

## CHAPTER 5:

### Stand Up and Be Godless! On Receiving the Gift of Faith

In the last chapter, we managed a somewhat breathless romp through the Hebrew Scriptures. I hope this has left you with a sense of the long historical process by which the human perception of God (or “the other Other”, in my jargon) underwent a process of pruning. A process by which it became clear that God is not a god at all. So now, I’m going to ask you—at least initially—to take off your theological hats and stick with some pretty basic matters of anthropology, because we’re going to look at what is meant by the word “faith”.

Let’s take that word out of its religious wrappers: try and imagine its use in ordinary human language and forget the religious overtones which the word has come to have for so many of us. I want us to work through and escape from the ways this word has come to trigger a sense of emotional blackmail in our lives. You know what I mean by “emotional blackmail”: there is a whole discourse about faith which tells you that you need to “believe” in order to be saved, and that if you don’t believe, you’ll go to hell. The rhetoric gives a fairly strong incentive to believe, even if you’re not quite sure what it is that you are supposed to believe or why. So you find yourself bullied into making a sort of moonshot: firing off a rocket of desire, or intention, or wishful thinking, towards some supposed celestial body which, unlike the moon, might or might not be there. And you just have to hope that your moonshot lands. The result is that so-called “faith” becomes a very stressful matter, something you have to work at and even feel. Something very demanding. Something you are constantly on the verge of losing.

Contrast this with the notion of faith as it operates in an entirely non-celestial sphere, the sphere of everyday interaction between hu-

man beings. Let us imagine, for instance, two kinds of meetings: one is an encounter with a benign elderly relative who has known you since childhood, and the other is a job interview. The first of these finds you relaxed. Why? Because you know Aunt Mildred likes you and wants what is good for you. When you are with her, you don't need to impress her or convince her of your worth. In fact, when you are with her, you can let your masks down and allow yourself to be teased, your little foibles giggled at. You know that she is trustworthy, that she is not out to get you and won't hold things she learns about you against you. In fact, it is she who, over time, has produced in you this disposition of *faith* in her. The emotional correlate to this disposition is a certain relaxation when you are with her.

Not so at the job interview. There you are, one of a number of candidates. You don't know your interviewer, and you are not entirely sure by what criteria he will be judging you. You go as smartly dressed as you can manage, with a C.V. as polished as the bounds of honesty will admit, all the wrinkles in your history dutifully ironed out. You psych yourself up to be as impressive as you can possibly be, ready to make your sales pitch for yourself. This, too, is a kind of moonshot. This process—all the hard work of putting on a good front—is the emotional correlate of a lack of faith: you don't know much about your interviewer, and you're not quite sure what he's out to get, or whether you have what it takes to give it to him.

Do you see how ironic this is? The normal human framework for words like 'faith' and 'belief' is one of relaxation. Yet when those words turn "religious", they suddenly become demands which inspire the exact inverse of relaxation. What I hope to be doing in this chapter is showing how the normal human sense is right—especially in the religious sphere!

### *The Priority of the Other*

You may remember that in the first chapter, I spent some time setting out something you already knew: how what I call "the social other" is prior to us at every level of our being. Long before we come into being, there are others—human others—who are already viable, have already

lived within and extended some human culture to us, have established things like shelter, language, some sort of medical system and other structures to ensure us the regular availability of safe food and drinking water. All of these things pre-exist us, and we are entirely dependent on them. Part of that dependence is the freedom not to have to think about such things too much. Even when we do have to concentrate on one or other of them—finding somewhere to live, learning a new language, taking part in a preventative medical health campaign, getting flu jabs, for example—we are normally able to take a vast amount of other things for granted. And we are justified in doing so. Part of what makes us viable as human beings is the regularly dependable certainty of things just being there, thanks to those who have come before us.

Now, what would you say if you were to come across a person who, every time they opened a door, before stepping through it, checked carefully to see if there was a floor on the other side? You would regard them as seriously troubled. If they were to say to you: “I don’t know how you can be so blithe about stepping through doors: faith and doubt are equal and opposite realities, and I’m always tortured as to which one I should go with”, you would react with justified concern. They are talking nonsense: faith and doubt are not equal and opposite realities. Faith is the habitual disposition which knows and trusts the regular certainty of what is about us, without any need to see it or think about it at all. Doubt, on the contrary, is a very highly developed and skilled subsection of faith in the regular certainty of things, thanks to which, from time to time, we may question whether the normal certainty holds in this or that situation.

By the same token, any of us would regard it as quite sane for a person visiting a building site, in addition to putting on a hard hat, to check whether there was a floor on the other side before stepping through a doorway. This is because a building site, by definition, is the sort of place in which the normal certainties concerning completed buildings don’t necessarily apply. There, the capacity to doubt is exercised as a sane and sensible skill.

In any field at all, there is a huge seedbed of unexamined certainty prior to our viability as humans. Doubt is, really, a very small (and as I say, very skilled, highly developed) subsection of that viability. To make

the point even more obviously: think of the first words you address to someone in the morning. You do not typically spend any time or emotional energy at all worrying about whether or not words still mean the same this morning as they meant last night, or whether some celestial, infernal, or government-backed agency has not secretly rearranged all words and meanings during the night so that you may find yourself saying things which mean the reverse or nothing at all. Your early-morning linguistic muddle might depend on how long it takes you to wake up or how much alcohol you had to drink the night before. But eventually, words like “coffee” and “Pass the toothpaste” will emerge as having much the same meaning as usual.

We live most of our lives like this. When you leave your front door, you will typically give no thought at all to whether the railway tracks which bear you to work still head in their usual northbound direction, or whether they have been secretly shuffled around in the night so that you may find yourself heading helplessly further and further away from your destination. You take it absolutely for granted that these, and a thousand and one other things, will be where they usually are, functioning as they usually do. Occasionally, you will be surprised by some alteration within that regular certainty—a fire in a tunnel somewhere may cause the trains to be temporarily rerouted. Still, neither you nor anyone could possibly cope with a world in which language changes meaning in the night and railway lines are shuffled around arbitrarily, the clear liquid emerging from your kitchen tap was sometimes H<sub>2</sub>O and at other times H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>. Furthermore, before every breath you take, there is a question as to whether you will be breathing air or some noxious gas, or whether breathing was in any case something that you should be doing. Faith and doubt are not equal and opposite realities at all!

