

I

I BELIEVE IN GOD (1)

MORE AND MORE, the longer I stay here, and the longer some of you stay here, do I find it difficult to preach to you. At Oxford, where the ordinary undergraduate only lasted three years, it was quite simple, because at the end of three years I started preaching the same sermons over again. But here it's different. If you come to think of it, it's a dreadful thing to reflect about—we have been three years here together; and when I look round I still see a lot of the same old faces, that is, rather older faces, but still recognizably the same. And whereas I know you remember very little of what I say to you in sermons, I am quite confident you would spot it if I started preaching the same sermons over again; none of you would have any idea what I was going to say next, but there would be a general groan of "We've had that one before." So, as it's difficult to go on from one Sunday to the next thinking up a new subject to preach about, I am going to start this year by launching out on a course, and a course which will see us through more than a month of Sundays. I'm going to give you an exposition, clause by clause, of the Apostles' Creed; that is, the *Credo* which we learn in our Catechism, not the longer and more difficult one which is said at Mass. That will mean, I am afraid, something more

like an instruction than a sermon properly so called. And you will be inclined to complain, perhaps, that it is too much like lessons, and you get quite enough lessons as it is in the course of the week. But I thought if we managed to make these instructions fairly chatty and informal, it won't matter so much.

Well, we are starting off this afternoon with "I believe in God"; that ought to last us for the length of a whole sermon, even if we cut it down as much as we can. Let me direct your attention first of all to the use of the word "I." Surely that's curious, if you come to think of it? Surely saying the *Credo* ought to be a tremendous congregational act, uniting us in a common profession of faith, and surely at that rate it ought to start "WE believe?" But it doesn't, you see, ever take that form. Go out to Lourdes, and watch from the top of the slope tens of thousands of candles flickering there below, in the torch-light procession. So many of them, they don't look like separate candles; it is just a vast haze of light. And the people who carry them are singing *Credo*; *Credo*, not *Credimus*. And so it is at Mass.¹ If you watch the *Gloria*, it is *we* all through, *Laudamus te, Benedicimus te, Adoramus te, Glorificamus te*, and so on; we lose ourselves in a crowd when we are singing the *Gloria*. But when we sing the *Credo*, we are not meant to lose ourselves in a crowd. Every clause of it is the expression of my opinion, for which I am personally responsible. Just so with the *Confiteor*; it is always *Confiteor* we say, not *Confitemur*, even when we are saying it together. Why? Because my sins are my sins, and your sins are your sins; each of us is individually responsible. So it is with the *Credo*; each of us, in lonely isolation,

makes himself or herself responsible for that tremendous statement, "I believe in God."

I expect you will think I have been making too much of that, and rather wasting time over a minor point. Believe me, it isn't so. The reason why I want to give you this course of sermons on the *Credo* is because I want each of you to say it intelligently, thinking what you are saying, meaning what you are saying, not just copying the girl next you, not just reciting a rigmarole of words which must be all right, of course, or the Church wouldn't make you say it. No, you are to say the *Credo* as an expression of your own individual point of view, giving it the full homage of your intellect, prepared to explain it to other people; if necessary, to argue it with other people. I, Mary Smith, believe in God.

"I believe"—we have often been told that we ought to be proud of our faith. But there's a tendency and a temptation for us, on the contrary, to be ashamed of our faith when we are living among people who don't agree with us; we don't like the idea of believing so much more than they do. Because, after all, the person who is ready to believe anything you tell her—on the first of April, for example—is a person who doesn't command your respect. I don't say we should go so far as to call such a person a mug, because that wouldn't be a ladylike word to use, but we think of her as a mug.² Credulity—by which I mean the quality of being a mug—is a weakness in a human character; and at the back of our minds, I think, we have always got the idea that the less you believe the more clever and the more enlightened you must be.

Well, of course that comes from looking at the thing in quite the wrong way. The difference between being a credulous person (or mug) and being a sensible person isn't a question of HOW MANY things you believe; it's a question of whether you believe the RIGHT things; that is to say, whether you demand the right kind of evidence before you believe a thing or not. I mean, if you take a perfectly open question like the Loch Ness Monster: it's foolish to believe a story of that kind merely because you've seen an article in a picture paper about it, which would notoriously say anything. On the other hand, if you've been about in that part of the world and met various people whom you regard as sensible, truthful people, who say they've seen the thing, then it is foolish NOT to believe in it.

No, don't let's be got down just because we come across other people who haven't as much belief as we have. Very likely they haven't come across the evidences for the Christian religion as we have. Or perhaps they have come across them and not been able to estimate them at their true worth; in that case, it is they who are the mugs, not we. Of all the silly things on which the modern world prides itself, the silliest, I think, is its habit of not believing in things. Nothing is easier than not believing in things.

Anyhow, you believe. You believe, because you regard the Catholic Church as a trustworthy source of information. We shall get on to that subject, towards the end of the *Credo*, if we live long enough, so we won't stop over it here. But it's worthwhile observing that not all the articles in the *Credo* have to be believed on the authority of the Church. The very subject we are discussing this afternoon (if we find

we have time enough to discuss it), the existence of God, isn't a belief that depends merely on the authority of the Church. The existence of God can be proved by the use of reason.

