

Next Sunday there will be no evensong at St Mary's. Instead we will be schlepping over to All Saints, Hackbridge for what, when it happens, is always the second happiest moment in any congregation's year, the deanery confirmation service. The happiest time of the church year of course is the Sunday after the Rector comes back from holiday. Or was it the first Sunday the Rector's away? Anyway, the confirmation service. Confirmations *are* happy occasions, when we see those newer members of our congregation, those coming of age in the faith and those who had forgotten that they never got round to it when they were younger, stand or kneel in front of the local successor to the apostles, confirm their membership of Christ's body, stand up in public and say 'this is my faith.' It's a moving and exciting time for all concerned (hey, I don't get out much) and as the bishop calls down the Holy Spirit upon those women and men, girls and boys who have become our brothers and sisters in faith our breasts would be swelling with pride if pride wasn't *the* original sin.

It takes time to get to that point. Faith rarely develops quickly- I've yet to hear, for example, of an instance of somebody standing in front of a bishop and instantly getting faith, or indeed anything other than a slight panicky feeling (though that might just be me). Faith takes time to ripen. An adult being confirmed has often spent years vaguely attracted to the Christian faith but repelled by some of its manifestations such as having to grow a beard and wear sandals. They may give in to the fatal attraction and move on to cautiously dipping their toes in the lukewarm waters of church life before somebody sneakily pushes them in, pulls the plug out, and they are sucked into the whirlpool of faith and before they know it they are being prepared for confirmation.

The purported purpose of Confirmation preparation is that when that person appears before the bishop, they will have at least a vague notion of what they're doing and along with that, possess a basic understanding of what the Christian faith is.

This a task that is not anywhere near as easy as it sounds. We can do what we can, and then rather like the baptism service says, trust God for their growth in faith, hoping, (which the christening rite doesn't spell out) that they don't get too many weird ideas along the way.

The difficulties start right at the beginning of the process with the word 'faith'. Faith. Central part of Christianity. In the gospels, in Paul's epistles there it is like the

proverbial writing in the stick of Brighton Rock. And still, we're not really sure quite what the word means.

I always teach confirmation candidates what I was taught when I was being prepared for confirmation, that the best way to understand what faith means is that it is about being *faithful* to your Christian calling i.e. making the effort to get yourself out of bed and put in an appearance in church each week whether you feel like it or not, but then, to completely misappropriate Mandy Rice-Davies' only famous quote, I would say that wouldn't I?

If you were basing your view of the Christian faith on what you've seen on the news in the past week you'd think it was something about not making cakes for gay people, which seems to be a line clung to doggedly by some who claim the name Christian, but- whatever the legal niceties- that I would hazard to suggest is at best a faith woefully misplaced, and at worst bigotry hiding behind religion. Who needs Richard Dawkins when we've got Ashers Bakery?

Even if we're not doing it for ourselves and shooting ourselves in the foot with a whaling harpoon, the Christian faith is never short of its detractors. Faith, they like to say, is the ability, like Alice, to believe 6 impossible things before breakfast. It's certainly something that those tentatively trying out Christianity are afraid they're going to have to sign up to, all that leave your brain at the church door when you come in stuff that we do so well.

So. Grain of truth or vicious propaganda. Let's see.

Noah's ark. The Tower of Babel. The plagues of Egypt. The Israelites crossing the Red Sea. The sun standing still for Joshua. Elijah's chariot of fire.

There's half a dozen for starters.

Maybe those detractors have a point.

A rather sharp point that has often smarted, that has stung some in the past into trying to show how all those impossible things might just be scientifically possible. And so grew the contorted pursuit that is trying to prove miraculous events described in the Bible could have happened through nature. God, if you like, by natural causes.

The most famous of arguments, that was still being taught when I was at school, and that's still within living memory of many people here, was to suggest that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was not procured by scary supernatural means but by a volcanic eruption. A volcanic eruption was also responsible for the plagues of Egypt: the ash caused the sky to go dark and coloured the Nile red; the natives mistook showers of pumice for hailstones: because the water had now turned into French mineral water, the frogs couldn't live there so came on land, attracting swarms of flies which caused boils and so on.

By this reckoning [our Old Testament reading this evening, ] the trumpets bringing down the walls of Jericho also has a scientific explanation: I was actually taught it in a physics lesson (that's a church school education for you). The explanation is that the trumpets managed to blow with a particular resonance that caused the walls to shake and thus collapse: just like the famous party trick of a shrieking soprano smashing a wine glass with her whine, sorry, coloratura; except more destructive and easier on the ears.

And so, yes, if you really want to you can concoct a just about plausible account, explicable by the laws of nature, to explain many of the miraculous deeds described in the Bible.

But why bother? Yes, you may no longer have the embarrassment of appearing a lot more gullible and credulous than your peers; but you will also have done yourself an even bigger favour of a sort by neatly explaining God out of the story. No miracles, no God. So what was the point of that?

Faith is often considered to be the ability, like Alice, to believe 6 impossible things before breakfast.

But this is not true.

Belief in only one impossible thing is required, and that is belief in God. Everything else is window dressing.

Did the peculiar resonance of the Wilderness Brass Band demolish the walls of Jericho? Who knows? And may I venture, without for once aiming to be being flippant or offensive, who cares?

Because in the Bible the practicalities are not really the point. God is the point. Our Scriptures are works of theology not history. They are there to teach us what God is like, not who did what to whom, whether they enjoyed it or not and what happened next. They are there to tell us that God's Love will triumph and we are to love one another, not that trumpets once blew down walls.

If you set out expecting verbatim veracity from the Scriptures you will very soon be disappointed. At the very least you will find yourself twisting your intellect into impossible shapes trying to make it make sense, and when you've been screwing your mind up to make it fit, it stays that way. Which may well explain a lot. But much worse, you may lose interest, or worse case scenario, you may lose your faith.

However, if instead of a user manual you open a Bible and expect to meet God there, taking a stroll in the garden in the cool of the evening, gently chuckling at the tales we tell in his name and ready to talk one on one direct with the soul that yearns for him, then wonder awaits. He's there, as he always has been, waiting for you.