Now, none of this is to say that everything is always regular, certain and secure. On the contrary, we know enough about our world to recognise that it is a dangerous place, with phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruptions, and their (until recently) unpredictable effects on weather patterns and food availability in places far removed from the epicentres of such events. We know that there are a large number of pathogens in just about every climate, which can be

dangerous, even fatal to humans, as well as no shortage of other animals which can poison, eat, or trample us. And even more dangerous than any of these, the social other which we constitute for each other is by no means always a safe or secure environment. In fact, we humans are, and always have been, extraordinarily dangerous to each other.

And not merely dangerous physically. We are inducted into a world in which we are typically in rivalry with each other, take revenge upon each other, need to despise some people, conceive of our security and well-being as something which depends on others being excluded from it, and mislead and abuse each other. However, perhaps even more important than this is the accidental, non-deliberate dangerousness by which we affect each other very greatly. Think of this example: you are a small child, and your parent is playing with a teddy bear. One of the things that adults do, as is perfectly obvious to small children, is enjoy playing with teddy bears. And so, since you want to please the adult, you join in and play with the teddy bear with them (adults are usually quite easily pleased). Now imagine that, after a few minutes of happy playing with the teddy bear, the adult seems to lose concentration and starts to play with something new—a shiny metal object that they put just out of your reach. They then press some sort of button and disappear into a back room.

You don't know it, of course, but they've put a kettle on a stove, turned on the heat, and gone to the larder for a teabag. From your point of view, you merely want to please them, as you did with the teddy bear, by joining in their play with the new shiny metal object which has caught their attention. They, your model, have designated a new object for you to desire. As you reach up to it (mercifully, the stove top is out of your reach), the adult comes back into the room, sees you reaching towards a flame and a very hot kettle, and shrieks in anguish, rushing towards you and pulling you away. Well, from your point of view, what on earth has happened? One moment you were happily playing along with them, basking in the glow of approval; next you suddenly find yourself cast out of approval and banished to anger and loss. Why? First, you received and went along with a clear instruction: "Imitate me". Then, suddenly, without warning, that instruction became, "Do not imitate me".

The result is complete shock and paralysis. Two contrary instructions, on the same level, at the same time! It's incomprehensible!

Part of being a very small person is the inability to distinguish between "Imitate me here", and "Do not imitate me here yet, because you are not yet strong enough to cope". The skill necessary for distinguishing between the levels—"Imitate me" and "Don't imitate me here, for the moment, for your own good"—is a very highly developed one. And the result is that, without anyone having been malicious or cruel towards us, we yet find ourselves locked into double binds, forms of paralysis, which may tie us into repetitive patterns which will make us, in turn, less competent and more dangerous than we might otherwise have been.

It's not so much that we humans are brilliantly intelligent, but really quite evil towards each other. Really, we are not all that bright. Our intelligence often remains quite underdeveloped. We are often as dangerous to each other through incompetence and confusion as through malice and rivalry.

Yet all this danger and uncertainty, real as it is, is just a tiny tip of a huge, invisible iceberg of regularity and certainty. Even when we feel this dangerousness very strikingly, it is because the hugely regular realities—which we may not feel, but which have enabled us to feel at all—are just there, functioning normally. Just have a go at imagining what must have gone right, how much must have been massively dependable, for you to be a viable, English-speaking adult who is able to read and make some sense of this page!

A huge seedbed of certainty, of that which we take for granted and which precedes any capacity for doubt, is absolutely normal in our becoming human at all. Riding on that, in a comparatively superficial sense, is the reality of ambivalence, uncertainty, danger, and insecurity, which is everywhere part of our experience. Thus, the social other is this massively faith-inducing, certainty-teaching underpinning to our viability, and yet it is also somewhat ambivalent, sometimes giving us a sense that it is out to get us, is a bad, or a cruel joke.

## *The Emergence of the “other Other”*

It is only from here, when we begin to get some sense of the huge priority of certainty to doubt, that the whole question behind the issue of religious faith emerges. That question goes something like this: “Given that we recognize a social other, and that it is basically benevolent but can also screw us up, might there be another Other who is entirely benevolent, entirely and unambiguously for us, and not in any way part of that mixture of benevolence and screw-up which is the normal pattern of our lives?”

This is the question which, as you will remember from the last couple of chapters, the Hebrews were asking. They cast it as the difference between “gods” and “God, who is not-one-of-the-gods”. When they talk of “gods”, they are talking about projections of our forms of violence and screw-ups as ways of holding onto what little we’ve got, in case worse comes along. These are gods like Baal or Thor, “National Security”, “Disaster Insurance” or fertility rites. Collective projections like these have a way of acquiring what seems like an independent reality, usually one requiring that we sacrifice this or that inconvenient other for some supposed social good. Thus, we can wage battles against each other by proxy. That’s the world of the gods.

The Hebrew question is “OK. We know there is the social other, and within the social other, there are gods—collective fixations and projections which help us structure and protect ourselves (or so humans typically like to think, even though all they do is leave us further in the dark). Now, is that all that there is? Or is there *another* Other, who is *not-one-of-the-gods*? Who is not on the same level as any of those things, not in rivalry with anything that is, who is completely benign, holding things in being without there being any “out to get you” or handle by which they can be manipulated or negotiated with?”

Here I would like to bring out something concerning this other Other, which is often confusing: that little phrase, “not in rivalry with anything that is”, means more than we imagine. It does not mean: “So much bigger than everything else as to trump even the biggest thing or force that there is”. It means simply: “Not in any way part of the world of things that are, not on the same level as them at all, and therefore able

to occupy the same space as they do without being an extra ‘thing’”. It means being able to move them from within, as it were, without in any way displacing them.

