

‘If you were arrested and charged with the offence of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?’ I cannot remember when or where I first read that quotation, but I used it occasionally in preaching when I was a working as a prison chaplain. It was familiar language to prisoners, who had all been arrested, charged and convicted for crime. Sometimes I added a story I had picked up from somewhere about an imaginary court case where a respectable couple have been charged with the subversive offence of being Christians in a world (not exactly unusual in the real world), where secularism, atheism, were now the official ‘religion’ of the ruling party and the state and had become the statutory doctrines for all ‘loyal citizens.’ In the story, the defence lawyer attempts to convince the court that his clients cannot be accused of being Christians. Although they sometimes liked to take part in the forbidden ancient rituals on Sundays, such practices have absolutely no effect on the rest of their lives; their behaviour, attitudes and values are the same as the rest of the compliant population. Their activities and lifestyle are in no way influenced by the founder of Christianity. The verdict of the jury is left to our imagination, but the question, the charge, poses a challenge to any one of us. ‘If you were arrested and charged with the offence of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?’

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. It serves to remind us of the life we began when we were ‘Christianised,’ that is, when we were baptised, or for those of us baptised as infants, when we chose to claim for ourselves the baptismal faith once pledged for us by our parents and godparents. Baptism signalled the beginning of Jesus’ ministry; it symbolised the self-offering of his whole life to God, even to death.

From a spiritual point of view, baptism is the greatest thing that can happen to us. The American priest-scholar, Raymond Brown, once said, ‘The day when a person is baptised is more important than the day a person is ordained a priest or a bishop.’

For to be baptised is to be *Christ-ened*, to be made like Christ, to become one with him in his purpose and values, his love and service, his mission and destiny. Of course, it is not given to us automatically by being baptised. We have to learn to live by its intention, its promise, and that is a long term and continuous process. As the Second Vatican Council put it, ‘Baptism, of itself, is

only a beginning, a point of departure, but it is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ.' So when we are baptised, or when we make a mature, independent and voluntary affirmation of our baptism, we have not suddenly become all that it means to be Christian. We have rather joined an organisation of students or learners, which is what the word 'disciple' means. It is disciples or learners that Jesus called to follow him, and together become his community, his Church.

The task of Christian disciples, like all good students, is to be searching, enquiring, hungry, and dedicated to moving forward in the Christian faith journey. The Epiphany story of the Magi, the wise ones, searching for Christ is a good guide for us. They had to make a journey to find Jesus. When they found him, they were overjoyed and venerated him. Then they returned to their normal lives by a different road, signifying a new perspective and a changed life. When we have diligently searched for and found Jesus, we too have found a life that is different than it was before. As St Paul puts it, we have become a new creation.

We do not make this journey alone. It is always in the company of brothers and sisters who make up the Christian community. Christian faith can never be something purely private or personal. It is wholly community focused. Anyone who says they can be a Christian without regularly sharing in worship and fellowship with other Christians, has completely misunderstood what being Christian means.

Like the man who once went to visit the American evangelist, Dwight L Moody. He told him that he was a good Christian but saw no reason to go to church. They were sitting in front of a coal fire. Without responding verbally, Moody picked up the tongs and took one bright burning coal out of the fire and placed it on the hearth. Together with his questioner they watched the solitary coal gradually lose its heat and go cold. The point was made effectively without the need for words.

Of course, our individual commitment and contribution are vital for the well-being and success of the community. Individuals, diverse as we are, but moving ever forward in our faith and love and service to God and to one another, help to create and inspire a vibrant, healthy and holy Church

community, a community which has the potential to promote awe, respect and curiosity among those who are not yet its members. Mission begins and has most impact when Christian people are living authentic Christian lives.

On this feast of beginnings, the Baptism of the Lord, may we each and together recommit ourselves to the Christian life. In humility, let us also be thankful none of us are not yet the final version of Christian disciple. If we are open and committed to progressing in our journey of faith, God has so much more to give and to work in us, so enabling us truly to become the people who, through our baptism, God has called us to be.