

Homily for The Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

As we return to Ordinary Time, we begin with the call of the first disciples. The disciples listen to the voice of Jesus, and they respond by following him; this mirrors the first reading where the boy Samuel hears the voice of God calling out to him in the Temple, and after a bit of misunderstanding he understands what is going on, and he responds just as the disciples do. These are two stories of very direct encounters between man and God, and this sense of encounter is heightened in the gospel where John says that John the Baptist 'stared hard' at Jesus, and later on that Jesus 'looked hard' at Peter: these are very direct and intense meetings, which leave the new followers of Christ changed for ever. In many different ways, and in countless different situations, these encounters have been repeated throughout history. God reaches out to his people.

I thought this might be a good opportunity to reflect on the atheist bus adverts that I saw in London last week. You probably read about the posters that now appear on a number of buses saying "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life". When I saw one on a bus I found myself thinking that I should have been filled with indignation that someone could launch such a brazen attack on religious faith, but in fact I was really struck by how clumsy and inept the slogan seemed to be. All the same, it gives us the chance for a little foray into apologetics.

First of all there is that strange word 'probably'. I realise that this word appears in order not to fall foul of advertising rules, but all the same it seems an odd thing for an atheist to say. In the past atheists have always said they were sure there was no God, now they say there is probably no God. Have they changed their minds - are they now accepting they might be wrong, or are they still certain, in which case even they don't believe the advert they themselves have placed. If they are unsure, how unsure are they - how probable is probably? Are they 99% sure there is no God, or are they only 51% sure? And what difference does probably make to people? Even if I agreed that there is probably no God (which I don't), it would be wise to act as if there was one. I might take a revolver, and load a bullet into two of the cylinders leaving the other four empty: I could then place it against my head and pull the trigger, knowing that I

probably wouldn't blow my brains out. I could do that, but it would be wise to act as if the chamber next to the hammer contained a bullet, even if in fact it didn't. When I drive home and come to a give way sign on the road, I know that there are seldom any cars coming; I could just drive straight out and I probably wouldn't crash, but it would be wise for me to act as if a car is coming every time, and stop. This is because probability isn't the whole of the story. Sometimes the benefits of acting in a particular way are so great (not blowing my brains out; not crashing the car; living life to the full in accordance with the only really comprehensive and credible vision of what life is all about) that it is worth acting in that way whatever probability may say. [This is a slightly amended version of the argument sometimes referred to as Pascal's wager.]

Then again, even if atheists only say there is probably no God, how can they be even that sure? I could understand someone saying that they didn't like the look of our Christian God and deciding to reject him. I would disagree with them, and I would question whether they have really understood him, but I would respect their decision; but how can you even think there is probably no God at all? A long time ago, when I was at school, I used to study maths. I remember being given complicated calculations to look at, and being asked to find what mistakes, if any, there were within them. This was a good exercise, because I could only find the mistake if I understood everything that was being done in the calculation. If there was some idea that I didn't understand, I could not tell if it was right or wrong. I speak a little bit of Italian, but only a little bit. If you show me a written sentence I might think there was something odd about it, I might think there was a mistake in the grammar, but I probably wouldn't be sure, because it may be that instead of being wrong, it is just some use of words that I don't know about. You can only spot the mistake when you know everything that there is to know - either about the language, or about the maths, or whatever. In the same way, to be sure there is no God you would have to know everything there is to know about every possible God; even to say there is probably no God you would have to know a great deal about lots of possible Gods. But there are two problems here. In the first place, atheists often seem to know very little about the God they choose to reject. But more importantly, before you can reject any idea of God, you must know all there is to know about Him. Otherwise, the God you are

rejecting may just be your own misunderstanding. But the nature of God is that we cannot know everything about Him - if I could understand everything about God, that would mean God was smaller than my mind, and if God was smaller than my mind he would not be God. This is the fatal flaw with atheism: God is by definition beyond our understanding, so to reject God is to reject something that we only partly understand, and that in itself does not make sense. So, it appears that atheism is neither rational nor logical

OK, my brain is beginning to hurt a bit. I can't leave the slogan without a word about 'stop worrying and enjoy your life'. The implication is that believing in God makes you worry more, and enjoy yourself less. But this is nonsense. People who believe in God actually worry less - because we know that, fundamentally, all will be well. We have something to hope for. I have put a link on the newsletter to a video on the internet that I recommend everyone should see: it shows how a family are coming to terms with terrible tragedy, and what helps them is faith. If you look at the lives of the saints, who by definition are the people whose lives are closest to God, you will see that two of the characteristics of their lives are that they do not worry, and that they are happy. People of faith have a clear and definite ideal of what life is all about. Living life to the full is not an atheist idea, but a religious one. Jesus says "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10.10); St. Irenaeus says "The glory of God is man fully alive". Perhaps the writers of the bus slogan never read Hilaire Belloc's wonderful words: "*Wherever the Catholic Sun doth shine, there's dancing, laughter and good red wine*". As Christians we have a real insight into what life is all about, and the more we live life as it is meant to be lived, the more we enjoy it. In fact the bus slogan offers something much less appealing. Enjoyment is something that comes as a by-product of living life well you cannot create enjoyment; if you set out to enjoy life, it will always escape you. Putting myself, rather than God, at the centre of my life leads to misery where there should be happiness; it leads to worry where there should be hope, and to slavery where there should be freedom.