This means that, when we talk about the other Other—about God—we are not at all talking about a large being outside the social other, a different “being” in a different “place”, as though our only access to this God were by some escape from the social other which forms us and is the universe of our life and experience. That would be the moon-shot model of faith: a fragile desire fired off from an independent self towards a large, invisible space-deity.

Instead, we are talking about “another Other” that can only be discovered at the same anthropological level as the social other. The only way of discovering “another Other” is by undergoing an alteration in your way of being tied into the social other. The social other is not intrinsically the enemy of the other Other. In fact, it is through the same process by which we are brought into and held in being by the social other that we find another Other trying to get through to us, at the same level as us, without making any demand that we try to step outside it all and make a moonshot. The other Other works through the same things that bring us into being normally, and because it is not in rivalry with anything, it is able to undo from within the various forms of screwed-up-ness by which we are inclined to project and so deceive ourselves.

So, when we talk about faith in God, we are not referring to a piece of information about an extraterrestrial being. Instead, we are talking about being inducted, thanks to an act of communication from another Other who is not in rivalry with anything that exists, who is not over against anything at all. Being inducted, that is, into undergoing a huge psychological turnaround, of the sort which we began to look at in our last chapter, when Moses had his gaze drawn to a burning bush.

### *On the Oddness of the Centrality of “Belief”*

With that in the background, I’d just like to make one other point about our uses of the words “faith” and “belief”. And that is how very odd it is that we’ve come to assume “religions” are centred around the notion

of faith. In fact, in a bizarre piece of unwitting Christian imperialism, we talk about other “faiths” and of “interfaith dialogue”. However, it is simply not true that most of the social and cultural forms of life we call “religions” are centred around the notion of faith. Nor is the notion of faith important to their self-understanding.

If you were a decent, law-abiding, pious, and devout member of ancient Roman or ancient Greek society, piety would have meant offering sacrifices to your house gods, the gods of your family. It would have meant, occasionally, taking part in public cults in temples, perhaps to the Emperor or the city. Your piety would be shown in going along with the way your ancestors did things (piety is, quite specifically, the virtue of respect for and docility towards fathers). At the same time, there would have been no shortage of stories about Jupiter and Hera, Minerva and Poseidon—the gods of Olympus, whether under their Greek or Latin names. However, no one would have thought that it mattered at all whether you had any personal sense that these beings really were cavorting around on Mount Olympus. There would have been no orthodoxy tests as to your degree of personal commitment to Apollo or to Zeus. You would not be expected to have a close, personal, subjective relationship with any of these divinities.

In fact, if you did have such a personal relationship, people would regard you as probably mad—and certainly dangerous—since having a personal relationship with one of these divinities probably meant getting sucked up into a frenzy in a cult and becoming possessed by the spirit of Dionysius, or whoever took you over. Decent members of Roman society would be well aware that the stories of the gods serve a purpose in the social scheme of binding people together. They’re like the Tooth Fairy and Father Christmas: you don’t need to believe in them or have a close personal relationship with them, but it’s quite essential that presents get delivered and coins get found under pillows.

If we look closer at our own religious background, the very religion which gave birth to Christianity—Second Temple Judaism—did not centre itself around faith, but around Torah. The central notion of what Judaism is about is a word we usually translate as “law”. Now, the word “law” should not be understood in a legalistic way, but as a dynamic, legally structured pathway to life. Nevertheless, it is quite

clear that it is the following of Torah, rather than being continuously concerned with what God thinks or does, that is important. It is a commonly repeated sentiment in rabbinic circles that, once God had given the Torah and left it up to humans to interpret it, the Almighty lost His right to give His opinion on this or that matter or to interfere with the interpretation.

A further example: the central concept around which the followers of Mohammed gather is Islam, a word whose most frequent translation is “submission”. (Different Muslim voices give different readings as to whether “submission” is the most accurate rendition of the word in modern English, and I don’t wish to enter into that fray). Nevertheless, the word has quite different connotations from the word “faith”, not the least of which is that, in the majority, Sunni Islam, once you are on the inside of the group, you have made your formal act of submission. You are in. Thereafter, the degree of your subjective involvement in the Muslim form of life is not of any great significance. There are practices that you should carry out but simply doing them is what matters. This is, of course, less true in the Sufi tradition, where subjectivity matters greatly. But it is worth remembering that this is a tiny minority within Islam, one which has long been considered suspicious by the majority of Islam precisely because some of its elements are seen as being somewhat like Christianity.

I suppose I’m glad that we don’t talk about “intersubmission dialogue”, but we pay a hefty price for the word “faith” having become an alternative word for “a religion”. And this is because Christianity has a rather dim view of religion, precisely because its central principle is faith. If what is absolutely central is not certain practices, but the process over time by which someone else shows themselves as trustworthy to you and enables you to relax into their trustworthiness, then this is necessarily going to downplay a whole lot of things that seem culturally important. What matters is not so much what *you do* as what someone else is doing, altering your subjectivity and producing a new you.

One of the consequences of this is that the form of knowing and trusting which we call faith tends to lead us to becoming *incredulous* concerning the value of apparently important sources of “religious” goodness, like fasting, mandated dietary regulations, the need for par-

ticular pilgrimages, god-given forms of dress or hair covering. Those are the equivalent of the highly polished shoes and stretched CV of the candidate who doesn't know his interviewer. But if Aunt Mildred is interviewing you, you know she's not really interested in your shoes or CV, but in you—who you are and what you are becoming—and so you relax into a response to her.

So please remember the oddness of the fact that *faith* is the gateway disposition by which you are or are not Christian. Not a one-off profession, or an act of submission, or some ritual mutilation, but you being inducted over time by someone who is not in rivalry with you in any way at all, into knowing them and relaxing into their loving of you, such that you find yourself becoming someone more than you knew yourself to be.

