

Recent surveys of religious belief across the UK suggest that belief in life after death is actually growing. More people now believe in an after-life than they did 10 years ago. But within the same time frame fewer and fewer people actually believe in God. For an increasing number of people Heaven has very little to do with anything or anybody we might call 'God'. Heaven, for many people, has just become a nice place where we will all meet up, a kind of perfect version of our life on earth.

Now last Sunday I noted that when the disciple finally entered the tomb '*he saw and believed*'. What was it that he *saw and believed*? It certainly wasn't the risen Christ that he saw, not, that is, if we abide by the gospel account that he himself subsequently wrote. All that he saw with his physical eye was an empty tomb, *the linen cloths on the ground, and also the cloth that had been on his head....rolled up in a place all by itself*.

Thomas, on the other hand, does get to see the Risen Christ. In fact, not only does he get to see the risen Christ, he gets to place his fingers in his wounded hands, and his hand into his wounded side. And he does his seeing and believing by falling to his knees and saying '*My Lord and my God*'. This is what Easter is about. This is what Christianity is about. This is what heaven is about.

There is nothing very revolutionary about belief in life after death, and even in belief in people ascending up to heaven. Muslims believe all that stuff too. The majority of our non-Christian friends seem to believe it. What **is** revolutionary is the belief that a particular man who was crucified under Pontius Pilate is in fact our Lord and our God, the belief that the maker and the creator of the universe has taken upon Himself all the pains of human rejection and death, the belief that our poor suffering feeble bodies can become the vehicle for the most amazing glory and love.

Yes, we will meet our loved ones in Heaven, but only because first of all we will have met Christ our Saviour, our Lord and our God. This is the real message of divine mercy. Nobody has some kind of divine right to get to heaven. We don't approach the pearly gates with a kit bag of brownie points. We come to the pearly gates pleading for mercy and dependent upon the prayers of both the saints in heaven and the Church on earth.

For these pearly gates to be swung open is to experience the fullness of the resurrection, to be completely joined to Christ by the Holy Spirit, for all our human loves to be fulfilled and consummated in that one searing love that God has for each one of us.

May we, and all the faithful departed know this mercy. May we know that searing love. May we know Jesus to be our Lord and God, the Living One, the First and the Last. May we hear Him say '*Do not be afraid. It is I.*'