

## 18 How can I believe in a God I can't see?

*How can I believe in a God I can't see?* I'm tempted to answer 'well you wouldn't need to believe in someone if you *could* actually see them!'

Faith, the letter to the Hebrews writes, is '*conviction of things unseen*' (11:1).

The questioner is really asking 'how can I find faith?' A quick answer is 'you should ask God for it, ask him to open your inner eyes to his all powerful yet invisible presence'. Asking God for a vision of himself more to his dimensions and less to your own seems to bear fruit. Faith grows – it enlarges, especially if it is enriched by prayerful reading of the Bible and celebration of the sacraments.

God's unseen-ness is a major stumbling block to Christian belief in a materialistic world. People only believe in, or rather value, what they can see.

Ask a married blind person though if they believe in the love their spouse has for them. Not only can they not see their wife but they doubly can't see intangible love. But they *know* the love their spouse has for them. Similarly it is possible to experience God's presence and love without seeing him with our eyes.

*'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'* Jesus once said.

There are many unseen things in life that are really important. People who complain at God's invisibility don't complain they can't see electricity or the air around them. We see the *effect* of the wind even if we can't see it directly. Similarly though God is unseen he can be experienced by faith.

Pope Benedict's encyclical letter on Hope says faith as defined in Hebrews 11:1 is no subjective conviction. It's something that brings the objective reality of God into our lives. He writes: *Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a "proof" of the things that are still unseen...the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future.*

Faith is not a feeling. It's an ongoing decision to reach towards God and be energised by him. By what the mystics call the 'eager dart of longing love' faith touches God and releases his possibilities into our situation.

It is implied in the Bible that God is invisible to protect us from his glory. This invisibility serves our freedom to love without being manipulated. If he were visible that would dramatically affect our freedom to grow in pure love. By being invisible God can be with us without overwhelming us. He can stand at a distance to grant us freedom to make our own decisions including the decision to love him and our neighbour and ourselves.

A God we could see would actually be less wonderful than the God Christians believe in. We'd be able to contain him in our minds! Instead the Christian vision of God is one that expands continually from our limited dimensions to his unlimited ones. If you want a magnificent God the price you pay seems to be that of worshipping a God that's invisible to mortal eyes.

When C.S.Lewis asked himself 'Do I believe?' he said his belief seemed to go - just like when he asked himself in the midst of pleasure, 'am I enjoying myself' his enjoyment seemed to go. Both actions, he said, are like taking one's eyes out instead of keeping them in the right place and seeing with them. Faith like enjoyment has its focus outside of self.

*How can I believe in a God I can't see?* You need to make a decision. That's what faith is – a decision to act as if God were there and to be energised by a power quite outside and beyond oneself.

To have faith is to go beyond and not against reason. As John Donne wrote *Reason is our soul's left hand, faith his right, by these we reach divinity.*

Both faith and reason lift us to God and in Jesus God himself reaches down to us revealing himself to both our reason and our faith. Here, at the heart of Christian faith, what we believe and what we see come together. As St John writes *No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known* (John 1:18)

*John Twisleton 14.8.08*