### *Sticking With this Level*

We've seen that the process of God's revealing Godself to the Hebrew people as not-one-of-the-gods took a long time, and was experienced by them as the undoing of certain ways of being held together. These undos were also signs that a new form of being-together was being created. And we've seen that all of this has incidence at the anthropological level: the more God reveals Godself, the more we learn about who we are. Now we will begin discussing Jesus—and I will still ask you to remain firmly at the anthropological level.

This may seem difficult, since often enough in presentations of Christianity, it sounds as though everything was going along as normal, when suddenly a bunch of half-crazed individuals from within the Hebrew cultural universe started talking about Jesus as though he embodied the demand for yet another moonshot: now, in addition to the other Other, you've got to believe certain implausible things about this individual, and since you can't see either him *or* the other Other, you must just make a moonshot. Indeed, *because* it's a double-moonshot, it's especially meritorious.

This is a serious misreading of a crucial point, namely the role of the apostolic witnesses in our faith. The apostolic witnesses—Peter

and company—were a group of people at our level, chosen by Jesus, to be his witnesses. They were chosen to accompany him throughout the time of his public ministry, from his Baptism in the River Jordan until his Ascension into Heaven. Although Jesus did indeed give them certain teachings which they have passed on, much more important is the way they underwent what he did. Jesus acted out something in their midst at an entirely human level, and they are the witnesses to that acting out, and as a result of that acting out.

I like to use the illustration of a meteorite and its crater. Many of you will have seen satellite pictures of the Gulf of Mexico near the Yucatán Peninsula. Those pictures reveal a massive concavity on the seafloor, and both geologists and astronomers say that this is where a significant meteorite hit the Earth many thousands of years ago. (There was a time when this was thought to have something to do with the end of the dinosaurs). Now, there are no bits of meteorite left that anybody can find. However, by studying the concavity, scientists are able to determine the dimensions, size, weight, speed at which it was travelling when it hit the Earth, its density, and so forth.

In other words, the concavity—something entirely at the level of this Earth—delates, gives away, the force that produced it: something which came, literally and physically, from outside the Earth's atmosphere. Well, the same, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said about the apostolic witnesses. Think of them as the concavity in whose midst something happened such that they began to bear witness to it, in part by telling people about it but in part by being the observable remnant of what had happened. These were people who found themselves undergoing a complete change in their perception of who God is and what their own culture was about. This was not so much because they had been given extra information, but because somebody at the human level had done something in their midst which included going to his death and being seen by them thereafter, even if somewhat mysteriously, in such a way that they found themselves completely re-oriented in their picture of who God is, what it means to be part of Israel, what it means to be human.

So, it was something that happened to them at the anthropological, human level that they bear witness to. And what they are doing

when they pass on their faith to us is not saying: “This happened to us, now close your eyes and make a moonshot”. They are saying: “This has happened to us, and it is producing this and this and this effect in our lives. If you believe that we are trustworthy witnesses, then please step alongside us and allow yourself to become part of the same concavity we find ourselves becoming. As you become part of this concavity, you will find that the same happenings that we underwent will surely and faithfully reproduce themselves in your lives as well. So, the concavity will get bigger, and there will be further ripples out from it.”

This is why, in the Creed, Christians say: “We believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”. It is not a demand for loyalty to an exclusive club; it is a statement about the place within which we are brought to faith. We are brought to faith inside and as part of an anthropologically structured concavity. It is very definitely the other Other alone who is the protagonist of our faith, the one who induces us to relax into knowing ourselves loved and held by him over time. However, this process of relaxation occurs because we can trust the apostolic witness as being a truth-bearing concavity. It is our listening and beginning to undergo something at this horizontal level that opens us up to undergoing something genuinely more than anthropological—vertical, if you like, but without ever being less than thoroughly anthropological. Rather than being subjected to the emotional blackmail of a transcendent demand for a moonshot, we are encouraged to enter a space where we regularly find ourselves able to pick up a communication from “elsewhere”.

### *Turning the Equation Around: Jesus’ Ministry as the Creation of Belief*

With this in mind, I hope we can start to see what Jesus was about in a richer way. And one of the things that Jesus was about was creating faith. He was doing something so we could believe. Effectively, he was saying, if you will allow me to paraphrase:

I know that you are susceptible. I know that you find it very difficult to believe God loves you. I know you are inclined to be

frightened of death. And because of that, you are inclined to run from death, mete it out to others, and engage in various forms of self-delusion and self-destruction. You find it difficult to imagine that things really will be well and that you are being held in being by someone who is utterly trustworthy. All this I know. But I want to nudge you into trusting that the One who brought you and everything else into being is actually trustable—not out to get you. You can believe God. Believe in God, believe in me. In fact, I am going to act my life out in such a way as to make it possible for you to believe: I am setting out to prove God’s trustworthiness for you.

In fact, in John’s Gospel the very phrase appears: “Believe in God, believe also in me...and now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe.” (John 14:1, 29). John actually frames Jesus’ speech before the Passion as an explanation of how he is inducing belief.

When I think this through, the image I have is of Evel Knievel. I know it dates me, but he was a major motorbike stuntman of a generation or so ago. In any case, you can imagine Evel Knievel with a group of novice bikers: he is saying to them: “OK, I’m going to drive up a ramp, shoot over seven double-decker buses through a hoop of flame, and then come down the other side safely”. And the novices say: “It can’t be done”. So he goes ahead and does it. Some of the novices then say: “Oh, well, maybe it can be done after all!” And after a bit, one of them plucks up courage and does it. And then more people come and do it, and it becomes ordinary. So suddenly Evel Knievel says: “OK, now, I’ll jump over fourteen double-decker buses, and a hoop of flame, and the Grand Canyon!” And everyone says to him: “You’ve lost your mind”. And then he does it, and guess what: after a bit of stopping and starting, the novice bikers get used to the idea that it is possible after all, and then they find themselves doing the impossible once again. (In fact, this is a standard human thing. Once someone has broken a record, it won’t be that long before someone breaks it again. The record gets stretched over time, since what used to seem impossible has suddenly become ordinary. Around the world in eighty days, anyone?)

