

THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

9 : MEETING GOD.

Two weeks ago :	JESUS :	What is it really about ?
Last week :	DOCTRINE :	What has the church made of it ?

That seems to cover quite a bit of ground !

IS THAT ALL ?

Obviously I've left out a lot of detail, which is all there if you want it.

But DO YOU WANT IT ?

I've tried to suggest that it ISN'T OF VITAL IMPORTANCE -

at least while you're finding your way.

It might be more useful when you know more, but we can leave it for now.

But it's ALL THEORY. And it isn't all.

By itself, it's of little significance.

So why have I been wasting all this time talking about it ?

Well, I hope it hasn't all been wasted. There are two reasons :

- It's hard to talk about the practical because it's, well, practical. If you don't do it, you won't see the point.

I could tell you, so far as I'm able, about my own experience - or about other people's experience (there are lots of books) - or stories from the Bible. But even if you're willing to take what I say on trust it's just words until you do it for yourself.

(And I've been saying that you shouldn't take things on trust. I can hardly except myself.)

- Because many people use (or misuse) the theory as an excuse to avoid the real commitment.

They find some piece of doctrine, or an example of misbehaviour in the church, or a passage from the Bible, to which they take exception.

Or they say silly things, like "Science has proved that God doesn't exist", or "I don't believe in anything without scientific evidence", or "the church is an instrument of capital, set up to oppress the workers".

I've tried to suggest that there's more to it than that.

WHAT ABOUT THE PRACTICAL ?

THIS IS OF THE HIGHEST IMPORTANCE !

CHRISTIANITY IS NO USE UNLESS YOU DO IT.

You can study it, or admire it, or ignore it, or oppose it, or vilify it, or support it, or even believe it

- but you don't see the point until you LIVE it

- and I know that, because it's what I did.

I was a Christian long before I found out.

I was a Christian simply because it made sense of the world, in much the way I've described earlier, in a way that nothing else I knew could match. That wasn't just inherited, though I was sent to Sunday School as a child, and it stood me in good stead. It started as a conscious decision in my

mid-teens, when my scientific friends found it fashionable to be atheists. I thought perhaps I should be an atheist too, but after a couple of weeks it seemed to me then that atheism just wouldn't work (see previous nine talks), so I went back to Christianity.

It was real, so far as it went. I did give it a fair bit of thought from time to time, but didn't go to church much (people that was for less clever and able than I), and didn't join in anything (it was my job to find my own way).

Then came my deep thoughts (see above somewhere), and I became committed in a way that I hadn't been before.

That isn't the only way. You can determine that you'll be a Christian, perhaps because you're attracted by the Christian way of life.

You go to church, read the Bible, pay your weekly offering, perhaps join a study group. You go to interesting meetings, support Christian activities, and you quite enjoy it, in a quiet way. You take up church architecture, or music, or liturgy, or get involved in social or political action (the Hikoi comes to mind). Everything does make reasonable sense once you've accepted the idea of God (and you probably have one or two reservations about certain bits of the creed, but so does everyone else), and you feel comfortable, accepted, at home, and content.

You feel virtuous. Indeed, you probably *are* virtuous, and none of this is bad.

You might do all that after being convinced by my arguments. (You might be doing it anyway.)

But IT MISSES THE MAIN POINT.

COMPARE music.

You can study sound : frequencies, harmonics, spectral characteristics of different instruments.

You can study theory : melody, harmony, counterpoint.

You can study musical works : structures of musical forms, first and second subjects, variations.

And it's absolutely fascinating.

But until you actually MAKE MUSIC for yourself, you've missed a great deal of what it's about.

HOW DO YOU DO IT ?

I don't know. I mentioned my way in the context of the "broken and contrite heart", but that's not everyone's way. There are certainly more than one ways. (Some Christians will tell you that theirs is the only way; I think that God is cleverer than that.)

I think you need some sort of genuine desire to put God first, and some sort of commitment. It has to be real; curiosity, mild interest, respect, tolerance, etc. are not enough. You still can't do the experiments without the right equipment.

Some sense of need might be necessary. The traditional approach is that we all need forgiveness, and if that's what you believe there is plenty of precedent for conversion. I needed values. You might need something else.

Then, convinced of your need for God, you ask Him to help. And wait for Him to do so.

The fashionable way to do that at the moment is the somewhat charismatic way, as found in the Alpha course. That's a middle-of-the-road, slightly conservative Christian approach, emphasising the Holy Spirit. It does pretty well exactly what I've just described. But people have been dedicated Christians for a long time without the charismatic approach.

