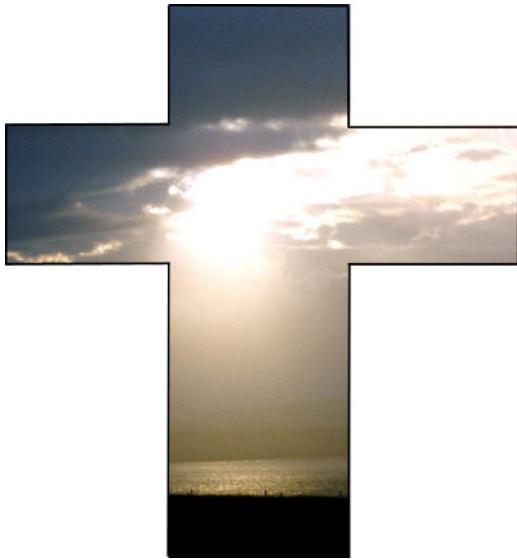


“By Faith We Understand...”

For many people the way to understand things of importance - ourselves, the world we live in, history, death - is by a deliberate avoidance of relating them to God or to theology. This is by no means new; indeed such a philosophy of life is as old as mankind is. It is perhaps best characterised by a poem written around 1909 by the atheist Thomas Hardy, startlingly called “God’s Funeral.” Hardy pictures himself watching and drawing



The Light of Hope

near a funeral procession in which mankind carries the remains of the idea of God to a final resting place. Of course, “God” in all this is no more than the projection of human fears and desires, the invention of human beings, so that Hardy asks,

“Whence came it we were tempted to create,
One whom we can no longer keep alive?”

And then comments,

“And, tricked by our own early dream
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
Our making soon our maker did we deem,
And what we had imagined we believed.”

What humans had developed as the idea of God came to be believed in as if it were really a divine Being. “Faith” is no more than instinct evolved and developed by human experience.

How different the eleventh chapter in the Letter to the Hebrews of the New Testament Scriptures!! *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen...through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God...”* Far from God being the developed projection of human aspirations and fears, he “is.” He lives as the Eternal, unbegun, glorious One who is from “everlasting to everlasting God”, existing objectively and independent of human thought or invention. And far from faith being but evolved human instinct, faith is the human soul in its highest exercise of speaking to, listening, accepting from, aspiring after, worshipping, confessing to, this living God.

“By faith we understand...” Little wonder that there should be so much spiritual and moral darkness when there is so little faith! Whether it be the world we see around us or the experiences we go through, it is impossible to see any of that aright without faith. The Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible can be taken as an experiment in this. The whole world of human beings and their experiences is surveyed, only God is left out of the survey. The survey looks longingly for meaning and purpose, but the outcome is inevitably “vanity of vanities”; futility and meaninglessness rule. But bringing God into the picture leads to a very different conclusion! *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.”*

“By faith we understand...that the world were framed by the word of God” The universe is not random, chaotic, thrown into its present state by the disorderly forces of chance. It is ordered, structured, “framed”, by God. He has placed our world in exactly the right relation of distance and axis to the sun. Closer it would be too hot; further too cold. The universe is full of purpose and design, if only we have the eye of faith to understand it. Faith knows where the world came from and what its end will be: God’s creating power and God’s power in judgment govern its beginning and end respectively. The universe is also full of mystery. Suffering, evil, temptation and sorrow are as prolific as comforts and joys; for many it is their daily lot. And just as surely as faith “understands” what God has revealed, so too faith “understands” that there are things beyond human understanding, even though it be believing understanding.

That is to say, faith is not the attitude that says “I cannot understand anything of that so I will just have to believe it.” Faith relates to God’s word - to objective truth in other words. It’s not a leap in the dark. On the

other hand, faith does not insist that nothing is believed but what is fully understood. God's word is true, and faith believes it, even when scope of reason has been fully extended.

We began with Thomas Hardy's disrespectful "God's Funeral." We end with a funeral also; the funeral of God's Son. Jesus died and was buried. If only Hardy had thought more of how the funeral of Jesus, God himself in our nature, is the greatest argument against "God's Funeral" as Hardy saw it! Far from this being the end of God, the final moments in laying to rest the body of the Christian religion, it is instead its greatest hour! God is not dead! Calvary proves it!

So too does the experience of every heart that believes in Christ. *"I know", said Job long ago, "that my Redeemer lives, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"*

What now of Hardy's "what we had imagined we believed"? It is plainly seen to be but the flimsy hope of atheism that God is dead. But "faith is the substance (no flimsy hope) of things hoped for, the evidence (no speculative theory) of things not seen."

"By faith we understand..."

Rev. James Maciver