Well, this is the sort of image behind what Jesus is talking about in John's Gospel. He says: "You are going to do greater things than I, because I have gone to my death." In other words: "I am going to do the equivalent of Evel Knievel. But rather than a silly hoop and a sillier star-spangled motorcycle suit, I'm going to go and actually inhabit the space of death, that which so frightens you, and which you think is impossible to get through, so that you will no longer be run by fear of it. Because I'm doing that, you will be able to do the same and much more. Greater things than I did you will be able to do, because you will no longer be run by fear. It is to your advantage that I go to my death, not because you will then have me out of the way but because, on the contrary, I will have opened up for you the possibility of no longer being run by this bugbear of death".

Do you see what he's doing? He's setting out to produce faith. His idea is not: "I need you to have a list of propositions that you must believe", but, on the contrary: "I do wish I could get it through to your susceptible, paranoid, numbskull minds that you can trust God and trust me. I'm going to act in such a way as to try and prove this to you, so that you will thereafter be free of your fear of death".

This is, incidentally, very exactly how the epistle to the Hebrews expresses this same reality:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Another image: many of you will have seen more or less cheesy films, such as *The Exorcist*, which often feature deathbed scenes. In these, some photogenically gowned priest, usually a Jesuit, comes up to the dying person with a crucifix to hold before their eyes while they are dying. And of course, in the cheesy Anglo-American film tradition, the purpose of this is to produce repentance in the sinner. The priest holds the crucifix over the dying sinner so that he may repent—a typically modern, moralistic reading of such things. In fact, the whole point of

holding a crucifix over the eyes of a dying person is much better understood from the Evel Knievel model. It is to say: “He has been there before you, so it’s OK. You needn’t fear. Relax. Allow yourself to be taken through this time”.

I hope you see that this shifts the whole burden of faith. Rather than an imperious demand that you should try to believe seventeen impossible things before breakfast, this is a picture of someone desperately trying to get across to you that they are trustable. They are not making a demand on us so much as doing the work of inducing us into relaxing. And this is central to what I’ve been talking about all along: the whole burden of faith is on the person who is trying to get you to relax, not on you! Faith is the disposition in you which someone else has worked hard to produce—a gift in you from the person who did the work of producing it. This is a complete reversal of the way in which we are accustomed to hearing such things presented.

### *The Place of Death and Resurrection Within the Gift of Faith*

I want to bring out two further dimensions of what Jesus was trying to prove to us by going to his death in the way that he did—two things he was trying to get across. The first of these concerns the power and the deathlessness of God. By occupying the space of death and not being run by it, which is what Jesus did, and being shown thereafter not to have been dominated by it, Jesus was making available to us something about God, which is that God has nothing to do with death at all—is not involved with it, is not moved by it, is not frightened by it. It is not a serious blip on God’s radar screen. It is merely one of the contours of being the sort of creatures we are. Of so little concern is it to God that God is not in rivalry with death in any way, nor is God’s life. God is not frightened of death, contaminated by death, or touched by death at all. So it was that Jesus, in going to his death in the way he did, was able to show up the complete non-involvement of God in death by being a dead man held in life. A dead man for whom the life of God had rendered his death moot. In other words, Jesus assumed death into life and thus rendered it non-toxic forever.

Please notice what this means: Jesus' death and Resurrection is God's way of proving that he is able and willing to hold humans in being through death, starting here and now. We can already begin to live as though death were not. We can start to trust that God will hold us in being through death. And a key result of this is that our view of everything need no longer be shot through with futility. After all, if death really were a definitive reality, then why bother with life? Why bother with a whole lot of things if we're all dead in the long run? Why bother to stand up for justice? You'll only be killed. There doesn't seem to be much of a project going on, so why bother to stand up and make cultural change, paying a price now so that others will reap the benefits later? You might as well go along with the rich and powerful who run the show, and let them get away with organising things to suit themselves. It's safer that way. I mean, why risk anything? At least I can save my skin for a bit.

When Jesus occupies the space of death for us and makes it non-toxic, it has everything to do with revealing the utter aliveness of God. This aliveness makes everything that is into part of a vibrant project heading for something much bigger than we can imagine. Furthermore, it is a project in which we can come to dare to participate. It is actually worthwhile to learn how to want things, long for things, and start working to bring them about. You can start to discover yourself on the inside of a project that has no end. So it's worth standing up for the weak, the vulnerable, those who are being cast out and hurried to death; you can afford to be generous, since you are part of a project that is being fulfilled beyond the scope of your life, and that participation is imperishable.

You can see how justice, for instance, can become more important than being alive, because justice is part of the Creator's plan, and you can be involved in that. Being dead is no obstacle to that. You can begin to glimpse, perhaps, why Jesus says things like: "The one who believes in me has eternal life". The very fact of believing that Evel Knievel could and did go through the hoop over the double-decker buses was already the beginning of the draw that would take the novice biker through and over. So the very fact of believing in Jesus, who occupies the space of

death, is already the beginning of the draw that takes you into the same space, where you find yourself growing and expanding through it.

### *The Place of the Forgiving Victim Within the Gift of Faith*

It is not only the power and deathlessness of God that is made visible, manifest—three-dimensional, if you like—in Jesus’ going to his death. For us, death is also inseparable from the realities of shame, powerlessness, pain, failure, and loss. Jesus didn’t only go to occupy a space of death in some abstract, hygienic sense. He went to occupy the space of one who is thrown out in order that others might survive. In other words, he went to his death as a victim, as the sort of person whom others gang up against. The reason this is important is that it catches us at our worst, as it were. The space of the victim is the kind of place none of us at all ever wants to occupy, and if we find ourselves occupying it, it is kicking and screaming. More to the point, we spend a great deal of time pointing fingers and ensuring that other people occupy that space, not us.

