

'If you were arrested and charged with the offence of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' I can't remember when or where I first read that striking quotation, but I occasionally used it in preaching when I was serving as a prison chaplain. It was familiar language to prisoners, who knew well what it was like to be arrested and convicted. I remember one prisoner being so inspired by that quotation that he went and made a poster of it and put it up on his wing notice board where the chapel services were advertised.

Today we are reminded of the life we began when we were 'Christianised,' that is, when we were baptised, or for a great many of us, when we chose to make our very own the baptismal faith once claimed for us by our parents and godparents. The baptism of Jesus calls us to reflect on the meaning of our own baptism. We share his baptism, but can we share what it meant for him? Baptism signalled the beginning of Jesus' ministry; it symbolised the self-offering in love of his whole life to God, even to death. When on one occasion two of his disciples requested special privileges in his future kingdom, he asked them, 'can you be baptised with my baptism? Can you drink my cup?' They failed to understand that he was speaking about the suffering he would endure in the cause of his kingdom.

From a spiritual point of view, baptism is the greatest thing that can happen to us. The saintly 13th century king of France, Louis IX, used to sign his name on official documents as Louis of Poissy. When one of his courtiers asked him why placed an apparently insignificant town after his name, he said, 'Poissy is where I was baptised. It is a more important place for me than Rheims where I was crowned. It is a greater thing for me to be a child of God than the ruler of a kingdom. On my death I shall lose my crown, but the life into which I was baptised I shall never lose.'

The spirit of those words was evident in the life of the late Queen Elizabeth II, and certainly expressed in the final ceremonies of her funeral in St George's chapel at Windsor Castle. She was buried simply as Elizabeth, a Christian. It was moving to see all the emblems of her status as a monarch removed from her coffin and placed on an altar. They did not accompany her to the grave.

To be baptised is to be *Christ-ened*, to be made like Christ, to become one with Christ in his purpose and values, his mission and destiny. Of course, it is not given to us automatically as a result of being baptised. We have to learn to live by its intention, its pledge, and that involves us in continuous process of conversion or transformation. So when we are baptised, or when we make a mature, independent and voluntary affirmation of our baptism, we have not suddenly become the finished product of Christian identity. We have rather joined an organisation of students or learners, which is what the word 'disciple' means – one living and learning under the discipline or instruction of a master or teacher. 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 diligent, searching, enquiring, hungry, and dedicated to moving forward on the Christian faith journey. Such resolve instils in us the vision of a higher, better, more complete life, drawing us ever onward in our pilgrimage of faith. It opens for us stronger and deeper possibilities in spirituality and service; it inspires courage, hope and humility. Such graces are not for the individual only, of course, but for the Christian community as a whole. But our individual commitment and contribution is vital for the well-being and success of the community.

I mentioned humility. I have to say that this virtue is not something many individuals are good at, even in the Church, yet as Christians it ought to be one of our highest qualities. In a former parish I came close to removing someone from my Confirmation course when she rather proudly stated that she did not speak to her next-door neighbour. We had to have a good talk about that. Because for a Christian, 'not speaking to someone' is not an option. We are all about forgiveness, reconciliation, healing. It might not always be reciprocated, but *our* door must always be open. Throughout my ministry I have often heard, usually second or third hand, about church members who have 'fallen out' with one another; they are 'not speaking,' perhaps because of some disagreement, mistake, misunderstanding, or even something more serious. To those people, I have said and will always say, for God's sake, for the sake of the Church, our mission, what we are about, and for your own spiritual wellbeing, get it sorted, seek forgiveness, apologise, even if you do not think you are to blame! It costs nothing but it can gain everything. Reconciliation, reaching out to the other

person, is vital if our Christian faith and identity is to have any real meaning or integrity.

Individuals, diverse as we are but wholly concerned for the welfare of the other, our neighbour, and not least our fellow Christian, help to create a vibrant, healthy, and holy Church community, a community which has the potential to promote respect and curiosity among those who are not yet its members. Christian mission has most impact when Christian people are living authentic Christian lives, individually and as a community.

The beginning of a new year is a traditional time for new resolutions. On this feast of beginnings, the Baptism of the Lord, may we each and together recommit ourselves to the Christian life. It is in putting ourselves more fully into God's hands that we can truly be formed into the people who, through our baptism, God has called us to be. Our most important task is to co-operate with God, to be faithful to Jesus Christ every day, to love one another without distinction, and to be always longing to grow in our discipleship, in the faith and life we are called to share with him.