

Why I am still a Christian – John Philpott

Where
Luxembourg

When
25.10.17

Born Bristol in the war, moved to London in time for the great freeze up of winter 1947. Failed the 11+ - Central School where I floated to the top stream. Redbrick university – Leicester - history. Makerere University in Kampala Uganda - Diploma in Education. Taught in Lira – N. Uganda - 4 years. End of first term in Lira - flew back to UK - 2 weeks later married Margaret - not seen for 11 months. Flew back to Uganda 8 days after the wedding.

A couple of years later our car ended up in a ditch – in the remote NE of the country – Karamoja. Conversation: What shall we do after Uganda? Influence of CMS missionaries – ‘Get ordained!’

Two years later in 1969 – to Bristol - Theological College to prepare for ordination. 7 years of curacies in Knutsford and Solihull. Vicar of St Luke’s Bristol Street, Birmingham in the 80’s, vicar of All Saints Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton in the 90’s and chaplain of St Clement’s, Prague in the naughties. Retired in 2008 - Exmouth, Devon. Then began the decade of locums.

Why I am still a Christian?

Why am I still a Christian when I could complain that I had far too much church when I was young? A reason made by some years ago for not going to church now – “Too much of it when they were young.” I’ve heard the complaint a lot from ex-public-school boys, from ex-choir boys and from girls who at the age of 12 were Sunday School teachers who by the age of 15 had decided that boys were a better option than God.

For a couple of years in my teens - 5 ‘God-slots’ a day on Sundays (Boys’ Brigade Bible Study Class, Morning Service, teach SS in afternoon, Gospel service at 6.30 followed by Youth Group) so if anyone has a reason to say that they had too much church when they were young, I guess I do.

Whilst there was one particular time aged 7 when I said ‘Yes’ to Jesus – “I am yours,” there was also the constant drip, drip feed of Christian teachings and Scripture. Brain washing? – perhaps, but I was given a Biblical worldview with which to thrive in a world which increasingly has not had a biblical worldview.

Can I ask how many of you here are what we call ‘cradle Christians’ – that is you were brought up in a Christian home and haven’t greatly deviated from it? How many are converts to the faith from beyond the fringe?

Whether or not one is a cradle Christian, one has to make the faith ones’ own. God has no grandchildren! Faith has to be authentic – copper bottomed – not a mere recitation of undigested beliefs and attitudes, not a mere hand-me-down. What helped me to make the faith my own was leaving the small but intense world of my parents’ Gospel Hall and becoming an Anglican. Here I encountered a breadth and depth of theology and history which had not been open to me in my youth. The people in church history who could be admired expanded. The theology embraced was wider and deeper than I had encountered. There was Creation theology as well as Salvation theology.

Over the years I guess my appreciation of the faith has continued to be broadened. Encountering Christians and churches in other continents and other cultures formed by different histories helps one see and appreciate the fact that this tree of life, rooted in Christ, has many branches in which one can find oneself at home. That Protestant spirit of mine which was automatically suspicious of anything Catholic and totally ignorant of anything Orthodox has been softened by reading and by encounter. That suspicion of what was called the social gospel has been eroded by the realisation that the faith is not about pious separation from the world but radical encounter with the world.

Can I now ask how many of you, now attending an Anglican church, were not brought up as Anglicans?

Three of my children continue as Anglicans. One is a leader of a Vineyard Church in Birmingham. Most importantly they are all committed Christians which is something of a miracle these days for which we constantly praise God. I’m looking forward to the Sunday when all 4 of them are preaching on the same day in their respective churches!

So, to answer my 1st question – Why am I still a Christian when I had an awful lot of church when I was young – my answer is this: There is an awful lot of church to have – a lot of faith to explore – and above all, if one takes it seriously, a lot of life to live – life which makes most sense when lived in the company of Jesus Christ.

My 2nd question to myself is this: Why am I still a Christian when attacks on God and the church have been so undermining in the 19th century, so remorseless in the 20th century and so bitter in the 21st century? “Religion is more trouble than it is worth,” is an opinion voiced by many since the 9/11

attack on the twin towers. Religious fundamentalisms – Muslim, Hindu and Christian do not help.

“And for God’s sake – not that I believe in god – if you want to believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster, that’s all right for you – but the days of so ordering society to reflect that belief are over – so away with your church schools, your homophobia, away with your religiously influenced laws on abortion and marriage, away with your bishops in the House of Lords.”

On issue after issue one is seeking to defend the reality of God, the truths of the Scriptures.

God as creator – does he survive in the face of destructive interpretations of evolution, natural selection, evolutionary biology, astrophysics and astronomy which date the universe at 13.8 billion years rather than the 4004BC of Archbishop Usher of Dublin in the 19th century!

God as sovereign in the face of the horror stories of history – the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, Passchendal, the Holocaust, earthquakes, plagues and Islamic terrorism.