By going into and occupying that space deliberately, without any attraction to it, Jesus is not only proving that we needn’t be afraid of death. He is also proving that we need not be afraid of shame or disgrace, or of the fact that we have caused others to experience shame and disgrace. It is as if he were saying: “Yes, you did this to me, as you do it to each other, and here I am undergoing this, occupying its space, but without being embittered or resentful. In fact, I was keen to occupy this space so as to get across to you that I am not only utterly alive but utterly loving. There is nothing you can do, no amount of evil that you can do to each other, that will stop my loving you. Nothing you can do to separate yourselves from me. The moment you perceive me here, on the Cross, occupying this space for you and detoxifying it, you will know that I am determined to show you I love you, and I am in your midst as your forgiving victim. This is how I prove my love to you: by taking you at your very lowest and worst point and saying: “Yes, you do this to me, but I’m not concerned about that; let’s see whether we can learn a new way of being together”.

So, it's not merely that Jesus was the visible acting-out, on this human, anthropological level, of the way that the other Other is not run by death, and wants to make it possible that we, completely human as we are, should not be run by death. Jesus was also visibly acting out (again on this human, anthropological level) that God is not frightened of us, not scandalised by our cruelty, our violence, our incompetence, our stupidity. In fact, God loves us so much that God wants us to understand how, unlike with us, there is no "over against" or "out to get you" in God at all. Instead, he wants us to live much richer, more fulfilling lives than those we manage while survival by scapegoating is our default game plan. In other words, Jesus wanted to make it three-dimensional for us that God *loves us*.

### *On Being Spoken Into Being by One Who Loves Me*

Now I'd like to look at some effects of the other Other having entered into the social other in this way. The other Other has become present as a protagonist at the human level, and we find that, little by little, he speaks us into being. And the one who speaks us into being loves us. Normally, of course, it is the social other that speaks us into being, gives us identity. And, as we have seen before, there is an element of love in this, and an element of stability. But it is hardly definitive. We know how easy it is for us to depend entirely on the social other for approval, for identity, for a sense of who we are and what we are worth. And we also know how easily we can lose ourselves, sell ourselves out, in order to win or keep the approval of people. The regard of the social other is a highly ambivalent thing: often it allows us to feel a sense of importance and belonging, but only temporarily—and only when it is convenient to others who seem to have our best interests at heart, but who don't really.

With Jesus having occupied the space for us, which he did, in the midst of the apostolic witnesses, we find ourselves being nudged into another daring act: letting go of our need for immediate approval. Instead, we are empowered to discover ourselves as being liked and loved into being by someone who has no ulterior motive, no convenience. I

find that I am being spoken into a being that is not run by death, given a “self” that is much, much more than anything I could have come up with on my own account, because I am now able to trust that someone who does not know death is bringing me into being out of nothing, and holding me in being, so that I need have no fear of ever being nothing. In other words, faith is what enables me to relax enough to be stretched, until I become something much more than I could ever imagine.

One of the odd consequences of this is that, as it happens in your life, it ceases to become so important to be good. And this is something very odd about Christianity compared with the world of religions in general: its presupposition, its starting point, is that we’re in a mess. We don’t start being good and then screw up; we are screwed up from the outset. And, as we find ourselves loved, so we are able to let go of our attempts at being good, which are usually very dangerous and hurt other people. In fact, as we find ourselves loved, and so able to give up manipulating people into loving us, so we also find ourselves able to do genuinely good things out of generosity rather than out of a need to make ourselves presentable or to justify ourselves.

Remember Aunt Mildred and the job interviewer! This is what the Reformation meant when it said that we are not justified by works, but by grace through faith. If you need to justify yourself, it is a sign that you are not relaxed about how loved you are, which means you don’t know the love that your interlocutor has for you. When someone needs to justify themselves, it is a sure sign of lovelessness—they don’t know they are loved for who they are. Whereas the sure sign of someone who knows they are loved is that they don’t need to justify themselves at all. The Reformation was quite right to insist that, because somebody loves us gratuitously, we’re able to let go of the need to do good things. The pity, from a Catholic point of view, was that they didn’t go far enough. It’s precisely as you stop *having to do* good things that you may find yourself wanting to respond to love by doing something good. It’s when you no longer have to give somebody a bunch of flowers out of duty that you may suddenly discover a longing to make such a huge statement of love on your own.

The collapse of your forced self-presentation, the dropping of your mask, is also the beginning of the ability to give because you—a

you that you didn't even know was there—wants to. You find yourself doing things out of love, and those are the sorts of “works” which show that faith is alive.

*On Sitting Peacefully With Not Being a Truth-teller*

To continue in this somewhat strange vein: all this suggests—and I think it is true—that once people start relaxing into the gift of faith, they apparently become worse people. Why? Because they are no longer so concerned with tidying up their story. If you're constantly aware that at any time, cops may come by and you will be vulnerable to them, you will always have a story ready. Your self-presentation will be tidy, complete, and well-defended. However, if the cops are not going to come along and find you, then you don't need to prepare your story; you don't need to have your tidy-up act right.

One of the first fruits of the relaxation which comes with faith is a loss of a story of goodness, a loss of a defensive story, a self-innocenting story about “how right I am”, because you no longer need a story about how right you are. You are being told a story about how much you are loved. And this is what it means to see yourself as a sinner: far from being some moralistic demand that you browbeat yourself into coming up with a list of alleged failings, being able to see yourself as a sinner is merely the sign that you are able to hold yourself peacefully and realistically as being who you are, non-defensively, because you know yourself loved. You are no longer frightened of being seen to be—or actually being—a failure.

And of course, there flows from this one of the things we saw in our first chapter, which is that you start to tell a much richer and more relaxed story about yourself: you are able to become a much more flexible revisionist historian. You no longer have to iron out the inconvenient wrinkles in your own account of why you did this or that, fleeing from certain glimpses into your motivations, fearful of others who remind you of an ugliness that you would rather not see (but still suspect is in you, so you repress the suspicion). The whole need to de-

fend yourself, to give a defensive, self-justifying account of yourself, starts to disappear.

