

Perhaps it is because our lives are so similar in so many ways that we keep asking and being asked the same questions.

All couples, for example, will be asked 'where did you meet?' A little later they may find themselves being asked 'How do you put up with it?'; one day perhaps, when it is too late they will ask themselves 'What was I thinking?' and for the less fortunate, finally, 'How did I put up with it for so long?'

All dog owners will have found themselves formulating polite formulaic responses to questions such as 'what breed is he?' 'what's his name?' 'does he bite?' For the less fortunate you may progress to 'are you sure he doesn't have rabies?' and finally 'please could you persuade your pooch to remove his teeth from my leg, now, please, before I faint from the pain'

As a practising Christian— something of a minority pursuit in this country even if not a persecuted one— you may well find yourself being queried along such lines as 'Which church do you go to?' 'What's the vicar like?' (you need to be very careful answering that one) 'Do you go to confession (always punctuated by an almost audible deliciously horrified salacious exclamation mark) and finally, in this day and age of militant unchurched secularism 'Do you really believe all that stuff?'

If anyone is taking your faith even vaguely seriously, you will be asked that question: 'Do you really believe all that stuff?' It's an important one. What would your answer be? 'Do you really believe all that stuff?' I know what mine would be. No.

Before you tell me yet again that you're clearly paying me too much, let me explain what I mean, by examining the weightiness of our faith. This here is a copy of an ancient first century writing called the Didache, a curious word but it simply means 'teaching' in Ancient Greek. These six pages purport to be the teaching of the twelve apostles, and though they probably didn't sit down and pen it personally- most of them would have had to learn to write first- it is certainly early enough to have been very much in tune with their thinking. If you've ever wondered why the Lord's Prayer we say is longer than the one in the gospels, the answer is, it's the version that's in here. So this, as church tradition had it, is what the Apostles had to say.

Three centuries later, and the Western church had boiled down what it thought we need to believe, the minimum anyone who wanted to be baptised had to agree with, to this, the Apostles Creed. Legend also claims this to have been written by the

Apostles, one line each, which is a nice story, but, how shall we put it, unlikely. Regardless of who wrote what, this is a work of tremendous concision, it's like mobile phone brick circa 1982 and mobile phone now: the Apostles Creed says all the essential stuff, it's easily memorable and has a sort of minimalist elegance rarely seen in religion. One of the unsung achievements of the Western church. [We'll be saying it at the eucharist in Lent]

Scroll forward to now, and this is the Catechism of the Catholic church. Perhaps you are starting to feel Anglican Superior- pretty much goes with the territory- but that would be a trifle premature. What do you believe? Anglicans are asked. '*Lex orandi, lex credendi*' is the always pretentious reply, 'what we pray is what we believe', and although we have a lot of prayers in our liturgy kit, the bottom line is this: The Book of Common Prayer. There's also a book of Homilies which all C of E churches are supposed to have and I'm sure the Churchwardens could lay their hands on our copy in a second. Just like I could. Anyway.

These heavy tomes are really just for starters, an aperitif for the aspiring Christian. Looking at these now we can see that the 'stuff' of 'Do you believe all that stuff?' has simply grown and grown. Nothing is lost, little is changed just like the cobwebs in the upper reaches of this church, more and more is added as the centuries roll by.

Could it be that twenty-first century modern life is so much more complicated than late classical and so we need more substance in our faith formularies? Could it be that our understanding has increased, that the longer we've had to think about it, the more we know about God? Whatever the reason, there's no denying that the complexity of the church's message has increased.

Are we closer to God now than we were 15, 1900 years ago or are we further away? You tell me.

*"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth," Jesus says "because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants"*

Elsewhere he says:

*'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'*

Light enough for a mere infant to shoulder. And yet, I wouldn't blame anybody who heard the words *'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'* then looked at this and responded by saying 'Really?'

Over the centuries, the content of our faith has mushroomed and ballooned, expanded and bloated, and yet, it is questionable whether this exponential expansion in the quantity of doctrine and dogma, comment and codification has been matched by a corresponding increase in the depth of our faith.

If you listen to some of the very loud and persistent voices that fill the ears of the Christian world today, you could come to the conclusion that the defining points of being a Christian, those things which distinguish a true believer from a lightweight, the sheep from the goats, are: wearing a crucifix at work, sporting a vocal opposition to equal marriage and holding out against women bishops. They're not. Whether we agree with any of that or not, they are not major issues and they do not define the Christian faith. It's questionable whether they have any real connexion at all, one way or another, with our faith. It is just not necessary to hold any particular opinion there in order to be a good, full, proper or any other sort of Christian. What's important is that you are a Christian. And the absolute heart of what Christians believe, is here.

Let's go back beyond even the Didache and to the Acts of the Apostles. When it became clear that Gentiles were getting the Jesus thing too, the Apostles had to decide what these new recruits needed to do. They said:

*“it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication”*

Obviously the apostles and elders knew there was more to following Jesus than not sleeping around and avoiding eating black pudding, but they also knew the inestimable value of keeping it basic.

*'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'*

Sometimes the burdens that our religion asks us to carry feel anything but light. But they should. And if they're not, it's entirely possible that most of what's in there in

the backpack weighing us down, might be stuff we really, really do not need. Without a doubt can leave a lot of it behind at the check-in desk, because it really is excess baggage.

You will hear many times it being suggested that this approach to the faith is nothing more than cherry-picking, taking the bits that suit a particular agenda and leaving out the bits that don't. To which, with Acts in the forefront of our thinking we might answer, 'yes. That's exactly what the Apostles did. That's the apostolic tradition. The disciples did it first. In the Bible'.

Which is why I can stand here a true Anglican and answer 'Do you believe all that stuff? Yes. 'Do you believe all that stuff? No.

If this has been a heavy homily, please accept my apologies. If that *is* the case, then the place to end is with a song; the only song we need to know; the song of the Spirit through the ages, the song of the prophets and the patriarchs, the saints and the angels; the very song on the lips of Jesus himself. *You* probably know it sung by the Beatles. That song? All you need is Love.