

When I was about 6 or 7 years old – it came as quite a shock – to learn that some people didn't believe in God. As a vicar's son, believing in God was such a natural part of life – it seemed almost unthinkable that anyone *shouldn't* believe.

As I grew older, the question: “Does he believe in God? “Does she believe in God?” became a touchstone – to distinguish between those who shared my faith and those who didn't.

I know it's not just *me* who wonders whether or not other people *believe in God*. Just recently, I was in conversation with a young man who told me – slightly apologetically: “You know, I don't believe in God”.



So, why might we think that God exists? For many people that's the fundamental question. So, over the centuries, Christian theologians and philosophers have come up with all kinds of ingenious means for proving that God exists ... or at least – *claiming* to prove existence of God.

There's the *cosmological* – or first cause – argument: “Everything is caused by something – a something that came before. So, what came right at the start? Surely that must be God!”

There's the *teleological* – or design – argument: “Look how wonderfully the world is designed and made. Surely it can't have come about by chance! It must've been made by God.”

And so on. I don't have time to run through all the arguments ... but you probably get the idea.

Except, the thing is ... none of these arguments – for all their cleverness – actually end up persuading anyone to believe in God. At least, they've never persuaded anyone *I've* known.

What the atheist young man I met wanted – and perhaps many unbelievers want the same thing, too ... What he wanted was for God to *do* something amazing that makes the existence of the divine – obvious – unmistakable – unambiguous.

An audible voice – booming from the heavens.

Bright dazzling writing – arcing across the sky.

A genuine miracle of indisputable authenticity.

Any of those would do the trick. Each one would convince even the most hardened sceptic to believe in God – or at the very least – to start to question their atheism. But God isn't having any of it. God seems to delight in staying hidden. It's almost as if God doesn't *want* people to believe...! So, what's going on? Why is God so elusive?



As so often happens – things become clearer when we turn to Alban ... Alban, Britain's first Christian saint who was martyred on this site 1,700 years ago. You may remember the story.

Alban lived in Roman Britain around 300 AD. On one occasion, he offered sanctuary to a Christian priest who was fleeing persecution. Alban was so moved by the priest's faith that he, too, became a

Christian. So, when the authorities tracked down the priest to arrest him, Alban insisted that the priest take *off* his distinctive robe, and that *he* – Alban – put it on instead. As a result, the priest – now in disguise – escaped ... and Alban was arrested. He was brought before the city magistrate and was ordered to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Alban refused, and declared: “I am Alban and I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things.”

What I find really fascinating – is what Alban *didn't* say. He *didn't* say: “I am Alban and I *believe* in God.” No. — Alban declared: “I *worship* and *adore* the true and living God.”

There's a vital difference between: “I believe” and “I adore”.

“I *believe*” is a disposition of the mind.

“I *worship* and *adore*” is an attitude of the heart.

One is about opinion.

The other is about love.

And it's our *love* that God desires: not our *belief*, our *love*.



You see, all the most theologically and philosophically sophisticated arguments in the world – even if they're devastatingly convincing on an intellectual level ... They can never make us *love* God.

And the voice from heaven – the sky-writing – and all manner of the most remarkable miracles – although they may be overpoweringly impressive ... They're likely to leave us – at best – in trepidation and trembling before the transcendent. But they're unlikely to inspire *love*.



God doesn't want our *belief*.

God wants our *love*.

And our love for God springs – not from proofs or power – but from God's own love for us – a love that's seen supremely in the figure of Jesus Christ. As Jesus says in today's reading from St John's Gospel: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”



It's when we experience God's love – that we come to love God in return – when come to abide in God's love.

My guess is that many of us are here this morning or watching on the livestream – *not* because we've been convinced by a so-called argument or miracle – *but* because we've known God's love ... just as God's love was known to – a crucified bandit to whom Jesus offered eternal life – a distraught woman whose little daughter was healed by Jesus – and a friend of Jesus who'd failed him, but who found in him forgiveness and a new beginning.

For me, I think back – for example – to a time in my early twenties when I was feeling deserted and let down by my friends, and then in my loneliness, I suddenly experienced God's presence and care and concern.

Others of you may remember times when you felt: anxious, yet knew God's peace – broken, yet knew God's strength – shamed, yet knew God's acceptance – quite ordinary and unremarkable, and yet knew God's abundant and overflowing love.



In my youth, the question: “Does she *believe* in God? “Does he *believe* in God?” became a touchstone – to distinguish between those who shared my faith and those who didn't.

But nowadays a different question comes to mind: “Does he *love* God? “Does she *love* God?” For that's what this Christian faith of ours is really – truthfully – all about.

And there's more.

*For*, having been loved *by* God, and having learned to *love* God, we're called to love one another.

As Jesus says, again, in our Gospel reading: “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

But that's not easy. It can be costly. Love can be demanding.

Love means going on treating that tiresome old so-and-so kindly – even after they've rubbed you up the wrong way for the thousandth time.

Love means giving your time and energy – to care for someone who's in need – a sick loved one – a needy neighbour – even when you're exhausted and wrung out by yet another day full of online meetings.

Love means going the extra mile. When Aunty knits you a cardigan – a startling and surprising cardigan – of purple and orange stripes – it means not just saying “thank you” – but actually *wearing* the stupid thing!



The trouble is, it's easy to *talk* about love. Everyone agrees love is a good *idea*. But it's so *hard* to put into practice.

And yet – it is possible. We *can* take those first tentative steps in loving – *when* we've experienced God's love – and – *when* we've learned to love God.

We may fail often. We may be imperfect. There'll be people we really struggle to love. And yet – to quote Jesus in today's Gospel reading one final time: “The Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.”

So, we ask for the grace to love others – and the Father *will* give us the gift of love.



I used to ask myself: “Do they *believe* in God?”

But now I ask: “Do they *love* God?”

Because those who love God – who abide in God's love – are those who learn to love one other – and through that love – bring joy and hope and healing to our world.