Part of undergoing this being-loved is the realisation that I have been telling lies. I have been giving an account of myself, have bought into it and elaborated it, in a way that has not been truthful. In other words, I am a liar. And the strange thing about the gift of faith—the ability to relax into the entirely sure trustability, truthfulness, and loving kindness of the other Other—is that it hugely increases in us our awareness of not being truth-tellers. And it enables us to become more relaxed about that, as we find ourselves being given elements of a story about—and including—ourselves, which is much richer, but also much more realistic, than the one we held onto before.

This element of the gift of faith is especially worth dwelling on by those of us who preach in Church, or teach in religious spaces, and therefore are more strongly tempted to “get it right”. We can all distinguish between someone for whom faith is an ideology (and who therefore tells lies while being convinced that they are being truthful) and someone who is undergoing the gift of faith, and thus actually finds herself speaking more tentatively, with more discernment about how involved she has been in lies. We can distinguish between these two and detect that there’s a certain narrowness that goes along with having to stick to a line, and a certain spaciousness which goes along with finding yourself held in the midst of truth. And we can tell when someone is being a charlatan.

When we see someone who is obviously undergoing something that is not from them, part of the truthfulness which emerges is their ability to sit peacefully with themselves as liars. This seems odd, but it is significant for those of us who are asked to give witness in some way or other. I’m not advocating being dishonest; I’m advocating relaxing and not being too disturbed as we discover how dishonest we are.

### *Doubt, Crises of Faith, and Occlusions of the Self*

I hope that as we have advanced, it has become ever clearer what the role of doubt is within the gift of faith. You may remember the picture with which we started, with faith as some ideology to which one

must adhere very tightly and make a moonshot. In that picture, what we call a doubt appears as some sort of weakness—a failure to send up a strong enough moonshot, or an insufficient verve in my partisan conviction about our ideology. Well, within that sort of world view: “doubt” is something equal and opposed to “faith” and to be regarded as an enemy—and potentially a devastating one.

But if the picture I have been developing with you here is true, then a completely different appreciation of doubt emerges. What we call doubt would be something perfectly normal and indeed to be expected. If someone else is speaking you into being, you will quickly find that, despite an initial familiarity with yourself, over time you’ll find that things are no longer quite the same. You will find yourself strangely unaccustomed to yourself. Bits of familiarity will be stripped away, and unknown bits will start to appear. Rather than finding yourself in a well-known home, you will begin to find that, here and there, you are on a building site. And this will mean finding yourself slightly lost, from time to time, as regards who you thought you were. You’ll have to learn anew how to distinguish between things you thought firm and confident about yourself, and things which are only now becoming clear, between floors and stairs already in place, and floors and doors which are yet to be finished.

In other words, doubt is a constitutive part of faith, not an equal and opposite threat to it. It is *because* you find yourself becoming something different that *you would expect* there to be bumps. If we start by thinking of our fixed selves making a moonshot towards God, then on the occasions we find ourselves being shaken up, we imagine we are undergoing a crisis of faith, as though it is somehow God who is suffering the consequences of our being shaken up. In fact, this is getting things exactly the wrong way round!

What you would expect to happen, as the other Other nudges you into daring to become something rather more than you thought you were, is that you will have crises of self, times when you will undergo a “loss of world”. Things will not appear as they were; you won’t know quite how you’re oriented. You will lose certain feelings which you have become accustomed to thinking of as “religious” feelings. However—and this is very important—faith is not a feeling. Faith is the disposition

that keeps on even when you no longer have any feelings. Feelings are part of what assures us of familiarity. But the gift of faith is what enables you to stretch beyond the familiar when our feelings don't give us their customary reports.

What we call crises of faith are, more often than not, far better described as "occlusions of the self". They are bits of us cracking up, and because of that, we are a bit unmoored as to who we are and how we belong. But this is exactly what you would expect if someone is nudging you into a bigger world! You would expect to undergo a loss of world—your own, smaller world—and therefore a temporary loss of vision as to how trustworthy it all is. However, these moments of loss, of discombobulation, are internal to the process of someone gifting you with faith. They are not a threat to that faith.

This was understood rather more clearly until the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Starting then, the notion of faith as a certain propositional rightness (one linked to a particular kind of partisan belonging) began to take over the more old-fashioned view of faith as a process of being given an habitual disposition to let yourself be taken somewhere else. It was the time of the Wars of Religion, around the same time as René Descartes was elaborating his philosophy. This was the period in which it became important for religion not to be about a virtue (and a virtue is a habitual disposition) but about a belief. A belief that made you one of a party—the Catholic Party or the Protestant Party, for the king or against the king. Religious orthodoxy became the sign of being fully signed up for your party. The propositional and the ideological take on "faith" began to take over from the habitual.

Nevertheless, the habitual is the more reliable and more traditional understanding of faith. And within the habitual understanding, doubt and the crisis of the self—what we call crises of faith—are normal. They are not at all the end of the world. They are exactly what you would expect! It's precisely because you are relaxed about being held in being by someone who is bigger than you that you can also be relaxed enough to undergo crises of self. If there isn't anyone bigger than you holding you in being, then you have to hold tight to yourself, and not allow yourself the luxury of being re-worked from within.

*On Infants and Zimmer Frames: Looking at Faith through the Eyes  
of the One Who Gives It*

I want to leave you with an image which I hope makes sense of various things we've talked about. It's a ridiculous image of infants and Zimmer frames (which I think in the US are called "walkers").

Let us imagine a room full of infants—infants without any adults. In fact, there are no adults around, and the infants have never seen an adult. All they've ever seen are other infants. So they crawl around all over the place, on all fours. They've never seen anybody standing on two legs, so all that they know is that one wriggles on knees and bellies as best one can.

Well, let's imagine that, in the midst of this infantile mayhem, one of the infants starts to perch on two legs and even tries to stand up. You can imagine the reaction from all the others: "Who do you think you are? Think you're better than us? Getting up on two legs is quite ridiculous! Get down on all four like the rest of us, or we'll bring you down to size. This is something up with which we will not put! If God had meant us to stand on two legs, he would quite clearly not have given us four".

