

Old Answers to New Atheism!

Psalm 150; Job 9¹-40⁴; Hebrews 12¹-17

Shall a faultfinder content with the Almighty? [Job 40¹]

My favourite epitaph from a gravestone is,

Here lies an atheist - all dressed up with nowhere to go!

Having taught the philosophy of religion I am well aware that there is no conclusive argument that proves the existence of God: neither is there any convincing argument that God does not exist. The only thing that convinces an individual is experience - the personal experience of God or the lack of any personal encounter.

In trying to respond to the New Atheists of the 2000's the Church (or its theologians and preachers, at least) seem to have accepted that the burden of proof falls to believers to convince the rejectionists that God exists.

In this movement, given its name by the journalist Gary Wolf in 2006, the 'Four Horsemen' of the New Atheism - Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett - claim to have tested the *God Hypothesis* scientifically and that the results of their empirical enquiry show that there is no need to introduce God or the supernatural to understand anything. What is concerning is that they no longer defend atheism; they attack belief in general (and Christianity in particular) as dangerous and that the New Atheists are often "more wooden in their hermeneutics than the most literal fundamentalist" (*David Marshall: The Truth Behind the New Atheism: Responding to the Emerging Challenges to God and Christianity, 2007*).

Perhaps those who have made science their God need to hear the thinking of Rowan Williams:

The rational philosophy of the last couple of centuries has been weakened. One of the paradoxes is that many people now mistrust and undervalue science almost as much as they do religion, because they do not take for granted the same confident attitude to reason and objective argument. And because of the advances in science and technology have brought their own nightmares and crises - nuclear warfare, genetic engineering, environmental pollution - it is not surprising that this mistrust is widely felt.

If only they had taken the advice of Job when he is called to test God and responds, **I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.**

- ✦ Job has a stronger faith because of his experience of God - and that experience has seen God wager with the Devil that Job will not abandon his faith. So everything is stripped from him and yet his faith remains.
- ✦ There is a certain irony that it is the same biology that leads Job to worship (based on the challenges issues in the text) that inspires the rejection of the arch-atheist, Dawkins - for it is the loss of an open minded wonder that nurtures the closed minded dogmatic naturalism.

The preacher in Hebrews revels in a positive experience of faith:

- ✦ It is the confidence that we stand with those who have shared faith before us. Even in this Cathedral Church, standing as it has for a third of a century, there is the sense of continuity; something that is amplified in my own Parish Church, which has been a site for Christian worship since 800.
- ✦ Even the experience of **disciple** is something that this preacher sees as strengthening to faith - it may not be a positive experience but it leads us to a positive insistence that God is involved in our lives.

The insistence of Job and our preacher in the early Church is that God is there especially when things are difficult and his sustaining power convinces us that he is there for us.

It is not my purpose in this sermon to provide irrefutable evidence against atheism old or new - God doesn't need defending. As Job says, **anyone who argues with God must respond.**

It is, rather, to say that your experience of God is sufficient defence because in the small things, as well as the great, God has just been there:

- ✦ If you have ever in nature, in the sea or the mountains or in life itself, felt that sense of awe, then you have experienced God and that is enough.
- ✦ If you have in the simplest prayer in lighting a candle, or in music managed to lift yourself above the mundane, then you have experienced God and that is enough.
- ✦ If you have, in the difficulties of life, known that you have not been alone but have been held and loved, then you have experienced God and that is enough.

You probably know the story of the man who fell off a cliff and, on his radio descent, manages to grab the root of a shrub growing from the cliff face. As he hangs there he cries, 'Is there anyone there?' God replies, 'I am here!' The man then says, 'What should I do?' God replies, 'Let go!' After a pause the man is heard to shout, 'Is there anyone else up there?'