

Why Believe?

As many of you will know I grew up on the Isle of Wight. In those days there were two Methodist Circuits; East Wight and West Wight – with what seemed like an ‘iron-curtain’ between them! East Cowes, my home, had a resident minister who also oversaw the two Wootton churches and those in Arreton and Merstone. Ironically the East Cowes Section was part of the 28 church strong West Wight Circuit.

Despite the apparent lack of contact there were two occasions a year when the young people of the two Circuits got together for a residential weekend, based at one of the larger church premises. These weekends often had input from nationally known Methodist figures.

Being Methodists, a considerable amount of our free time was spent around a piano - singing hymns! It was not uncommon for one in particular to become the favourite for the weekend and I remember when the hymn was ‘Blessed Assurance’.

We must have sung it the best part of a dozen times already and just as it was coming to a further conclusion, one of the weekend participants walked up to the ‘choir’ – wearing a raincoat; carrying a briefcase and a rolled umbrella. As we finished singing he said “Good evening, I represent the ‘Blessed Assurance’ Company”!

The ‘Blessed Assurance’ Company – why do we take out Assurance or Insurance? It may be to guarantee a ‘liveable’ sum of money in the event of future illness or injury. If we drive, we have to be insured in case there is an accident. We may take out household or appliance insurance in case of problems. We need to insure pets in case there are unexpected veterinary bills.

Move on some years and there is an evening concert at Portsmouth Guildhall given by the BSO. A group of people outside the building are distributing pamphlets to the arriving audience – one is thrust into my hand. The front page, printed in blue I remember, showed a set of traffic lights with the legend, “Stop, are you ready to meet God?” Over the next few pages it put the “fear of God” into any reader! There was a distinct message that one should believe in case something catastrophic happened that led to facing God at that moment. One should have good Insurance to avoid being ‘lost’.

In contrast to this I have always loved the hymn attributed to Francis Xavier in the 16th Century: “*O Deus ego amo Te.*” We find it, translated by Edward Caswall, in both MHB (446) and H&P (171 – with some textual alterations).

My God, I love Thee – not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet because who love Thee not
Are lost eternally.

There seems to be a clear statement - for Francis Xavier, his love of God was not based on any kind of ‘Insurance Policy’. In the next two verses he sets out the reasons why he loves the Lord:

Thou, O my Jesus, Thou didst me	And griefs and torments numberless,
Upon the Cross embrace;	And sweat of agony,
For me didst bear the nails and spear,	And death itself – and all for me,
And manifold disgrace;	Who was Thine enemy.

These two verses remind us of John, writing his first letter to the Christian Churches.

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

The final three verses of the hymn amplify the words found in that letter.

Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ,	Not with the hope of gaining aught;
Should I not love Thee well?	Not seeking a reward;
Not for the sake of winning heaven,	But as Thyself has loved me,
Or of escaping hell;	O ever-loving Lord.

E’en so I love Thee, and will love,
And in Thy praise will sing;
Because Thou art my loving God
And my eternal King.

Why Believe? - Not, I hope, as any form of insurance policy; but in response to the love of God shown to us in Jesus.

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