

TESTIMONY OF STEPHEN SHERIDAN – FEBRUARY 2020

My name is Stephen Sheridan, I am 56 years old, and back in January 2018 I returned to Mass for the first time in 40 years and Father Paul thought it might be interesting for me to explain why. I was christened a Catholic, but my parents, despite professing their faith, never took me to Mass unless it was associated with school and I found those boring and uninspiring, as was the compulsory CofE school chapel.

As a teenager I was an agnostic, but became more atheistic as I grew older. This grew stronger after September 11th 2001, when there was a big outpouring of anger against religion in general, not just Islam. I became very keen on atheist writings such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* and Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*. And yet in all this atheistic certainty, I found problems.

The first problem was the big atheist thinkers came across as very militant in their views, arrogant and often quite rude and disrespectful towards kind, caring people of faith. Ironically Richard Dawkins has the same kind of intensity as a religious fanatic as if he is a crusader for atheism. I asked myself if the atheist arguments are so strong, why do so many leading atheists have to be so rude about people of faith.

The second problem is that even if atheism is correct, then it still doesn't answer the most important philosophical question of how to live a good life, nor does it explain why we should behave morally. Many atheists claim we should behave well towards each other, simply because humans do better when we co-operate as a group; but this just means that the only reason to behave well is self-interest and that implies there is no real morality. This just doesn't make sense as we see in our lives that most humans have an instinctive knowledge of right and wrong. If they didn't there would never be a constant yearning in humanity for justice and freedom.

My mental struggle on how to define a moral life became more intense as my daughter grew older. As a parent, one has a huge responsibility in a child's upbringing. Just repeating that "some people believe this" and "some people believe that" wasn't very helpful, especially when she would say "yes Daddy, but what do you believe?". "Er well," I would reply. "I think we should do to others as we would like others to do to us." And then I hoped that she would not ask me why I believed that or point out that the line was straight from Jesus.

As part of this mental struggle I read a lot about different philosophies and religions and I ended up with the ancient Greek and Roman philosophy of stoicism, which is about focusing on giving thanks for what pleasure you have had or are having and not to be overcome with any sense of loss or resentment. But useful though stoicism is, as a way of coping with the difficulties of life, it still doesn't explain why you should behave morally.

So there I was at the start of 2018, at a stressful period of my life, when one Sunday morning I decided I needed to go to Church in Hartley Wintney (where I live) as my Mum, my then surviving parent and sadly in a care home with many ailments, had stated in her will that she wanted a Catholic Mass; so I needed to have a chat with a priest about arranging it. At that service, my first for 40 years, the priest explained in his homily one of the most difficult passages I had found in the Bible, that of Abraham being about to sacrifice his son Isaac. No Christian I had questioned on this story before had ever explained why Abraham never challenges God's apparently terrible command. The comedians Mitchell and Webb have even made a sketch about it, where God keeps saying "Are you really sure you're not concerned about what I'm asking you to do?"

Now I was finally given the explanation I had been looking for. God never intended for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, because as Father Paul has recently pointed out to me, they encounter a lamb for that purpose on the way. What God was saying was "think how much you love your son and think how much I love my son; and yet I am willing to let him endure suffering pain and death to redeem you and your children". The lamb which God provides as a substitute for Isaac is like Jesus – that Lamb of God we speak of before Communion and see in so many symbols.

So the excitement of that revelation started me on the path of going to Mass again. I found huge comfort in prayer and the time to think and I started to find illumination in the readings and the homilies - something I had never found 4 decades ago.

Since my Mum was in a care home in Newnham I was passed over to Father Paul and this Church in Hook. I was able to bring Mum in her wheelchair to such a lovely friendly reception from Father Paul and you the wonderfully kind

congregation. Father Paul was hugely inspirational in his kindness visiting Mum and with all the funeral arrangements when she passed away last August. Father Paul's kindness, humour and insight have been like a lantern guiding me down the road of my spiritual journey.

Now we all know what an amazing priest Father Paul is and I have thought he would be a great character in a TV comedy series, where the Vatican clones him and sends the clones around the place on urgent missions. Imagine hundreds of Father Pauls about the place – we would need a lot more cycle lanes for a start and of course everyone would keep mistaking one Father Paul for another Father Paul unless they started wearing numbered football shirts. Please don't start writing it though, I bagsie that, although I guess Father Paul and the Vatican would get the rights to the action figures.

So that's how I have a come back to the Church or actually have I just come to it properly for the first time? All that matters is that it is making me a more fulfilled, better behaved and, dare I say it, happier person. My wife and daughter have seen a dramatic change. I am less grumpy more engaged and more helpful – although there is much still do! And I have found more passion for charitable work and actions. So these are the practical upsides, but the mental ones are even greater. It is like an intellectual tap has suddenly been turned on and so much that didn't make sense, now does.

For instance, one crucial piece of understanding is the story of the Garden of Eden and the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The way I interpret it now is it is all about humans gaining consciousness, something that animals do not have. Before gaining consciousness Adam and Eve were outside of good and evil actions, just like the animals, but when they acquired consciousness they became aware that their actions have a moral impact and they gained awareness that by their disobedience of God's commands they had committed sin.

The Bible says that humans were made in God's image and I think that that image is consciousness. But the image is of course an imperfect copy of God's, so while we have consciousness like God, we also have the capacity to sin and do evil. The good news is that God forgives us our imperfections and is prepared to sacrifice himself, to suffer just like us in order to redeem us. God is Consciousness and God is Love and that is a very comforting thought.

Thank you for your patience listening to this and so much thanks to Father Paul for encouraging me to share this with you. With Father Paul's permission, I have left some printed sheets in the porch with some book and YouTube references that I have found interesting on this spiritual journey. Thank you and God bless.