

We Believe (Part Two)

Referring the mission of the apostles, the renowned fourth century preacher and Bishop of Constantinople, Saint John Chrysostom, wrote in a letter to the church at Corinth:

For whence did it strike twelve unlettered men to attempt such great enterprises, men who were living in marshes, or rivers, in desert places, who had never perhaps gone into a city or the public square? Whence did it strike them to array themselves against the whole world? That they were cowardly and unmanly, he who has written about them shows, inasmuch as he does not even deprecate nor try to gloss over their failings. This in itself is a powerful proof of the truth. That after innumerable miracles they had seen Christ work, when he was taken prisoner some fled, while the one who remained, although he was head over the rest, denied him. Here were men who failed to stand up to the Jews when Christ was alive. Yet when he died and was buried they arrayed themselves against the whole world. How came this if Christ had not risen again from the dead, conversed with them and put heart into them? Would they not have said to themselves: What is this? He had not strength to save himself, will he protect us? He did not defend himself when he was alive; will he reach out his hand to us now he is dead? When he was alive he did not conquer a single nation – shall we convince the whole world by speaking his name? Would it not have been folly even to conceive of such things let alone do them? Hence it is clear that, if they had not seen him risen and received this mighty proof of his power, they would never have risked such a gamble.¹

Be honest, haven't we all sometimes found ourselves wondering about things to do with our faith? – not questioning our faith as such but perhaps listening to that tiny voice of temptation that asks: "What if someone made the whole thing up?" That passage from John Chrysostom is a tremendous counter-argument that basically says: would anyone have made up something as ridiculous (in human terms) as this?

In our own day and age, an age of instant electronic communication and media saturation, it would be the easiest thing in the world for someone to fabricate a credible identity for themselves that would enable them to carry out an elaborate hoax or to obtain large sums of money by false pretences. It happens all the time. We have all heard of so-called religious cult groups through which self-proclaimed "messiahs" have been able to exert a frightening degree of control over their misguided followers. There have also been examples of "televangelists" obtaining large sums of money in the name of religion from viewers who thought they were

¹ from the Office of Readings for the feast of St Bartholomew.

supporting healing or preaching ministries but who, sadly, were merely lining the pockets of those who, far from praying for them, were preying on them.

Consequently we have learned to be very sceptical in our response to people and organisations seeking our support – though not sceptical enough that the occasional con artist still finds it worthwhile trying. We have learned to ask ourselves who this person or organisation is that is asking us for help. How do we know if they are genuine or not? What guarantees of authenticity can they produce? Are even these genuine? How easily could this be a con? What do they stand to gain personally? What are the risks involved if we decide to trust them?

What lies behind those thoughts from St John Chrysostom over the page is a very basic question: could the apostles have perpetrated an elaborate hoax? And his answer is an unequivocal and resounding “No” on the grounds that no one could make up a scenario that bad. Let’s look at what he says.

Let’s imagine Peter and his brother Andrew mending their nets by the Sea of Galilee one day with James and John, their partners in the family fishing business. Maybe because there was no football on the television that weekend(!), the unlikely subject of the message of the prophets comes up in conversation and the fact that that they had foretold the coming of a messiah who many thought would lead the people in an uprising against the occupying Roman forces. Why, even for a moment, would they conceive the idea of pretending he had finally come? What would be the point? What would they have expected to get out of it? As St John suggests, it’s ridiculous to think that the apostles (most of whom were not very educated and probably knew very little of the world beyond the boundaries of Palestine) could, let alone would, have conceived the idea of a hoax that would lead to the establishment of a world-wide religion and their own canonisation as saints? First of all, why would they want to found a religion? A business empire, trading with the Romans maybe, but a religion? And what would be the point of being well-known after they were dead but which did nothing for them or their personal gain while they were alive?

And how could they plot and plan all of this without anyone else knowing? It was a very small community they lived in and everyone knew everyone else; they’d all have had to be in on the hoax. But why? What would the people have expected to get out of it? I might be wrong, but I don’t think anyone had yet invented the word “pilgrimage” and so they couldn’t possibly have envisaged that once Jesus became famous, people would come to see him in their thousands and everyone could open hotels and restaurants and souvenir shops(!).

