

HTHQ 9 August 2009 (Trinity 9)

*Heavenly Father, by your Spirit and through your scriptures, instruct our minds, warm our hearts, and strengthen our wills, so that we may better trust and follow you; we ask this through Christ our Lord*

We shall be referring back to the Ephesians and John readings quite soon, but I want to start with a quote/ a question from Psalm 42:2, 12 – **“Where is your God?”**

Reads like this in v.12 – *“my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”*

Presumably=not just where is He doing anything, but is He around at all?! Tough for the psalmist – going through a difficult time in his life, and now others are exploiting his own pain and perhaps his own doubts about God.

This rings bells for **me**, because there are plenty of people around us, even in Oxford (esp in....!) who pour scorn on our trying to hold on to a faith in God when they would say we know so much today about evolution, genes, etc.

and about bizarre religious claims and experiences around the world.

We can feel under pressure, esp if overwhelmed by personal circumstances and the turmoil of the world news.

Can play into **our own doubts or hesitations**, and anyway we Christians realise that there can never be absolute certainty, 100% proof that our faith is true. ??

Yet some opponents pretend they can be almost 100% sure there is no God! Irritating! Annoying!

Why do I raise this theme this morning and spoil your Sunday lunch?

Certainly not to knock your faith or create new doubts.

Anyway, perhaps you never have moments like me, sometimes in middle of night, of thinking “is all this true?”

**The aim** must be to encourage one another to build **firmer foundations**

and, for those here who are really unsure

or are wonderfully still searching and exploring the reality of the Christian faith, our aim is to say: it has a **solid basis**.

The *other reason* for taking this theme is even **more personal**. Most of you will know I have been on the sick list in the church intercessions for almost a year, since diagnosed with myeloma. (Thank you. Such love and support and prayers for Sue and me.)

Regular blood tests – 3 weeks ago, after various courses of injections of a new chemo drug, the test could find no trace of paraproteins, m. cells in my blood. Before you shout “*Wow*” or “*Hallelujah*” etc, the doctors quickly pointed out that

even though cannot find the cancer cells, see them, detect them, no symptoms, they are still there! And will return and grow! Eventually. (I knew that was the case; not doubting it.)

But I realise critics of any religious faith think that’s how we Christians can argue! “You cannot see God, no obvious evidence, what can you possibly base your faith on? Yet you still claim He’s there!”

*Atheist “Camp Quest” and the great unicorn hunt!!*

Can unnerve us and put us **on the back foot**. Where is our solid ground? ‘*Where is your God?*’

**Firstly** I am so grateful to those who **can** argue from a philosophical or scientific perspective. Keith Ward “Why there prob is a God” – response to Dawkins. Hang on to his coat tails! Also our Andy Gosler – chapter in book by scientists on their faith.

**Secondly** Not originally planned to say this, but sensed the Lord nudging me in the night – last night!

Not planned, because not the time to go into it, and not really in our passages today,  
but as I think about the people who come to me for spiritual direction and want to talk about their times of prayer and reading the Bible and when they sense God in their lives,

I realise we at HT need plenty of opportunities to share our experiences of how we think God is speaking to us, giving us his strength and peace, guiding and nudging us.

Of course this all needs sifting and testing, we may have got it wrong sometimes,

but if we play all this down, we are giving too much ground to the sceptics and perhaps sawing off the branch we are sitting on! Groups in the church to tell our stories if we want; *Exploring Christian Faith* course in autumn. Home groups?

**Thirdly** Now look at some of the verses from that reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians - 4:32-5:2.

Ethical practical part of letter, but Paul bases it on the teaching, the doctrine of the first 3 chapters. So, a lot here about the character and action of God.

Notice how he refers to God acting and being seen *in Christ*, in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

- God's kindness, forgiveness, is seen and bestowed on us in Christ. 4: 32
- God's love for us as his children is seen supremely in how Christ loved us and gave up everything for us. 5:1-2

So one of the foundations for my faith in both the existence and activity of God **is in fact the life of Jesus Christ**. Does this sound strange?

I realise that usually we work the other way in our thinking: in the light of what we know/believe about God, what do we now make of Jesus?

who was/is Jesus? Just a human life? Really part of the very being of God?

Is it really true that Jesus is (Jn 6:51) "*the living bread that came down from heaven*"

But increasingly, I am thinking things through in the opposite direction as well.

In the light of what we see and appreciate about **Jesus**, what do we now make of the idea of a belief in God?

What I read in the Gospels about Jesus becomes for me the **biggest pointer for my belief in God**.

Sure, the Gospel records have essentially to be **historically true** (another case where I think we are losing our nerve as Christians...)

but the story of Jesus seems **true to what I sense life is all about** – relationships, community, love and forgiveness and kindness, healing, hope, the security of eternal life.

Jn 6:51 again: “*the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh*”. Cross shaped love, and (I believe) a Christ-shaped God.

And so this extraordinary life and death and resurrection of Jesus reassures me that God is not a delusion or an interesting add-on to our world view, but source and foundation of **the real thing**.

(And let me add here that I am not very interested in just believing in a God who is an explanation for the Big Bang, only the creator of the universe, although that must be a useful part of faith. To be told there is a creator leads me to respond “So what?!”)

I want a God who relates to me, who loves me, to whom I can respond. More than intellect answers.

A word for this point from Ephesians would be **Image**. Not used there, although in parallel letter to Colossians: Christ is “*the image of the invisible God*”. See Hebrews 1:4 “*the exact imprint or representation of God’s very being*”

So, **image** And, **Imitators**. That’s what *we* are to be! Extraordinary! Imitators of God. 5:1, cf 4:24.

Or it may be easier to take hold of if we say:

‘imitators of Jesus Christ.’ 5:2 “live in love, as Christ loved us”. cf. “Love one another....”

**So, Another foundation** for my faith in God is when I see the change, transformation, healing in various ways, in people’s lives, individually and as a community. Putting Eph 4 and 5 into practice.

**God at work.** Where is your God? – here in you, in us, perhaps sometimes in me! And through Christians living and working in so many situations of need. That’s seeing God the Holy Spirit at work.

Of course it’s slow and gradual. Of course we ‘grieve the Holy Spirit’ (4:30). But we can still see the real thing in real people as a reflection, an imitation, of the real God.

(And, let’s not use the word ‘imitation’ in the common way of meaning shoddy, second-rate, or even counterfeit.

It is an amazing enterprise Paul encourages us on, and an amazing project that God is committed to – conforming us to be like His Son.)

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So, enjoy your Sunday lunch, or even coffee in the Coach House.

Yes, many taunt us with the Q. We may have our own unnerving doubts and Qs from time to time.

But let’s be **reassured** through the Scriptures, and by each other, of some of the firm foundations;

And especially today the **foundations** of

\*Jesus as the unique **image** of the invisible God,

\*and even ourselves and our sisters and brothers as valid, if imperfect, **imitators** of God in Jesus and so as pointers to His truth and reality.