Well, we can imagine the kind of attitude this would inspire—a severe attack of "tall poppy syndrome" as it's called in some parts of the world. But this is not, of course, the human experience. The experience of infants is that there are adults around, and if they weren't, the infants wouldn't live. So from a very early age, and long before they can do such things themselves, infants see adults walking on two legs. Then there comes a certain stage when adults start to help infants learn to walk. Let's remember that, at this stage, these little bundles don't yet have the muscles to walk, and walking is actually physically impossible. Never mind having any theoretical understanding of how it is one day going to be possible—no infant is going to learn the theory of ambulatory locomotion before they walk.

So the infants do not know it is possible. In fact it is clearly impossible for them, though unbeknownst to them they are primed to do it. Yet little by little, adults will start helping them, holding their hands, leading them, with the adult walking or knee-shuffling backwards. This

will last a few steps, and then the bundle will collapse on the floor in a giggly heap. The adult will repeat this, and the few steps will grow into more steps. All along, the adult will keep looking at the child, so the child can see the adult looking at them. If they look down, they will fall; but as long as they look towards the adult looking at them, they will keep going.

Then, after a certain time, the muscles begin to acquire the requisite density. (And please remember, the baby doesn't know it needs muscular density—it is being inducted into the practice of developing the muscular density that will enable it to walk). So then the adult no longer needs to hold on to the infant's hands, but only to stand back a bit, and the toddler can launch itself with ever-increasing confidence across the gap to the adult. Then the gap gets bigger and bigger, the toddling becomes more and more reliable, until suddenly, as more than one parent has told me, there's a sort of "click" when the infant gets it and is able to walk without incentive from then on. After that, the little bugger is basically going to be out of control forever.

So there is an initial stage when it is normal for the adult to take quite seriously the business of looking into the eyes and holding the hands of the infant. They are not only encouraging the child to do the impossible, but also inducting them into believing it is possible. Later, there comes a moment when it no longer occurs to the child that there was ever a time when it couldn't do this thing. It never questions or even thinks about walking. Walking has become second nature, something completely reliable and trustworthy. This is an entirely normal process. The adult has inducted the child into a habitual disposition to do what was once impossible.

Now, let us imagine a lazy adult, one who doesn't really like children. This adult might say: "I can't bear children. I really can't be bothered to hang around and induct this awful thing into being able to walk. It will interfere with my social life. I know what I'll do: I'll have some infant-sized walkers (or Zimmer frames) manufactured. Then I'll put the blighter in the frame, make it hold onto the side, and leave it to look after itself".

You can imagine a whole generation of children who've never seen an adult walk, never actually learned to walk themselves, and instead

have merely learned to manipulate Zimmer frames. They may come to know Zimmer frames very well, and develop wonderful fencing matches with Zimmer frames, become really adroit at all sorts of yet-to-be-invented Zimmer sports. But the fact is that they would have been given a crutch rather than a habit, a prop rather than a disposition. And they will come to associate their adult state with the crutch. The lazy adult will have deprived them of the possibility of freedom.

A generous adult inducts the child into doing something which will leave the child independent, so that the child thereafter no longer needs to rely on the adult. The lazy adult would have short-circuited that possibility. The generous adult will have inducted the child into the habitual belief that it can do something which, at one stage of its life, was clearly impossible: to walk. And because of that induction, it's walking may take it on treks to the Himalayas, or to becoming a football player, a billiards champion, or simply someone who walks to work. Endless possibilities will open out for it, none of which the adult will have prescribed.

In other words, the child received a habit as part of belonging to a relationship. Things would have been quite different if the one who might have had a relationship with it had opted out of the relationship, saying: "I can't be bothered to spend the time with you, here's this substitute". Ironically, the adult who gave the child the frame and then disappeared from the picture, all the while justifying themselves by saying they've left the child freer to do his own thing, has not actually left the child more free. In fact, they've severely crippled the child and made it much, much less free. The one who stays in the picture and induces the disposition to try impossible things is actually the one who gives the child what it needs to be free—free to be entirely different from the adult if it wants to be.

This image goes to the heart of the polemic which St Paul wages in the New Testament concerning the Law. If God says to God's children: "You know, I can't really be bothered to induct you into freedom, so instead I'm going to give you a law. You grasp that law, you practice it, and that will define who you are as human beings. However, I'm afraid that I don't have the time to spend looking you in the eye and getting you to practice walking freely. I'd rather spend time wandering round

on a celestial safari, taking pot shots at minor divinities in other cultures and scalping them”.

When Paul talks about the law of Moses, he’s saying: “Yes, the law is perfectly fine, it’s perfectly reasonable. It’s a frame, a good thing in itself, not a bad thing. Children occasionally have carts that they can stand up with and push at the same time as they learn to walk, and these are temporary educational toys. But we would all be worried if their grasp of their cart was so great that they never learned to walk. The problem is not with the cart; it’s with how you grasp it. Instead, they must be nourished into learning how to walk” (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, 13:11).

And this is the point of the gift of faith. It is the disposition produced in us by someone who really, really wants us to be free, not bowed down or crippled. Someone who is prepared to go to great lengths to induct us into a habit, a disposition of being able to walk freely, not to be trapped by gods or frightened of death. “For freedom he has set us free” is Paul’s great cry in the epistle to the Galatians (5:1).

Do you begin to get a sense of how strange it is that the gift of faith is absolutely central to Christianity? How absolutely it is linked to the notion of freedom? For just as a parent does not induct a child into the habit of walking so that the child will thereafter follow it around and do exactly what the parent does, so the other Other who produces in us the habitual disposition not to bow down to gods and not to be run by death doesn’t do these things so that we will “behave properly”. Instead, the attitude of someone who seeks to give you faith is someone who is not in rivalry with you, is not concerned with the inevitable mistakes you will make, knows that perfectionism is the enemy of learning and of growth and wants you to be able to discover for yourself what is good for you, where you will take it, what you will make of the adventure.

So faith is the habitual disposition induced in us by the other Other, which allows us to relax and be stretched beyond our possibilities, and this turns out also to be something like a huge, happy, bracing challenge to freedom: “For God’s sake, stand up and be godless!”