

FAITH AS DANCE

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I wish to begin by asking a question, which may have occurred to you to ask, or possibly not at all. The question is, Do all the details in the Bible, and religious writings, matter equally, or are some details more important than others? If you imagined a list of details from the Bible, some of them very well known, like Noah's ark, Moses' burning bush, Mary putting the child Jesus to sleep in the manger, Pilate at Jesus' trial, and Paul on the road to Damascus, are they more important than the tongs which lifted the coals in Isaiah's vision, or the name of the man who was pushed into carrying Christ's cross on the way to Calvary, or the vision or dream which led to Paul crossing the Aegean Sea to preach in Macedonia? I suspect most of us would say that some details are more important than others.

But I wonder if there is a danger in classifying details as more or less important. The danger is similar to that of reducing a great piece of writing to a short summary. How far can you

take the Readers' Digest Condensed Books line and apply it to the reduction of any book or piece of writing to a short summary?

We might well accept that the plays of Shakespeare are not to be reduced to a few lines of summary; but in conversation with people over many years I rather think that in matters of faith, religion, Christianity, much the same process is not only practised, but even cherished and promoted. Such an attitude would be most crudely expressed in people saying, 'I don't read the Bible because I don't believe in God' whereas statements of belief may here be put at the wrong end of the process, at the beginning, replacing exposure to the detail, rather than at the end, taking into account a full exposure to the details.

Did Jesus not tell stories? Did Jesus make statements of belief or doctrine?

Some years ago a group of young ministers leaving the study of Divinity at university asked their professors to suggest books which would be helpful to them as they entered the practice of full time ministry. All but one of the professors made a list of books they thought might be useful, works of scholarship in their areas of teaching; but the remaining

professor gave as his suggested reading for new ministers a list composed entirely of novels. Without going into the details of which novels he had chosen, I would applaud the point behind his choice, that fiction is deeply important in the development of thought and in understanding human experience and emotion.

In retirement I have been reading books I have had on my shelves for years, some of them read before, others possibly not. I took three such books to the Western Isles this summer, and discovered not only that I greatly enjoyed the books but that the stories were set in three locations with which I had a certain familiarity, and thus could more clearly imagine the development of the stories, in Burgundy, New York City, and Kenya respectively. Of course you don't need to have been where a novel is located, but that is not the only point of connection in relating to the story – relationships and the ups and downs of living can offer such links and enhance the experience of entering into the story.

Among the authors I have been re-reading is Anita Brookner, and in her 'Falling Slowly' I noted this sentence, which had for me a bearing on the details of the Bible and religion with which I began. 'Miriam now sensed that she was united with her sister as never before, imagined her reactions to those tiny incidents which sometimes furnish a life more readily

and more accessibly than major events, birth, marriage, even death.'

Sometimes the details fit into the picture without drawing attention to themselves. Sometimes a detail will achieve prominence for one reader or observer, but not for the whole company of observers. Few stories captivated my attention than the news item, some years ago, about an orphan elephant in East Africa who learned to make the noise of a delivery lorry, so accurately that the staff rushed out, as the delivery was late; but no truck appeared, and after observing the baby elephant and consulting specialists they could reach no explanation for the action, except that the orphan was making the noise of a truck just for fun and for no other reason.

The two lessons we have heard both contain the element of dance. King David is pictured dancing to God as the ark of the covenant, the sacred box of the ten commandments, is carried to the holy citadel of Jerusalem; and the daughter of Herodias, subsequently known as Salome, danced before Herod the tetrarch and pleased him and his guests, also through the centuries quickening the imagination of Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss, so that she is now given a name and presented as dancing erotically, shedding seven veils, details not described in the Bible but not denied there either.

Dances have been part of Christian ceremonies over the centuries, and we may think of processions in Spanish streets. Burns' Holy Fair combined the Lord's Supper with merriment and social gathering and a carnival spirit. It is recorded that Holy Communion in Dunvegan, Skye, round about 1780 was carried out in the open, in a hollow near the church, and after the service the tables were cleared and fiddles brought out, and there followed a dance. We know that within twenty or thirty years the mood had changed, and the fiddles confiscated and burned, but the legacy was not forgotten. Pipers at funerals were banned as part of the same movement in the nineteenth century, but they have returned.

Christian worship has never been confined to a meeting lasting sixty minutes on a Sunday morning; but for many of us that is what we are offered, and what we expect. I dare say it suits us; but there is surely something to be said for a variety of different sorts of gathering, with different lengths and character, expressing and responding to different needs and the changing elements of the Christian Year. I would maintain that doing things with water, bread and wine is more fundamental to Christian worship than speaking true doctrine or reasonable belief.

I recently read an account of events which took place in Rouen in France on the 1st and 2nd of October, 1550, to

celebrate French involvement in South America. 'The King, his gentlemen, ambassadors from all over Europe, the clergy, and a significant number of humanists and magistrates occupied the best seats to witness this extraordinary spectacle worthy of the world expositions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To reproduce Brazilian exoticism, a strip of land along the Seine river had been planted with several species of trees and bushes, such as 'broom, juniper and box' to create a dense copse. The organizers of this event – mainly rich ship-owners in Rouen – went so far as to paint the trunks of the trees to whose top box branches had been fastened, "representing fairly closely the natural appearance of the leaves of trees in Brazil." Other bushes were loaded with fruits of various colours, imitating almost perfectly the natural appearance of South American forests. A bit of wild nature had been reconstructed on the banks of the Seine.

Huts had been built at each end of the area, their roofs covered with reeds and leaves, "fortified with a surrounding palisade instead of a rampart." Exotic birds flew over the heads of the astonished spectators, marmots, tamarins, and various other animals that were unknown in Europe. Here and there, throughout the area, as many as three hundred men, completely naked, tanned and bristling, were rushing about, made up and equipped

in the manner of the savages of America. 'Battles' were enacted 'between two tribes.' (from Philippe Desan, Life of Montaigne, translated from French)

I was much taken by that spectacle of five hundred years ago. People need both bread and circuses.

I wonder if many people on the fringe of the church think of the details of the Bible and church tradition as secondary to the primary thing, which is belief in something basic and central. I wonder if we could encourage the matter to be in the other direction, that inhabiting the story is the fundamental thing, and statements of belief can look after themselves, if they are needed.