Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief

1. Who Can We Trust? (I believe in God the Father Almighty)

Sunday, January 25, 2009
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor
Presenter: David Monyak

St. John in the Wilderness
Tokens of Trust
An Introduction to Christian Belief

ROWAN WILLIAMS

“It is a happy coincidence that the most important Protestant theologian in the world is also the best.”
—The Christian Century

“How rare to find someone who, simultaneously, is thoughtfully and constructively involved both with the main teachings of Christian theology (from the Bible through its formative periods to the present) and also with contemporary culture, politics, education, and spirituality.”
—Theology Today

“Rowan Williams speaks out of a fund of learning and pastoral experience which has made him arguably the most distinguished theologian in the English-speaking world.”
—The Way

The Most Revd. Rowan Williams is the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury. He was enthroned at Canterbury Cathedral on 27th February 2003.
Born 1950
Studied theology at Cambridge
DPhil at Oxford 1975
Priest 1978
1977 to 1992: taught theology at Cambridge and Oxford
  1986: Lady Margaret Professorship of Divinity at the University of Oxford
1991: Bishop of Monmouth in Anglican Church of Wales
1999: Archbishop of Wales
Dec 2002: confirmed as the 104th bishop of the See of Canterbury
Considered by many the best Protestant theologian in the world today
Also a noted poet and translator of Welsh poetry
Who Can We Trust?
(I believe in God the Father Almighty)

Questions
Questions

1. Believe?

- “I believe in God the Father almighty”
- What should we mean by “I believe”?
- Does “I believe in God …” have the same sense as saying:
  - “I believe in UFOs”
  - “I believe it is cold outside.”?
Questions

2. A Trustworthy God?

- What grounds do we have to think “God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth” is trustworthy?
  - Isn't God in a sense some completely alien intelligence, remote and transcendent?
  - Isn't it likely therefore that God has an agenda that we know nothing about?
Questions

3. An Almighty Father?

- How do we make sense of the words “Father Almighty”?

Father:
- Isn’t wishing for an almighty “Father” the ultimate unhealthy wish fulfillment projection?
  - wanting to have an all powerful father to sort out our problems, to help us out of situations we should be responsible for?

Almighty:
- Might not this word carry a very heavy baggage of human fantasies that obscures its true meaning?
  - We project onto God our desire to overcome our human limitations, to have what we want with the flick of our wrists?
Questions

4. A *Real* God?

- Suppose we agree that it makes rational sense to say God could be trustworthy, could have the characteristics of a parent, could be “almighty.”

- How can we know that any of it is actually true?
  - How do we know that this is a *real* God, as opposed to an impressive character in a book?
1. Believe?
There is a crisis of trust in our modern world.

We often don't feel the great institutions of our society are working for us:

- They often have their own hidden agendas that are against our own interests.

We have learned to be suspicious by default:

- We tend to assume that things aren't arranged for our benefit.
Believe?
“I Trust, I Put My Confidence In”

- This issue of trust is relevant, for when we say “I believe in God the Father Almighty,” “I believe” is:
  - not simply an acknowledgement about your opinion on the nature of God,
  - But meant to be a proclamation of trust in God.

- In the 9th chapter of John, when Jesus asks the formerly blind man if he “believes” in the Son of Man, he is not asking what the man’s opinion is of the concept “Son of Man”
  - Jesus wants to know whether the former blind man is ready to trust the Son of Man — that is, Jesus in his role as representative of the human race before God.
Believe?

“I Trust, I Put My Confidence In”

- “I believe” is much closer to the statement of faith made by Buddhists: “I take refuge in the Buddha.”

- When we say “I believe” in God the Father Almighty,” “I believe” means:
  - I take refuge in God the Father Almighty
  - I put my trust in God the Father Almighty
  - God is where I belong
  - God is who I have confidence in to keep me safe
  - God is where I find the anchorage of my life
  - God is where I find solid ground, home
2. A Trustworthy God?
A Trustworthy God?
Trust An Essentially Alien Intelligence?

- Why should we put our trust in “God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth”?
  - How can we dare to fathom the purposes of God?
  - Surely God’s intelligence is so much unimaginably greater than ours, that God is best thought of as an essentially alien entity.
  - Surely God’s ultimate agenda is hidden from us, beyond our understanding.

- Why then should we think him trustworthy?
  - After all, is he not a remote and transcendent alien intelligence with an agenda hidden from us?
A Trustworthy God?

The Bible’s Answer

n The Bible directly addresses these concerns:
  n God has communicated his purpose by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.
  n Through Jesus and the events around Jesus’ life, God has at last made his purposes clear
  n God has shown us God’s agenda
  n The opening passage in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians in particular plainly tells us God has at last made his purposes clear
A Trustworthy God?

The Bible’s Answer

God’s Agenda:

In a phrase from two themes in the Letter to the Ephesians: “peace and praise”

- Peace: the world God has made is designed to become a reconciled world, a world in which diverse human communities come to share a life together
- Praise: this reconciliation liberates human voices for praise, for celebrating the glory of the God

This does not tell us all there is to know about God, nor does it exhaust the mystery and wonder of creation

- It simply assures us about God's aim in creation
- God’s “agenda” for creation is not hidden
A Trustworthy God?

