) I had gone looking for him; no – *he found me*.

Will that “anchor hold”? What *are* our grounds for confidence?

It is an uncomfortable fact that the Bible, including the New Testament, does not generally support the idea that everyone goes straight to heaven. The New Testament isn't terribly clear about what happens to those who don't – except for some. It is *very* clear that there are choices to be made; there are also hints that it's up to God and there's no automatic 'pass purgatory' system. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12 : 2).

Do you remember a sermon I gave that started with a question from my GP? My GP was not entirely wrong when he suggested that the reason why the Church is dwindling is because it has stopped being concerned about saving souls. This sermon marks a departure for me. **I am going to say that I'm beginning to think that 'being saved' involves being an active part of the church, regularly.** I never thought I'd believe that. I'm not sure I do – yet. But I think we need to think whether it's back on the agenda. The current fashion for believing that we're all immortal, we're all going to heaven as long as we don't feel we've hurt anyone, the current defensiveness that says 'who are you to talk to me about sin?', the current idea that belief in God doesn't actually involve any change in behaviour, and as for going to church . . .

I'm not pretending to speak for God here and tell you that unless you do X, Y and Z and believe X, Y and Z you're going to hell. But I *will* dare to ask whether, as we face the curtain of our mortality, what our grounds for confidence and hope really are. '*Will your anchor hold?*'. *Is* it 'fastened to a rock which cannot move'? And what *is* that rock? 'What must we do to be saved?' as the disciples asked Jesus.

Well, here are three possibilities :

does it mean being 'religious' (i.e. practising religion)?

Jesus (in our reading) suggests that he is replacing 'organised religion' of this sort in himself. Christian confidence (a workable spiritual anchor) is entirely wrapped up in our relationship with Jesus, so the real question is whether by being religious we have a relationship with Jesus, and whether – if we do *not* practise religion – we can't (or, if we think we can, we're kidding ourselves).

We live in an age when people don't necessarily see the connection between organized religion and 'spirituality'. I would argue that spirituality (whatever that means) without religion (that is, spirituality done together in an organized way) is no more than self-help do-it-yourself psychology . . . DIY, privatised, religion – and we've all suffered from DIY incompetence. Nothing wrong with DIY, I suppose. Up to a point that's fine if it works for you – but what if, essentially, it's a deeply self-centred thing? Nothing more than a personal 'feel-good' technique that doesn't really give a toss for what is (objectively) true and what is mere wishful thinking? That's when the DIY spiritual house falls like a pack of cards.

So our grounds for confidence aren't in a DIY, private relationship with Jesus, but nor are they in going through the motions of being religious.

does it mean 'believing'?

You can't *make* yourself believe . . . the most you can do is demonstrate that it isn't irrational to believe. Suppose you have faith whilst being an appalling person? Obviously 'believing' can give us a sense of confidence, but though it might give me more confidence as I face the curtain to think that there's a 'tooth fairy' on the other side waiting to give me my sixpence, surely I must know I'm standing on shaky ground? People have proved very adept at drawing false confidence from all sorts of superstitious nonsense. Having confidence in a tooth fairy sort of god doesn't mean that confidence was *justified*, but if we're talking about what happens 'beyond the curtain' who could ever know anyway? "If it works for you . . ." people say, but that's not good enough. Superstition and false confidence are highly dangerous things and have produced misery and suffering on a huge scale throughout human history – on *this* side of the curtain. And I'm not just talking about religious superstition and false confidence . . . the non-religious are just as prone to it as the rest of us.

No, our grounds for confidence are not in personal beliefs that happen to 'work for us'.

does it mean 'being good'?

Well, I'm sorry to say it, but according to the New Testament, yes it does. Righteousness *does* give us a sense of confidence as we face the curtain. A sense of sin undermines our confidence. And that's as it should be. 'Bring back sin', I say.

I might find it hard to start preaching sermons that 'convict' people, but I suppose I *could* imagine preaching sermons that say something like "what right have you to think that your place in heaven is assured when your squandering of energy and your carbon footprint is consigning your grandchildren to a planet that will become uninhabitable and fall into chaos?" (I could do that, because I would know I was getting at myself as much as at anyone.)

So we do have grounds for confidence if we have a sense of 'righteousness' before God – but *self*-righteousness is *false* confidence, and if you include all the ways we are compromised by the world we live in, then (as the disciples ask Jesus) "who *can* be saved"

Through most of Christian history, Christians have been concerned with these three things : righteousness, belief and church attendance and which of these three is the real 'anchor' and ground for confidence in the face of eternal judgment.

They've argued, and sometimes churches have split, over their different beliefs about what our grounds for confidence in resurrection are as we each 'face the curtain'. For some, it's been a matter of making sure you go to confession and mass once a week (being religious). For others, it's been a matter of having enough faith (in which case, if God hasn't granted you faith, you're going to the wastebin anyway. That, crudely put, is *our* Reformed religious inheritance). For others it's been a matter of being virtuous – a moral crusade.

This is not remotely surprising, given that Jesus was who he was.

- He said the Temple – religion as it was actually being practised – was redundant. **So was he religious or not?**
- In Matthew he tells his disciples that he's more impressed with actions than beliefs. And when he died, the Gospels tell us he lost his faith. ("My God, why have you abandoned me?"). **So what does it mean to say that Jesus 'believed in God'?**

- He preached that the righteous go to heaven and the unrighteous go to the eternal wastebin – *but* – he rejected the people everyone else assumed were righteous and spent rather a lot of time with Roman collaborators and prostitutes, saying that they would enter God’s kingdom at the head of the queue. When someone suggested he was good, his retort was that ‘only God is good’. **So was he ‘good’ or not?** (His contemporaries clearly didn’t think so.)

Jesus himself puts a question mark against most of our grounds for confidence in the possibility of (our) resurrection to glory. And I have to say : *that’s one of many reasons why I am convinced by him.* He simply won’t stay in any box we try to put him in.

And that is why having grounds for confidence/anchor as we face the curtain means actively belonging to a church community. It’s why we simply can’t go it alone. God is found in relationship because even God does not ‘go it alone’ – God is known in Trinity (in a relationship).

We don’t go to church because God is impressed with religion. The reason for actively belonging to a church is not because it’s part of God’s entry requirements for heaven. It’s because if we are to have grounds for confidence we need to become more like people worth saving. Hebrews makes this explicit :

We should keep on encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things. Some people have got out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord’s coming is getting closer.

Hebrews 10 : 25 — 25

The point of Church attendance is not to keep God happy, it’s to give us deep grounds for confidence.

There’s no one right way to do Church (but there are plenty of wrong ways!) But whatever way we *do* do it, it must be a way in which all our differing hopes and fears challenge and encourage one another. Jesus – that enigmatic Jesus who doesn’t fit into any box we’d put him in – is only fully known in the whole Church (and that ‘catholicity’ includes Christians of past generations and Christians as yet unborn). That’s why Christian Unity is so important. That’s why it’s important that different churches are reconciled or at least recognise each other as

fellow—Christians; and that is why it's important that individual Christians play an active part in their local church.

There's nothing set in stone about the way we 'do church' here. What has worked in the past may not work for a new generation. If it doesn't, it's for the new generation to suggest what might work better. We're not into gimmicks; what matters is that we 'keep on encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things'. And (I might add) *worshipful*.

As we face the curtain of our mortality, our grounds for hope are rooted in Jesus Christ, the only one to hold the keys to the curtain (do curtains have keys?). But what that means is something that has to be worked out, explored and celebrated *together*, as part of the whole church. Try to go it alone, and your anchor will not hold, even if you kid yourself it will.

