Sunday August 9th 2020

Why I am a Christian: Part 6!

 Lord take my words and speak through them; take our thoughts and think through them; take our hearts and hold them in the palm of your hand.

  I suppose the easy answer to the question ‘Why I am a Christian?’ is simply ‘Because I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God ...’ But I think we all know that the answer for each of us is much more complicated than that.

So far in this series of summer reflections we have heard about the many different ways that our friends have found their ways to Christianity. What I find rather wonderful is that we all set out from very different starting points personally and geographically; some from little or no faith at all. And yet we have all arrived here at Christ Church today: some of us in person, and some of us virtually.

 I’ll let you into a little secret... it’s all part of God’s plan. I don’t know the full extent of God’s plan for me yet, and I certainly don’t know what his plan is for all of you. But I do know one thing with absolute certainty...He does have a plan for each one us. We may have to work at it though. For all of our lives. It started with our birth and it will end when we meet Him face to face in Heaven.

In the first reading today, St Peter reminds us that our faith is a precious gift that we have received from and through Jesus - but he reminds us that we have to work at it. Our faith and our Christianity are always a work in progress. St Peter promised to make every effort to help us to remember that if we keep the faith, there will be a warm welcome waiting for us in Heaven.

So...how many St Peter’s have **you** met on your faith journey? I know I’ve met a few - and after all the dramas we have experienced in recent months I think he gently nudged two of them - Mike and Eunice - to help him to deliver on his promise when they were discussing this Summer Series of Sermons! Perhaps some of us needed a little reminder that even in these strangest of times, we just need to keep the faith.

 My own Christian story begins in Birmingham in my Irish Roman Catholic family. There were only 5 of us, not 7 like George’s family (!) and my parents made sure that their 5 children were all baptised before we were 6 weeks old; we attended Catholic primary schools where we studied our catechism every single day until we were word perfect... at least on the early chapters. It got a bit hard after that....370 rules proved to be too much for most of us. Terry still has his little red book so I have been dipping into it this week to remind myself about rules long forgotten!

 (Show this)

 We made our first confession and Holy Communion when we were 7 and our Confirmation by the time we went to Secondary school. We went to Mass and Holy Communion every Sunday where I just loved the incense.... although as a girl I was never allowed to swing that thuruble! We trotted off to confession every two weeks where we were given two Hail Mary’s and a Glory be for the usual list of little sins. I must have spiced it up a bit one week because the priest told me to recite the Hail Holy Queen 3 times. As my granny used to say ‘God bless us and save us!’ (we didn’t swear of course!) I had to go home to find the words in the little red book **and** explain to my mother what I had done to deserve it! (I don’t remember in case you are wondering!)

One of the many blessings about growing up in an Irish Catholic family was simply that we talked a lot about God and the Bible. It was just an everyday fact of life that God exists, that He made the world in 6 days and rested on the seventh; that Jesus was born, died to save us and rose again on the third day. We loved God. Being Irish, we explained the Trinity with the shamrock... far easier than some of the sermons I have heard on the subject. We knelt down by our beds every night to say our prayers and usually said ‘Grace’ before meals.

 As a young mum I made sure that my own two children were baptised and made their first confession and Communion at the right time. I also encouraged them to say their night prayers and grace before meals at least on Sundays I thought I was doing so well. Until the day my in-laws came for Sunday lunch. You can imagine the scene- best white table cloth, best china, 25 different types of vegetables and three pudding choices to prove I could cook...it was a picture straight out of Good Housekeeping. And then Granny asked my 5 year old son to say the grace... with a look of pure innocence on his face he shared these immortal words “Rub a dub dub thanks for the grub!” I didn’t get daughter in law of the year award that day!

 There is an old saying ‘Once a Catholic, always a Catholic’ but this one now finds herself training to be a Reader in the Church of England. How on earth did that happen? I’m tempted to say ‘It’s all your fault!’ because you keep encouraging me, but actually it’s all part of God’s plan. The same plan that took me into a convent at 18 where despite my best efforts in the poverty, chastity and obedience classes, we all soon realised I was probably better suited to secular life.

As the years went by, I didn’t stop believing the Genesis creation story... I just realised that 7 days for God was millions of years for us and that God throwing the stars into the heavens required a rather big bang!

And then work and family life became my focus and although I still went to Mass every Sunday I stopped going to confession and my prayer life diminished significantly. Not because I doubted in God’s existence ... I just stopped spending time with Him. In the convent the words on the screen were the first words we said as we woke up every morning but in my thirties and forties I forgot to say even these.

 On the one hand, everything was fine in my life, but on the other it was a different story. When things started to break down, help came not from the Catholic Church that we had diligently attended for years with our children, nor from the priest I had known since my teens; help came from a very special Anglican vicar and his congregation. St Peter threw me a real curve ball with that one!

He sent Father Tony to reintroduce me to today’s gospel reading and to remember: ‘What came into existence was life and the Life was Light to live by’. John the Baptist wasn’t the light...he came to show the way to the light. The way to God. And that’s what we as Christians are called to do every day, in everything we say and do.

If you watch young children playing, you can see there isn’t always a plan and nor do they necessarily realise that they are playing. They just get on with it. For me, that’s what Christianity is like. We don’t need a plan to develop the qualities St Peter lists in his letter... we need them to simply be our own qualities and characteristics because we might be the only face of God that others see in a day or a lifetime.

 I love this picture. It was sent to me by a friend who asked me what I saw. Is it a child holding onto one of their father’s hands whilst leaning back into the other one? Is the father providing gentle support with both hands? Or is it support with one hand but a nudge forward with the other open palm? Is it God the Father gently pushing me, us, forward in faith, in our lives as Christians? I think so... We don’t need to wait for St Peter to encourage us. We need to **be** St Peter for everyone else. We’d better go and get on with that then!

Amen.