

Welcoming God

This is a powerful concept. It's sometimes hard enough for us to welcome each other, an ungenerosity we explain by pointing to the difference between ourselves and others. Now, human differences may seem huge to us; but beside the difference between us and God, they pale into insignificance. If we're put off by the difference between ourselves, how do we hope to cross the bridge between earth and heaven?

"I'm not religious myself"

I once met a woman who had spent her whole life on the firm belief that *anyone* can learn to sing. She was a teacher in an ordinary school, and year after year little children appeared at the gates with voices of raven-like tunelessness. With huge effort she passed on to each of them the sense of direction (up and down) followed by the sense of convergence (in and out of tune) and the joy of singing together, which inspired them to harmony. (I think there were some pupils who were incorrigible, but they may have been holding out on her out of malice.) I reckon I go through life treating the statement "I'm not religious" with a similar attitude of contradiction. She couldn't live with the resignedly unmusical. I can't live with the resignedly irreligious.

Unbelief is Boring

If you believe there's a Creator, life becomes exciting. It turns the world from a vast enigma into an act of communication, a message. It means we can start to *read* the world, expecting it to make sense to us - but careful: it will make *divine* sense rather than merely human. This can't mean our answers to great questions are any easier! In many ways, we find ourselves asking questions, as religious people, which can be, *must* be left alone by the irreligious *on the grounds that there's no-one to answer them*. The word "why?" for a strictly irreligious person seeks for simple practical causality. You have to be content with a very mundane answer. *Why Father Philip?* A fair question: but the rational answer *Because Jean and Jerry O'Dowd* is a boring and inadequate one. You can of course join the Genealogical Society and trace the same answer back for a hundred generations, without it really getting

you any further. For a believer it demands a word from God. The answer for an empirical scientist, is a statement drawn from known facts. For a believer, the question itself is an invitation to enter a mystery. It isn't that I find all this simply intriguing. Rather, it's the only explanation of the world that might excuse it - in its hardship, in its frequent cruelty, in the sheer darkness of many of its facts. There are many people who look the world in the eye and shudder. But a Christian who has read and absorbed the verses of today's Gospel would look out on the same world with a quite different mind. *Take up your cross and follow me....* The path of life lies through death, and it demands a preferential choice of Jesus Christ which can outbid every other form of belonging, every relationship we might use to give sense to our lives. This path we accept simply because Jesus took it, and we belong to him. And we accept it from him because we believe that *in him God has visited us*.

Thanks Be To God

When people who are exhausted and confused look out on the world, they often just wish it were able to be magically healed and humanised. They don't ask much more than quiet, freedom, and a little comfort. We sometimes think all we want is to be left alone. If we have learned to welcome God, in his word, in his love for us, in his providence, this changes. We learn to be at peace as we experience change, as we face hardship, as we accompany his Son, whom he sent to walk on our path. This is the way God has made the world, and the way he is saving it. This is the way we must learn to welcome God into our lives; and the only alternative is to refuse this meaning, to refuse this understanding, to face death and suffering and darkness with our own pitiful resources. That would be brave, and lonely, but also unnecessary, and *wrong*. Let us insist on our original fair question, and demand as good an answer from the world or from whomsoever is responsible for it. Jesus tells us the way to our meaning: that God has made us for himself, and that, if we will look for him, and meet him, and welcome him, he has promised that our burden will become light, and our way sure.

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