Another Answer

Another answer to why we can put our confidence in God the Father Almighty:

- we can trust the maker of heaven and earth precisely because he is the maker of heaven and earth

God is the unique source of everything, and there is nothing beyond God

- There is nothing God is “forced” to do
- The only thing that can 'motivate' his action is simply what he is.
- Hence: what God does shows us what he is
A Trustworthy God?

Another Answer

- God can't have a selfish agenda, because he can't want anything for himself except to be the way he is.

- The only motivation we can think of as to why God would make a heaven and earth is *sheer unselfish love*:
  - “He wants to give what he is to what isn't him; he wants difference to appear, he wants an Other to receive his joy and delight.”
Caution:

- God does not “need” us in any way
- We don't 'contribute' anything to God: God would be God if we never existed

We exist because of God’s utterly unconditional generosity. Creation is entirely and unreservedly for our sake

“God is, in simple terms, sublimely and eternally happy to be God, and the fact that this sublime eternal happiness overflows into the act of creation is itself a way of telling us that God is to be trusted absolutely, that God has no private agenda”
A Trustworthy God?
Creation and Salvation

- That God has made a heaven and earth out of sheer unselfish love, that we exist because of an utterly unconditional generosity highlights a deep connection between the often separate topics of “creation” and “salvation.”

- The love God shows in creating us is the same love that God shows in saving us:
  - They are the same love, and both are completely free and unconditional
3. An Almighty Father?
An Almighty Father?
“Father”? “Almighty”? 

- How can we make sense of the description of God as “almighty father”?
An Almighty Father?
“Father”? “Almighty”? 

- Pitfalls:
  - The wish fulfillment fantasy to have an all-powerful authority figure to look after us, who:
    - can sort out all our problems,
    - is always there on hand to help us out of situations where we would otherwise have to take responsibility
  - Believing there is somewhere an unlimited power that can do anything it likes
    - So I better be on its good side
    - Such a huge arbitrary will may inspire fear, but not trust
An Almighty Father?

“Almighty”? 

- “Almighty,” translated from the Greek means:
  - “Ruler of everything”, or “Holder of everything”

- Suggests “almighty” applied to God means:
  - there is no place where God is absent, powerless or irrelevant
  - there is no situation where God is at a loss
    - “God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation”
In other words “almighty” implies:

- there is no situation in which we cannot rely upon God
- God’s “love never exhausts its resources”

Therefore: God is to be trusted as we would trust a loving parent:

- Whose commitment to us is inexhaustible,
- Whose purposes for us are unfailingly generous;
- Whose life is the source of our life,
- Who guarantees that there is always a home for us
4. A Real God?
A Real God?
Does This God Exist?

- How can we know that any of this is actually true?
- How do we know that this is a real God, and not just some impressive figure we have created – like a character in a novel?
- In other words: does God exist?
There is no decisive argument to prove God exists.

St Ambrose of Milan (died December 7, 397 A.D.): “it did not suit God to save his people by arguments.”

The Bible has no arguments for the existence of God.
A Real God?

Arguments to Prove God’s Existence?

Indeed, the Bible is full of stories and poetry about the pain and angst of letting God come near you, of trying to trust him, when all the evidence seems to have gone.

See: Job, Abraham, Moses, the Psalms

Job, Abraham, Moses and the Psalmists don’t solve their angst by trying to work out decisive arguments to convince themselves of God’s existence – they already seem too caught up in a reality they can't deny or ignore.
A Real God?
The Testimony of Trustworthy Lives

- The effort they bring to their relation with God is itself a *kind* of argument for God –
  - if they take God that seriously, then God is surely more to them than a fantasy to make them feel better
A Real God?
The Testimony of Trustworthy Lives

- Faith does not usually begin with intellectual arguments.
- Faith often begins with “belief”, trust in the lives of some believing people:
  - We have confidence, trust in them because of the way they are living.
  - The way they live is a way I want to live. The world in which they live is a world in which I would like to live.
Some people do take “responsibility for making God credible in the world” through their lives.

One example Williams cites is Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish women captured by the Germans in Holland in 1941, who died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz in November 1943 at the age of 29.

Etty did not start out particularly religious.
A Real God?
The Testimony of Trustworthy Lives

- Her published diaries and letters from 1941 to 1943 show how she became more and more conscious of God’s hand on her life.

- She wrote “there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?”

- She described her life as having become “an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God”

- She sensed her vocation in the camp as being “not simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the heart of others. One must also clear the path toward You in them.”
Who Can We Trust?
(I believe in God the Father Almighty)
Faith often begins and is sustained by the recognition there are trustworthy lives (like Etty Hillesum, and many other less dramatic examples) making God credible to the world.

And as long as there are such trustworthy lives, the doors to faith remain open, and the possibility is there for Others, perhaps very slowly, to find their way to a point where they can say, “I believe”.
Who Can We Trust?
I Believe in God the Father Almighty

- Not merely “I believe in God” in the same sense of:
  - “I believe in UFOs”
- but “I believe in God” in the sense of:
  - I take refuge in God the Father Almighty
  - I put my trust in God the Father Almighty
  - God is where I find the anchorage of my life
  - God is where I find solid ground, home