

What proof do you have that you are a Christian?

On Tuesday I was asked to prove to a tribunal that a member of our congregation was a Christian. I was instructed by the solicitor that I was not allowed to answer that this was a question between God and that person; or that only God knows the secrets of our hearts. Rather I had to give concrete examples of how and why I believed that a person was a Christian.

What is it then that makes us people of faith?

Technically it is that we affirm that Jesus was and is the son of God – and that he lived on earth, was crucified died and buried, and then rose again on the third day. We agree to affirm the words on the creed, and the traditions of the church and faith; and the outward sign of this is our baptism, and our participation in regular public worship and sharing in the Eucharist together.

In a court setting, this is not proof.

It is a statement.

What makes me, as a priest, able to say that these things are true about someone else?

In the reading we heard today from John's Gospel, Phillip says to Jesus *show us the Father*¹ - and Jesus sounds at one level patient and at another level frustrated by their question. Look Jesus says – I have been with you all this time, you have seen what I do, heard what I say, explained how it works – but if that is not enough for you, when I leave you I will send the Holy Spirit which will help you understand further, and will help you in living this way.

What makes someone know the Father, or know Jesus? The story of Pentecost would say that it is the evidence that the spirit is at work. But how do we quantify that work, how do we prove it is of quality and meaning – without saying only God truly knows!

Is it that we attend church and pray everyday or every week? Is it that we can give clear theological answers to questions that are asked about faith and the bible? Is it that we engage with the poor, and active in our social action? Is it that we show compassion and love to our neighbours? Is it that are political in changing the system rather than just responding to the immediate needs?

I would suggest that all of these may be evidence, and equally all may not be.

If we attend church and pray, but show no love to our neighbours – then are we living in the spirit?

¹ John 14: 8

If we advocate with our neighbours on causes that are just, but do not pray, or do not love, are we living in the spirit?

The spirit of God inspires, nurtures and sustains us hopefully in all aspects of our being – in our worship and prayer; in our study and action.

The Gospel reading highlights that it is in the relationship that these things are known and exhibited; a relationship with Jesus and with each other. In this behaviour we come to know the spirit. In verse 27 Jesus says *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”* The peace John is referring to is not only internal, spiritual, but also external and social².

While we might live these things out in different ways, the reality of God at work in our lives is exhibited through a combination of these expressions.

After spending much of Tuesday thinking about how to quantify faith in a clear and concise manner – I went in the evening to St Paul’s Cathedral for the celebration of the 25th Anniversary of the ordination of women. In contrast, at this service, as part of the liturgy 6 women shared stories of how or where they had been able to share in the spirit of God – their experience of being part of God’s ministry. They only had 3 minutes to share, so their stories were short and to the point – and for the most part incredibly powerful. I found the whole service overwhelming and moving – the sense of what it means to be included, to be seen and to be heard. How do we know God is at work in someone, or that their faith was real; took on a different meaning in these stories – it wasn’t about proof – it was about story and experience.

So often we talk about our life of faith as if it is somehow separate from us – some other part of our complex life – but actually faith life – is life. Our faith is an integral part of who we are. To be people of faith we should be fully human in God – the person God created us to be; using the gifts and skills that God has given us. Being open to how God is continually transforming us, and this community.

We are each called to find what it is that God seeks of us. The call of God is not a one-off thing, it is a life’s work, and as such at different times in our life we will be called to new and different expressions of our humanity in God.

Pentecost reminds us that the spirit of God, the expression of God in our humanity is always at work in our midst, inspiring us in new and refreshing ways; and importantly changing us and what we do as a community.

This is the central importance of Pentecost story as we heard recorded in Acts: the Spirit’s transformation of the church into a community of prophets. The community that had gathered in Jesus’ name is now made something that they were not before: prophets of God’s word, the good news of Jesus. That transforming Spirit is given to all of them, apparently not just the disciples, but the larger community.³ Luke’s

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4055

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1630

account in Acts of the coming of the spirit is that it is life giving, it is poured out on everyone, so that everyone might know God, so that everyone might know themselves in God.

The call of God, is to share God's spirit and to share this knowledge. At the end of today's service, we will promise to be part of this sharing of the spirit, and we will take a light from the Easter candle, and take it with us wherever we go. This symbolism tries to help us embody this message from Acts, but also from our tradition of faith – that each one of us is called to share the good news of Christ – we are each called to share the story of our faith and called to be human in God – finding and sharing the God shaped part of us.

And how do we do this? Well we live. Because when we live in relationship with God this shines out, and others will ask us questions about the way that we live.

At the hearing last Tuesday, I was asked if we were a church that had people standing on the street shouting or telling people about Jesus. I said that was not our tradition, but we did talk about our faith with each other, and others. What I wish I had said is that our faith is shared not in shouting at others, or even in how clever we are with words; but rather in the way we live our life and in the way, we pray for each other.

At Pentecost we are reminded of the importance of living in the spirit of God and responding to God's call on our lives. Today we will re-affirm our commitment to being Ambassadors, re-affirm our commitment to praying for others to also come to know God.

We also need to be open to listening to what it is that God is calling each of us to now. How is God calling to you at this moment? Is there a step you need to take; a question you need to ask; a choice you need to make? Is God calling you to a specific task or way of living? Are we really listening of what God wants, or are we holding on to our own truths and habits – telling others and ourselves it is for God when really it is for our own purpose!

I have been part of several difficult, and sometimes painful conversations this week. Each day this week I have had an experience where someone has implied things about me and about my faith which were uncomfortable. Thankfully this week was unusual – but in the lead up to Pentecost it has been a helpful reminder. Our faith in Jesus is key to who we are. Others will not always agree with the decisions or choices we make as a result of this faith. But within this the spirit of God is always constant, and provided we are honest with God, other things will pass away in time.

Pentecost reminds us to make time to listen to our connectedness to God and see where that might be taking us. It is a time when we might each respond to the question – *what evidence is there in my life that I am Christian?* And if this unsettles us a little then we can take comfort in the words which Jesus offers the disciples in the

Gospel reading. *Love and keep the commandments because of the Spirit, which will be with you forever.* We should never forget this promise! Amen.