God as the shaper of conscience in the face of Freud and others who have said that God is merely a projection of our own yearnings, our desire for a father figure.

God as Lord of all instead of merely an invented tool of the powerful to divert the attention of the powerless from the fact that they have no power.

God as the author of Scripture when Biblical criticism has argued that the Bible is a very human construct which has no more authority than Plato or Voltaire or others who dared to think big thoughts.

The Church as the upholder of divine truth and promoter of the highest ethical standards when it is deeply divided on important issues and its leaders do not set examples of good moral practice – paedophile scandals etc.

At point after point Christians have been defending God against all comers. Many who were with us are no longer with us. Many who were Christians have had their Damascus Road experiences in reverse. So why haven’t I? **Why am I still a Christian?**

Is it because I was paid to be a Christian for 36 years for one thing? A lot of clergy left the church in the 1960’s and 70’s because of the influence of ‘God

is dead' type theology and became teachers or social workers instead. They could no longer match what they believed with what they were meant to proclaim.

Is it because I am too lazy to jump ship? Am I like many people in difficult marriages – they would like to get out of them, but are too lazy to – they can't be bothered because it would be more trouble than it was worth and so they go through the motions of being married or go through the motions of being a priest?

As someone with a continuing interest in the world of ideas – historical, social, political and scientific my faith does come under pressure. I do need to be able to give an answer for the faith that is in me. Prague was a city with many churches but few Christians. Its mindset – like that of Paris – was atheist long before the communists took over in 1946. Eight or nine years ago the media was full of programmes celebrating an anniversary of Charles Darwin. Evolution and atheism were in the air. Richard Dawkins and co were on a roll and I found that the waves of unbelief were giving me a rough time.

How did I survive? How do we continue to believe in an age of unbelief when science seems to have an explanation for everything and remorselessly fills the gaps where we said God could be found? A few years ago, there was some research that claimed to show that there was a greater chance of a non-Christian coming to faith through the Christian Union at Oxford University than there was through the CU's at other universities. The reason that was given was not that the CU there was more effective or that the Holy Spirit was more active – No, the research concluded it was because the academic and social pressure of being a student at Oxford is so high, especially for students from state schools rather than private schools, that students turned to religion as a psychological prop. With scientists analysing the religious part of the brain even our response to Jesus who says to us – 'Follow me' is under pressure.

So what keeps me believing in the face of intellectual pressure and a degree of public scorn?

Many things – and we can only touch on some.

1. Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Bach, Shakespeare, The Latvian Radio Choir singing Rachmaninov's *Vespers* at a Prom a couple of months ago.
Touched by the hand of God?

On Good Friday in 2009, at a time when unbelief was rocking my boat somewhat we went to Birmingham Symphony Hall and heard Bach's Matthew Passion. Such beauty, such power can be scrutinised and analysed so that all

that you are left with is a series of dissertations on Bach's harmonics. But that, of course, is entirely to miss the point.

Can you examine a flower, a sunset or an eye and only think in scientific categories for surely as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, *The world is charged with the grandeur of God*.

2. Similarly with Scripture - for all the criticism to which the Bible has been subjected – it still resonates with truth and authority. It still tells it like it is. It still answers our deepest needs. It is still the greatest story ever told and the more I study it the more I rejoice in its riches. Biblical scholarship today is much more affirming of the trustworthiness than that which I encountered at Bristol University in 1969-70.

3. It's when I look at the big picture that I see the hand of God. Education, health care, social cohesion, scientific endeavour, democracy and just laws have their origins in the principles of our faith.

This was confirmed for me when I read an article entitled "China: the land of the rising son?" – s o n. It quotes a lecturer from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences – the country's most respected research institute for politics and economics. He was addressing a touring group of US pastors and told them about a government-backed research programme he had worked on.

"One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic and cultural perspective. At first we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past 20 years, we have realised that at the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubts about this." As a result China is printing millions of Bibles and the persecution of church is less consistent and less persistent than it was. They have come to see that a society without spirituality is likely to remain corrupt and unpleasant to live in.

Even Richard Dawkins recognises this. Much as he despises the church and hates a god he does not believe in, he still laments the fact that when his campaign has succeeded there will be a great hole left in the fabric of society which humanism and secularism will not be able to fill.

4. Why am I still a Christian when the intellectual and scientific ideas promoted by many are dead set against it? I am still a Christian because God has a way of speaking to us which circumvents the mind. There is that about us which is variously described as heart, spirit or soul. It is here that we hear God speaking to us. Recently – and perhaps rather oddly for a man – God has been speaking to me through tears. There have been times when those tears have been provoked by man's sheer inhumanity to man. But there have also been times when those tears have come unbidden in worship as something of God's glory in Christ has weighed heavily on me. It happened on the Easter Day after the Good Friday when we had heard Bach's St Matthew Passion. Instead of singing, as most churches seem to, *Thine be the glory* as the last hymn at the Easter Eucharist, the tradition at All Saints Gravelly Hill, underneath Spaghetti Junction, was to sing *Man of Sorrows, what a name for the Son of God who came, ruined sinners to reclaim – Hallelujah what a Saviour*. They sang it to a tune I didn't know. This inner-city congregation sang it so beautifully that I swear the angels were singing with us that morning. I couldn't sing the last verse for tears. It was as if God was reminding me of ultimate realities. He has a way of circumventing our arguments and speaking to that part of us which is deeper still than the intellect.