And again, the statement that Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate isn't a belief which depends on the authority of the Church. All sorts of authorities, Josephus for example, who wasn't a Christian but a Jew, assure us that a man called Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea under the emperor Tiberius. And there's nothing at all improbable about a particular Galilean being crucified about that time. Some thirty years before, two-thousand Galileans were crucified by the orders of the Roman governor by one edict. It's simply a matter of history, and there is no reason to doubt it.

"But," you say, "if these things are quite obviously true; as a matter of philosophy or as a matter of history, why should I have to get up and assert my belief that they are true? Surely everybody, Christian or not, must believe in them." Well, that's the curious thing, there are quite a lot of perfectly intelligent people going about who don't really *believe* in these things. If you ask them whether they believe God exists, they will say, "Oh, yes, I suppose so." If you ask them whether Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate, they will say, "Yes, the evidence for that seems quite conclusive." But there the thing stops, they don't do anything about it. They are unable to deny these truths, but these truths don't form part of the framework of their minds. To *believe* a thing, in any sense worth the name, means something much more than merely not denying it. It means focusing your mind on it, letting it haunt your imagination, caring,

and caring desperately, whether it is true or not. Put it in this way. If somebody says to you, "Of course, your own country's rule in the Colonies is every bit as brutal as German rule in Poland," you don't reply, "Oh, really? I dare say it is." You care furiously about a statement like that. You may not have the facts at your fingers' ends, but you are not going to let a statement like that pass without examination. It would alter your whole idea of what the world is like if you thought a statement like that could be true. And it has, or it ought to have, the same sort of effect, if somebody tells you that some article of the Christian creed isn't true. The same sort of effect, only much worse. Because if you thought *that*, it wouldn't merely alter your whole idea of what the world was like; it would alter your whole idea about this world and the next, about what life means and why we human beings have been put into the world at all. If you really *believe* a thing, it becomes part of the make-up of your mind; it lends coherence to your thought, colour to your imagination, leverage to your will. It *matters* enormously; to lose your belief would dislocate your whole life. That is what we mean, among other things, when we say the *Credo*.

But at the same time, we mustn't imagine, we mustn't for a moment imagine, that we haven't got to *think* about our faith, that we have done our duty as Catholics if we simply shout about the faith, instead of thinking about it. That is a notion which is widely current outside the Church, and I'm sorry to say that I think we Catholics are partly to blame for giving that impression. I mean, you will come across non-Catholics who will say, "How nice it must be to be a Catholic, and not have to think about one's religion!"

To have the whole thing done for one, just be told by the Church what one is to believe and what one isn't to believe, and no more worry about it!" The odd thing is that people who talk like that are really quite sincere about it; they do genuinely think that is the Catholic attitude, and in a way they rather envy us. Everybody likes avoiding a job of work, and especially a job of intellectual work. And, you know, I think there is a temptation for us Catholics to play up to that lead, and to sham stupid, as it were, when we find ourselves in the middle of a religious discussion. You might find yourself, for example, among a set of people who were discussing whether the soul is or is not immortal, whether there is or is not a life beyond the grave. And your simplest plan, if somebody turns to you and asks what you think about it, is to say, "Well, you see, I'm a Catholic, and the Catholic Church teaches me that there is a future life, so of course I've got to believe it." And that's true; but it's not the whole truth. There are perfectly good grounds on which you can tackle a person who says the soul is destroyed at death; not perhaps so as to convince him of the contrary, but at least to show him that he can't prove his case. And those grounds you, as a Catholic, ought to know; not for your own sake so much as for the sake of other people. You want to be able to help them in their difficulties, not just sit by with a superior air and congratulate yourself on being better off than they are, as if you were a person who had saved up your sweet ration³ and they hadn't saved up theirs.

I know you think all this sounds very remote and improbable, but it won't seem like that in a few years' time. It may easily happen, for example, that you'll

fall in love with somebody who isn't a Catholic and want to marry him. I very much hope that that won't happen; if only because I know from experience that there are a lot of Catholic young men going about who are badly in need of marrying Catholic wives. But on the law of averages the thing is pretty likely to happen, and if it does, you will want the young man to get converted. And he will want to get converted, because he will think you are rather a nice kind of person, and it must have been a rather nice religion that produced a person like that. Now, if he gets the impression that your faith is merely a matter of shutting your eyes and believing things are true just because you want them to be true, it will have a bad effect on him. Either it will put him off the Church, because that way of going about it doesn't seem to him to be honest. Or he will go and get instructed by a priest, and say "Splendid! That's absolutely all right by me" to everything the priest tells him, without really finding out what it's all about and digesting what he's told; and that means another half-baked convert. Whereas, if he gets the idea that you mean what you say when you say (for example) "I believe in God," that you have really formed your mind on the subject and faced the difficulties and made the doctrine your own, then he will have more respect for your religion and, in the long run, more respect for you.

There, I knew what would happen. We haven't left time to talk about the subject I meant to talk about this afternoon, which was, if you remember, that of belief in God. But, all the same, I don't think we shall have been wasting our time if I've got you to see that believing a thing doesn't merely mean admitting its

truth because you can't see your way to denying it. Believing a thing (in the theological sense) means embracing it as something you are going to live by. And on the other hand, believing a thing does mean knowing what you are talking about, using your brains over it, not merely shouting it out as a slogan. Belief isn't just a matter of the intellect, isn't just a matter of the will; it is an activity of the whole man.