Unfortunately (or probably not), one size does not fit everyone. Unfortunately (really) I don't know of any equivalents to the Alpha course with other approaches. This isn't one, because I don't know how to do it. I do know that something like this way worked for me, but I had to do it on my own.

That's not as helpful as it might be. I'm sorry.

AND THEN WHAT ?

Then you have NO DOUBT AT ALL that God has acted in your life. That's the REAL EVIDENCE - but you don't get it until after you've really been ready to accept whatever God wants of you.

Like all the other evidence, it might be open to different interpretations. But I believe in God in much the same way as I believe in atoms.

And I believe (though perhaps not quite so sincerely) in high-energy particle physics, but I haven't been near any experiments about that. I believe it because people with the right equipment report consistent results which they can interpret in that way.

Millions of people with the right equipment report much the same as I do, and interpret it in much the same way.

PRAYER.

Prayer to God has been a Christian tradition since the beginning, and before that a Jewish tradition for a very long time. Most Christians believe it does SOMETHING, though not all agree on just what that is.

- Prayer GIVES US THE OPPORTUNITY to work through issues in a thoughtful or meditative way, open to the influence of God.
- Prayer GIVES GOD THE OPPORTUNITY of COMMUNICATING with us without interruption from other sources.
- Prayer GIVES GOD THE OPPORTUNITY of WITNESSING to us by answering.
- Prayer CAUSES GOD TO CHANGE HIS MIND and do what we want Him to.

- and many more.

The last of those is one assertion you can perhaps disprove by experiment : pray for a fifty million dollar cheque to arrive in the post tomorrow. Whatever God is, He is not to be bossed about by us.

But the "perhaps" is there because of two reservations :

- Is that really a prayer ? I haven't defined prayer, but if I did it would have some elements of things like reverence, trust, honesty, etc. I couldn't offer that prayer, because it's wrong.
- In any case, it is widely believed (and supported by several Biblical passages) that all prayer, of any sort, IS answered - though the answer might not be immediate, and might not be the sort of answer you expect.

(I am not entirely convinced by that, because it's almost equivalent to saying that if you pray for X then, eventually, something vaguely connected with X will happen. But that doesn't make it wrong.)

MIRACLES.

A miracle is an event which does not conform to our expectations of how things should happen.

Some of Jesus's reported acts count as miracles : changing water into wine, healing, raising people from death.

Miracles are not restricted to Jesus. They have always been part of the church's traditions. In the Bible, Jesus's followers performed miracles both before and after His death, and they were accepted as normal parts of the Christian life.

Many people believe that this is still true. They believe that God will answer prayer in miraculous ways if the occasion requires it.

- Healing is one of the more common examples. I have not experienced miraculous healing, so far as I know; Jean has - a painful back condition of long standing was healed many years ago and has not recurred.

- Provision for our needs is another. I have known several worthy Christian causes giving thanks for the miraculous provision of money from unexpected sources, with just the right quantity turning up at just the right time for some purpose.

I'm not going to make a big thing of this, because it isn't something I've looked into a lot, and it doesn't strike me as a problem. If God did build the universe (the assumption I have frequently not made), then I see no reason why He couldn't poke it about occasionally if He wanted - and it fits in with lots of other things if you suppose that He would so want if to do so would help to nourish someone's faith.

Science is not a counter-argument. The most it can say is that if
God does intervene in the regular operation of the universe,
then it's comparatively rare - but we knew that anyway.
Science is simply not equipped to notice miracles, because
they're not reproducible.

WORSHIP AND PRAISE.

People of all the religions of which I know anything at all seem to WANT to get together for activities called WORSHIP or PRAISE or THANKSGIVING or something of the sort. Christians are included.

But what's the point ? Surely it doesn't do God any good. The creator of the universe (there's the assumption again, but it makes the point that God is different and big) is unlikely to find His way much easier because I get together with half a dozen other people to sing some appropriate songs and tell God how good He is.

But we do it anyway. There are Biblical statements to the effect that God is in some sense with us when we engage in worship; some say they can "feel" His presence, though I can't. (I can feel exalted, but people in friendly and exuberant crowds are likely to feel exalted anyway.)

But it's a fairly natural thing to do, and I think it can support our faith. It's probably good for us (provided that you choose the right sort of service).

What is THE RIGHT SORT OF SERVICE ? The sort I like. But I don't like being rude about others, because - though I cannot imagine how people can possibly exercise praise and worship in some of the environments - we're all different.

I don't really think it matters. If we want to show our love for God, and way will do.

(My reservations are that some services might be more about us having a good time, or showing off to one another, than showing our love for God. But I can't tell.)