Enough on that theme. **Why am I still a Christian when after 65 plus years of being one, I am sometimes reminded that I am not a very good one.** This was brought home to me one recent Lent. Margaret and I were on a journey back from Birmingham where we had been to the funeral of Stanley Owen who was rector of the parish Solihull where I did my second curacy. We were in the quiet coach of the train where one is not supposed to use one's mobile phone. However, a woman sitting across the gangway used hers. She knew she shouldn't be doing this as she began the conversation by saying that she was probably going to annoy people by making this call. How right she was! To be heard on a mobile you have to speak quite loudly. To speak to a friend you have not seen for a long time you have to speak for a long time. I was trying to read a history book about one of my favourite periods – the 16th and 17th centuries. Quietly my blood simmered; I glanced at Margaret raising my eyes brows. Quietly my blood boiled and I whispered to Margaret that I was going to say something.

What came out and the manner in which it came out was not quite what Margaret expected me to say. *Madam*, I said, in my poshest stentorian tones, *are we going to have to listen to you rattling on all the way to Bristol? Some of us chose this carriage deliberately so that we did not have to be bombarded by mobile phones. Please desist.* To her credit the woman stopped immediately whilst Margaret squirmed with embarrassment at my rudeness. But it gets

worse. I was wearing my clerical collar. It wasn't long before the woman took out a pad of paper on which she wrote in letters large enough for me to read across the gangway, *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall see God*. I didn't have the heart to tell her that she hadn't quite got the quote right – peacemakers are the sons of God. The journey continued in, to my shame, embarrassed silence, until the lady got off at Bristol. If nothing else the incident provided plenty of material for Lenten soul-searching.

Why am I still a Christian when from time to time I don't get it right? Why am I still a Christian when I am sometimes a disappointment to myself? Why am I still a preacher when the devil whispers that I rather like the sound of my own voice? **The answer to this conundrum is found in God's forgiveness – a powerful medicine – not to be abused but to be appropriated alongside repentance.**

Here are two further reasons for remaining a Christian.

One is what I am calling the Christian DNA that I find in congregation after congregation that I have worked with for any length of time – 5 in this country and 11 in Europe. What is Christian DNA? It is the character traits that I find coalescing when Christians come together. Each person brings to the community the gentle work of the Holy Spirit in smoothing their rougher edges. Each person brings a sense that whatever the impact that others have in their lives – family, the boss, it is Jesus Christ who is the main man. Each person brings a sense that whatever they do with their lives at the end of them they will be answerable to God for the way in which they have been lived. So it is that in congregation after congregation, person after person, I find evidence of what St Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Churches are good places to be. Church delivers the goods!

Lastly, I have a deep sense that God has been good to me. Whatever problems I had in my upbringing in evangelical non-conformity because of its narrowness – that narrowness also provided solid foundations on which to build and so I am very grateful to my parents for their love and care and to Novar Hall Gospel Hall for its Bible teaching.

Then, of course, there is Margaret. Having failed the 11+ and therefore not having Latin there were in 1961 only 2 universities I could have gone to read History – one was Reading and the other was Leicester. And at Leicester I was president of the Christian Union and Margaret was Secretary and the rest as they say is history. Thanks to her we have a fantastic family which though widespread is close-knit.

A couple of years ago round about the time of our 50th wedding anniversary we were with the church in Freiburg in SW Germany on the edge of the Black Forest and there we had some absolutely wonderful walks. As we walked there came across me a deep sense of gratitude to God for the way that so far my life had worked out. Gratitude to God for the places I have been to and worked in. Gratitude to God for the people I have met and worked with. Gratitude to God for the people whose lives I have touched and whose lives have touched mine.

I want to end this talk – Why I am still a Christian - with **a verse that has helped me and might help you. It comes at the end of John 6.** It's a chapter which begins with the feeding of the 5000 and the people's desire to make Jesus king. By the end of the chapter they are deserting him in droves because of his difficult *I am the bread of life* teaching. Jesus turns to the 12 and asks if they are going to desert him as well as the others. Unsurprisingly it is Peter who replies: *Lord to whom should we go; you have the words of eternal life.* Where else indeed! Where else for forgiveness, for purposefulness or for a narrative that holds together things on earth and things in heaven? Where else would you go to encounter unconditional love? The scientists can tell us a lot about how we came to be here. But it is Jesus' words concerning eternal life that tell us why we are here. I stay with him. Like Peter I have nowhere else to go. Like Peter I have a tremendous number of reasons for staying!

