

March 28, 2010

“Palm Sunday”

1 Peter 3:15

REASONS TO BELIEVE

1. The reliability of the Bible

2 Peter 1:20-21 ... *no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

Compared to any comparably ancient writings, the 27 “books” of the New Testament are enormously well-authenticated by the thousands of ancient manuscripts which date back to the centuries immediately following the composition of the originals. A book to start with on this subject is *New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* by F.F. Bruce. Beyond the question of the reliability of the New Testament documents, there’s the overwhelming case to be made for taking the whole Bible seriously from the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Zechariah’s prediction of the strange triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Micah’s foretelling of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem. Daniel’s precise dating of Christ’s ministry (In the days of the Roman Empire: the 4th great world empire.) Isaiah’s majestic portrayal of the “suffering servant” who would be born of a virgin and die as an offering for sin and so “make many to be accounted righteous.” All of these (and many other prophecies) bear witness to the statement of the apostle Peter that “no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

2. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ

1 Timothy 2:5-6 *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...*

An examination of the words and actions of the carpenter-turned-itinerant-preacher/teacher, whose life and work is written up in the four Gospels, displays his stunning and admirable uniqueness. From whatever perspective he is considered, the “founder of Christianity” simply stands impressively alone in his interactions, his insights, his values, his teachings --- and his take on God and the human race and the relationships between them. And then there’s the shocking juxtaposition of his strikingly notable humility and his audacious statements of self-disclosure. He said, “*I am gentle and lowly in heart*” and there’s no record of anyone disagreeing. It seems that no one thought he was speaking falsely. But he also said, “*I am the light of the world... I am the way, the truth and life... Before Abraham was, I am.*” He said these things, and seemed to all kinds of people to be speaking the truth. It is in regard to this piece of my explanation that I recommend *The Everlasting Man* by G.K.Chesterton.

3. The parade of the giants

Psalm 16:3 *As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.*

Stretching over the 2,000 year length (So far!) of Christian history is the long procession of brilliant and impressive Christians. (Sure! Christianity has its share of black apples and black sheep and outrageous hypocrites and embarrassingly bad examples --- as does every group of human beings. And something needs to be said about that. And can be said. Firstly: if you will please excuse me my weird and goofy relatives, I will excuse you yours! But never mind all that just now!) The parade of the gigantically excellent examples begins (for me) with the apostle Paul, first an aggressive opponent of the Christian faith and then an outspoken advocate, quite willing to lose everything and to bear torture repeatedly rather than deny his Lord. A brilliant shining example. One of many! Then there is Athanasius (“*against the world!*”) Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, G.K. Chesterton, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, C.S. Lewis, Jim Elliott: all heroes to me. I read their works and I read of their lives and my heart cries out, “*I want to be on their team. When these saints go marching in through the gates of heaven, I want to be in their number!*” Not one of these men is faultless (They are all men!) --- and with each of them I disagree with at least a few of their interpretations and personal convictions, as they disagree with each other. But in every case, I am stirred by their shining examples to strive to become the man I am working on becoming. Each of these Christians has stories to tell of how they came to believe in Jesus Christ and why they continued to do so until their dying day. (RECOMMENDED READING: *Surprised by Joy*, the spiritual autobiography of C.S. Lewis, who once upon a time was a brilliant young Oxford student and a bitter atheist and who lived to become a 20th century version of the apostle Paul. Especially check out **Chapter 14, “Checkmate”**)

4. The capacity of the gospel IN ITS SIMPLICITY to be understood, believed and practiced by all ages and all sorts of human beings.

Romans 1:16 *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

The whole world is in great need of some good news! “The good news” of the New Testament is simple enough to fit and satisfy all ages and sizes and depths of human capacity as evidenced by its worldwide acceptance. Its rapid spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first three centuries is a case in point. (And so is its rapid spread through the People’s Republic of China in the second half of the 20th century! Now, there are 100 million Christians in China!) The gospel’s “conquest” has not been by force of arms or by civil action but rather by the life-changing force of the message itself and by the world-shaking impact of the lives and deaths of the men and women and children who refused to deny the Lord they had come to believe. (“*I am not ashamed of the gospel,*” wrote Paul to the Christians in Rome in the middle of the 1st century, “*for it is the power of God for salvation...*” And he paid the price. About 150 years later Tertullian wrote from North Africa that “*the blood of the martyrs is seed.*”)

5. The capacity of the gospel IN ITS COMPLEXITY to address all aspects of personal, familial and societal life.

2 Peter 1:3-4 *His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.*

After all these years of seeking to provide good advice to all kinds of people of all ages regarding the challenges and complications of their personal and relational and vocational and community lives, while trying to deal with the challenges and complications of being the young man I was and then the grown man I have become, I am still most helpfully directed in my counseling by a deep-rooted confidence in the Bible’s principles. I have found that paying close attention to, and seeking accurate understanding of, and attempting precise compliance with what the Bible teaches provides every sort of person with practical, personal guidance that effectively addresses the personal and interpersonal messes that we human beings have the tendency to create for ourselves and one another. And beyond the borders of my own experience as a counselor, I find in the Bible a great wealth of knowledge regarding solutions to the major issues facing every group of people, particularly families and churches and civil societies.

6. The confirmation of prayers specifically answered.

Psalm 18:1-3 *... I love you, O Lord, my strength... I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.*

In what must now be many hundreds of examples, a prayer of mine has been answered specifically, often in ways which bring about more good than I had been looking and praying for. Some other man might come to some other conclusion from a similar long series of experiences, but the conclusion I have come to is that the prayers I have prayed to God through Jesus Christ have not gone unheard or unanswered. “*Call me Ishmael*” (The name means “*God hears.*”)

7. The feel of truth

Psalm 42:7 *Deep calls to deep...*

This one is totally subjective but the way a thing feels isn’t always insignificant. The point is: for what it’s worth (And it’s worth a lot to me!), it feels to me that the deeply imbedded conviction that there is profound significance in being human corresponds very precisely with the Bible’s statement that we human beings are made in the image of God and so are meant to know him. I can go on. Augustine’s famous one-liner feels true. (“*You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.*”) And it’s not just the experience of being alive that feels as if it means something. To me, the world itself seems to mean something. To me, it feels as if the heavens are in fact declaring the glory of God and showing his handiwork, that the mountains and the hills do break forth into singing (in voices that human ears cannot hear!), that the trees of the fields do clap their hands and that the birds in the trees and the skies are singing to God. Along these lines, G.K. Chesterton speaks of his conversion to Christ in *Orthodoxy*. (“*I had found this hole in the world... I found this projecting feature of Christian theology, like a sort of hard spike... The spike of dogma fitted exactly into the hole of the world --- it had evidently been meant to go there – and then the strange thing began to happen. When once these two parts of the two machines had come together, one after another, all the other parts fitted and fell in with an eerie exactitude. I could hear bolt after bolt over all the machinery falling into its place with a kind of click of relief... Instinct after instinct was answered by doctrine after doctrine.*”)

TO CONCLUDE: These are seven of the reasons that I have been an enthusiastic follower of Christ since 1971 and that I intend to remain one for the remainder of my life and that I desire to die as one in due time