And what about Our Lord’s miracles? It might have been possible to fake a few of them right there in Nazareth if everyone was in on it, but we know from the gospel

accounts that Jesus didn't (wasn't able to) work miracles in his hometown but rather that it was over a large area everywhere else that he healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead.

If, indeed, everything had been a hoax (which, of course, it wasn't!), the apostles' plans were woefully useless given that before achieving anything they might have hoped for, Jesus was arrested and put to death and they were in fear for their own lives – and that, as St John Chrysostom says, would have been the end of it. The Pharisee, Gamaliel, wisely stated before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5 v 34-39 in full): “If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God.” But, of course, it didn't end, it was just the beginning because of Our Lord's resurrection from the dead (which they certainly couldn't have faked) and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (which, if not genuine, would have done nothing to allay their fears in the way the Spirit did). Even then, almost every one of the apostles was eventually martyred for the Faith – again hardly a recipe for earthly success – and, while now internationally known as saints of the church, not one of them ever enjoyed fame or fortune in their lifetime. And so again we ask: what was the point if it *was* all a fabrication?

If anymore proof were needed, let's move on to St Paul. Initially he didn't even know the apostles, as far as he was concerned Jesus was dead, and his one mission in life as a zealous Pharisee was to persecute the followers of Christ. It appears he was very good at it and the last thing he would ever have done was to concoct a wild story about an encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus – an encounter witnessed by his travelling companions don't forget – and his own conversion to Christianity. Writing some time later to the Christian church in Thessalonika, Paul says: “We have not taken to preaching because we are deluded, or immoral, or trying to deceive anyone; it was God who decided that we were fit to be entrusted with the Good News.” “You know very well that never at any time have our speeches been simply flattery, or a cover for trying to get money; nor have we ever looked for any special honour from men...” (1Thess 2 v 3-6) If he had also been part of a massive hoax, it hardly did him any good in his lifetime as we see from his second letter to the Corinthians (11 v 24 -28) and, like the apostles, he was also eventually martyred. The point, again, is that there is no other explanation for what happened in Paul's life other than that God was at work – he wouldn't have made up a story like that.

In light of all of this, how could anyone doubt the validity of the gospel account, or suspect the apostles of a colossal fraud. How could they have accomplished it? Why would they have decided to do it? What would they have gained by it? And

is it even remotely likely that billions of Christians over the next two thousand years would all fall victim to the hoax?

The thought also occurs that even if everything is a hoax, what have we got to lose? – we’ll never know. If there is no God, we’ll never know. It’s not as if we’ll be sitting there (dead) thinking, “What a swizz. All that time and there never was a God”! We won’t be thinking anything because, well, we’ll be dead. In the meantime, because of our faith, we will be living much better lives than perhaps we might if we didn’t believe. This can only make our life and our world that much better by virtue of the fact that we are trying to live as God wants. And we do this, also, because we have an eye to eternal life and the fact that we will one day be judged on the quality of our earthly life. We may sometimes find ourselves tempted to envy those with no such concerns, no such restraints on living the so-called “good life”, but we must counter those temptations with the certain knowledge that there is indeed a God and that, in due course, such people will have to pay the price unless they get their acts together pretty quickly. Imagine their surprise when they discover that *they* were wrong and there *is* a God after all... but by then it will be too late. The *good life* we try to live is according to God’s definition, the God we most surely believe in, the God of our lives.

This brings us to an essential point regarding faith. While there is nothing wrong with asking questions or even intellectually working through aspects of our faith, we should always remember that faith doesn’t depend on logic and proofs. Faith is a grace from God. “What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe because of the authority of God himself who reveals them.” (para 156 of the Catechism) “Faith is *certain*. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie.” (para 157)

Indeed it is precisely when things don’t make intellectual sense that we then find ourselves drawing on God’s gift of faith, believing simply because he asks us to. It’s the old story about the man who falls off the edge of a cliff and as he is falling he manages to grab hold of the branch of a tree growing out of the cliff face. As he is hanging there between earth and sky, he desperately prays to God to save him and a voice comes from heaven saying, “OK, but first you have to let go.” Very often that is how faith is for us – we have to let go of the firm and the secure and the certain and be willing to accept what God asks simply because he asks. And as we grow in our faith, we also grow in our knowledge of God because the two are inextricably linked.

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