

Shafts of doubt from a Clear Blue Sky . . .

NEXT MONTH IT WILL BE 43 YEARS since I became a Christian in November 1969. And this week I've been hit in the face by shafts of doubt like I don't even remember experiencing in any of those 42 years.

Doubt about the very existence of God even.

Why now? And what to do, how to handle it?

It all started with Bart Ehrman and a series of Youtube videos he made on the historical Jesus¹. Actually I enjoyed the videos. I found his basic historical methodology to be sound and I was interested to see where it would all lead.

- I wasn't particularly shocked by his portrayal of Jesus as a wild, long-haired weirdo despised and distrusted by almost everyone – after all we all know from Mark 3 that even Jesus' own immediate family thought he was mad.
- I wasn't disturbed by his portrayal of Jesus as an (end-of-the-world) apocalypticist – after all, it's in the record that he expected the coming of the Kingdom within the lifetimes of some of his listeners². Paul tells us that Jesus in his incarnation 'emptied himself'³, and I've long been comfortable with the idea that that emptying might include the giving up of any supernatural prescience. Actually, I prefer it. The greater the emptying, and the more human he became, the greater God's sacrifice becomes, and the more I can relate to Jesus' humanity.

SO WHAT WAS IT THAT DISTURBED ME SO MUCH? I think it was just the very ORDINARINESS of the Jesus experience to the people who were around at the time. Granted that he had a reputation for working miracles, but there were others apart from him who had that sort of reputation; and if we leave that bit aside, we find a picture of a Jesus who was just sort of, well, **ordinary**.

I'm not even sure why this should have got to me the way it did. After all, that's the whole point, isn't it? If we believe that he became a man, then we have to believe that he became like us—that is, ordinary. Perhaps we get so carried away with the risen Christ sometimes, and projecting that back into the historical figure, that we need every so often to be brought down to earth and reminded of that very ordinariness.

SURVEYS HAVE BEEN CARRIED OUT to find out what it is that makes people convert to Christianity, regularly come to the same conclusion. That is, that people most commonly convert as a result of meeting Christians and being impressed by their character and their transformation. They see the work of God within others, and it's that that convinces them of the truth.

And that's the way it should be. It's not ultimately about history. It's about morality. That's why the predictions of Dawkins and his ilk that Christianity will eventually just die and fade away are ultimately misguided. It won't happen, because as long as people are being morally transformed others will be drawn in.

The history is ultimately neutral. It doesn't prove one way and it doesn't prove the other way. Its neutral. And that's the way it's supposed to be.

BUT I STILL FEEL A BIT SHAKEN by Ehrmans's well-reasoned and ultimately quite valid argument that you don't actually need God to explain Jesus. Everything that can be historically demonstrated about Jesus can also be explained in human terms without having to bring God into it.

I shouldn't really feel that way. After all, that's not what brought me in, and that shouldn't be what keeps me in.

The reasons I came to faith and have stayed in faith are really these:

- Firstly, like most converts (as I said above), I met people whose lives impressed me enough to convince me that there really was something real going on that I couldn't explain in any other way.
- And second, that initial commitment led me into very real subjective experiences of the presence of God that I couldn't explain any other way. Answers to prayer that I can't discount; experiences of the 'Providence of God' – things that just don't fit together any other way, blessings that follow obedience, cursings that follow disobedience, and so on.

SO MY BELIEF is nothing to do with the bible actually, it's all down to subjective experience. Which is how it was in the early church, of course, since they didn't have any bible in those days.

Bible or no bible, we can never actually prove or disprove Christianity. Bert Ehrman, as a historian, deals with this well. The miraculous, he points out, is not really open to historical analysis. Miracles are, by definition, extraordinarily unlikely events, deviations from the norm and from the rational path. Otherwise they wouldn't be miracles. Since they are by definition deviations, they defy analysis by normal tools of historical analysis. We can say with reasonable certainty that during his lifetime, the people around Jesus believed that he was performing miracles. That's the historical record. As to whether the miracles ACTUALLY HAPPENED, a historian can say nothing.

Where does this leave us? Living with our doubts, I think, and choosing faith. Where there's faith, there will always be doubt. I'm happy with that. I didn't need proof to come into it, so I don't need proof to keep going. Feelings come and go. We make our judgments, choose our path, and go with it.

¹¹ Unfortunately this particular series of video lectures entitled "The Many Faces of Jesus" is no longer available on YouTube, apparently due to a copyright dispute. However numerous other lectures by Bart Ehrman are still available there, in which a broadly similar viewpoint is put forward.

² Mark 9.1

³ Philippians 2.7