

From time to time parents come to me and say 'what must I do to get my child into Bishop Gilpin'. I resist the temptation to say 'Go, sell all your possessions and pay for all the quinquennial works.' Nor do I say to them 'you have to be born again', although the reality is that that would be closer to the truth. For a Foundation place at Bishop Gilpin School a family needs to have faith and commitment. Faith is hard to define and even harder to quantify, especially in someone else. How do we know what someone else believes? Commitment is easier. We can see the deeds they do, the acts of kindness and generosity, but again we can never know the motives. In addition to parents coming to see me I have had teenagers asking what can they do in a helpful capacity which will look good on their university applications forms. Nothing wrong in that! But it is not necessarily an expression of Christian commitment.

I had a very interesting conversation with someone who described a person who had died as a really good Christian person. He then went on to qualify this. Well she didn't go to church or anything and I'm not sure what her beliefs were, but she was a good Christian, by which he meant that she was kind and caring. Perhaps it is a good thing that the words Christian has become so closely associated with such attributes, yet the New Testament teaches that deeds are not enough on their own. For that matter neither is belief sufficient on its own. St James in his letter and indeed Jesus in his teaching are very strong about putting our faith into action, and Jesus in particular absolutely condemns the religious authorities who exploit the poor.

Nicodemus is struggling to understand this connection between faith and action, between God and us. He knows that Jesus must come from God because he has seen the things he does. But then Jesus stuns and confuses him by saying that no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above.

Getting into heaven is a little different from gaining a place at a school. Yet in past ages people have gone about it in much the same way. 'What do I need to do to gain eternal life?' And because we are lazy and want to take short cuts, we want to find out what is the minimum. Does it mean going to church twice a month for at least two years? Does it mean saying the creed and making sure we don't approve of anything that has been outlawed in Leviticus? No, it means being born from above, born of the Spirit.

We can believe in a creator, one who has so ordered things that life emerged and continues to amaze us. Each spring within a matter of weeks, the bare branches of trees produce buds that swell, and inside the molecules from the air and from water are combined to make leaves which grow until

the whole branch is covered in these delicate and beautiful instruments of photosynthesis. We can look at the world around us and delight in God's creation.

We can believe in Jesus, in his teaching about justice and compassion. We can believe that he had power, that he was from God. We can believe that he died and rose again. We can attempt to become his disciples, even though we fail because we also long to be self-sufficient and financially independent. We recognise and admire those people who truly are disciples, who will always make time for others, whose selfless generosity makes a difference in the world. And we can use the word Christian as a short-hand for those qualities.

But the Holy Spirit?

What is it? How do we recognise it? If being born of the Spirit is so essential to eternal life, it seems pretty important.

To understand, we go back to the material world, the one we can examine and properly understand. We can tell by touch and sight and smell the difference between the best artificial plants and the real thing. We recognise the spark of life. With time lapse photography we can see that nothing living is static. It is constantly changing, moving, turning towards the sun, or growing toward the light. Within the animal kingdom, particularly mammals, we can see not only growth and movement and sensitivity, but also choice. I have watched my dog as it eyes the piece of cheese dangerously near the edge of the worktop. It is almost as though there is a thought bubble I can read coming out of his head 'will I get away with stealing it?' His mournful eyes tell me he has decided 'no', but he still hopes the cheese may fall to the floor, and he has learnt that the mournful expression sometimes brings reward.

Life, mortal life, is extraordinarily amazing and never static.

But there is another dimension. The spark of God, the Holy Spirit. Last week at Pentecost we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Disciples. They were together, still united by being disciples of Jesus, still talking about his teaching, about the meaning of his death and resurrection. But the Holy Spirit changed them to a new direction. It was no longer enough that they were disciples, they were compelled to bring others to an understanding of Jesus, of the meaning of his death and resurrection, of what it means to live a good life as a disciple. They really did give away their money to a common cause and keep the common purse. They put into action the logical consequences of their belief.

Did it make them nice people? Possibly not. Did it make them popular? Undoubtedly no. Did it make them happy? Not necessarily. Did it make them absolutely committed to following the teaching of Christ. Yes. Just as being physically alive is characterised by our response to our environment, being spiritually alive is characterised by our response to Christ.

And so we have come full circle. Back to deeds. It is the Holy Spirit that enables us to do good even when we would rather not. It makes us not simply children of the earth, but children of God, like adopted children, with all the rights of inheritance and all the duties of responsibility. Just as in our mortal life we are obviously alive because we see, hear, move, have a conscience and so on, in our spiritual life we are children of God because we see more than the physical world, we see the needs of those around us, we hear the pain of creation, we move in the direction God wants, and we have the strength to obey our conscience.

On Trinity Sunday, if this were morning prayer, the Apostles creed would be replaced by the Athenasian creed. As it is rarely recited in church these days, I will end by reading it. You will understand why it is rarely used, but it is a remarkable piece of writing about the Trinity. Note the ending:

WHOSOEVER will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate: and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal.

As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated: but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.

So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty: and the Holy Ghost Almighty.

And yet they are not three Almighties: but one Almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God.

And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.

So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord: and the Holy Ghost Lord.

And yet not three Lords: but one Lord.

For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity: to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord;

So are we forbidden by the Catholick Religion: to say there be three Gods, or three Lords.

The Father is made of none: neither created, nor begotten.

The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created, but begotten.

The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons: one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.

And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other: none is greater, or less than another;

But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together: and co-equal.

So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.

He therefore that will be saved: must thus think of the Trinity.

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation: that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the right Faith is that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man;

God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and Man, of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world;

Perfect God, and Perfect Man: of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting;

Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead: and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood.

Who although he be God and Man: yet he is not two, but one Christ;

One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God;

One altogether, not by confusion of Substance: but by unity of Person.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man: so God and Man is one Christ.

Who suffered for our salvation: descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead.

He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty: from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies: and shall give account for their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

This is the Catholick Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son: and to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.