

**Beginning Again**  
**Or Was I Ever A Christian?**  
**24<sup>TH</sup> Sunday, Year B**  
**13 September 2009**

A N Wilson is a prolific writer of novels, biographies and histories, with occasional forays into the realm of religious opinion. As a young man he was briefly an Anglican ordinand. Then for a while he was a passionate promoter of the Prayer book society, that seeks to keep alive the 1662 Book of Common Prayer in the life of the Anglican Church. Next, after an upheaval in his personal life, he dumped Christianity, and informed the public in his book on Jesus that his family had taken over his message after his death, co-opting it into their own narrow little agendas. Now, just lately he has quietly made his way back to the Christian faith, and has, as it were, begun all over again.

The reasons why people reconnect with the Christian faith and the Church are many and various. Recently a man told me that when his wife used to come home from Church in tears, there being a lot of tension there then, he decided to go along with her to support her. But when he got there he found that he liked the people, and the hymns and so forth, and kept attending out of choice. "I am not too sure about God," he told me, "but I like what goes on in his Church."

Another man, a rural gent, who took his leadership responsibilities in his local community seriously, hadn't been near Church since he left boarding school. But when the local lay leader of the Anglican community died, our protagonist was visited by one of the local church going Anglicans, and was told that it was his duty to take over

leadership responsibilities for his rural church. This appeal to his sense of duty worked, and so he rolled up his sleeves, and along with working bees and associated activities, he has got back into the habit of regular church going.

Members of committed and confessional churches often shake their heads at this kind of mixed motives carry on amongst Anglicans. They would like us to be a purer, more disciplined church. But one of our attractive features is the welcome we extend to people at all sorts of stages in their faith development. We are a broad tent church with lots of room for different sorts of Christian belief. So it is easy to come on board again, with few questions being asked.

People have been advising me ahead of back to church Sunday, "Make sure the readings are attractive and not off putting." To which I have replied, "The who do people say I am gospel reading couldn't be more appropriate." However there is a sting in the tale of that Mark gospel passage, as there so often is in the New Testament, and I will be coming back to that shortly.

"Who do you say I am," is a question Jesus puts to every one of us who have ever had any contact with the Christian faith. I find it mighty interesting that even people who go gunning for the Christian faith rarely mount a frontal assault on Jesus himself. Take for instance that latest despiser of the Christian religion, Philip Pullman, the author of the hugely popular children's trilogy, "The Dark Materials." He repeats the hoary old chestnut that Jesus was a good man who claimed nothing about himself, but Paul reinvented him as the Christ, the Son of God.

There are many people outside the Church who have a good opinion of Jesus, but who haven't made the decisive shift to saving faith in him, a situation I might add that applied to many of the contemporaries of Jesus. What happens when faith begins is that the Holy Spirit finds a way, particular to our personality and faith history, to turn Jesus' question into a personal invitation to come closer. Somehow our perspective shifts so that we come to see that Jesus was so alive with the presence of God that he was able, and is able, to transmit that life to us now. And to be filled with the life of God is the most desirable thing that could happen to us.

Often when preachers and evangelists commend the Christian faith to the undecided they use the add on argument. So you have got many of the good things that our society offers, but for deep down satisfaction add Jesus. It is as though Jesus can be got inside a saltshaker, and then dispensed over the meal that is our everyday lives and satisfaction's, to give them an enhanced taste and relish.

At one level that is true. Just as at the marriage at Cana in Galilee he can take the water of our ordinary lives and turn it into wine. But if we stop short at the material abundance of the sign, and don't look deeper into what it says about the person who made it happen, then we will miss out on the significance of it, and will be the poorer for it. I sometimes wonder if this reluctance to go down deeper to meet Jesus, as the giver of the very life of God, is the reason why people run out of puff in their faith lives.

Which is why we cant get away from all that apparently unattractive talk about renouncing

ourselves, taking up our cross, and losing our life for his sake. What this death to self amounts to will be particular to each one of us. What interests me this morning is the way we can experience crises in our faith that are an opportunity to come to terms with the missing elements in what would otherwise be a mature and life giving faith.

I can think of a couple of times when that has happened to me. Quite early on in my ministry there was a time of things falling apart, of things becoming rather less certain than they had been. Amongst other things, what was going on was a rather too rigid pattern of belief that focussed on believing the right things, and carrying out the right spiritual practices, in a somewhat pietistic style of belief, in which what went on in the sanctuary was the be all and end all of life. What was missing was the dimension of Christian faith as love in action, as something that makes things happen in the world, because God cares about what is going on in the affairs of humankind. Emerging out of that cauldron there developed an energetic involvement for over a decade in the social justice ministries of the church. And I worked hard in community development initiatives to make the run down suburb I ministered to come alive.

The most recent upsetting of the apple cart came a few years ago during my life in Wellington, when a colleague got on my case about the need to put a day aside a week to do some serious theological reading. I resisted for some time with all the usual excuses about busyness, but gave in when one of the Wardens virtually ordered me to stay in the Vicarage one day a week, and said that the parish would provide a serious book allowance to resource my study. Since then the habit of a study day has

become an all-absorbing pleasure and not a duty, and I even get up early most working days to spend an hour of concentrated theological reading before I go off to Church to spend time in prayer.

But there is a catch to all this - for the more deeply I read into the history of the Church and the doctrine of God the more I come to realise just how superficial and shallow was my understanding of the Christian faith, and of my practise of it, in former years. Now I recall some of what I said from the pulpit with cringe making embarrassment, and look back on some of my assumptions about what was acceptable Christian practice with shame. Often the question comes back to haunt me – was I ever really a Christian?

I have entitled this sermon, “Beginning again, or was I ever a Christian.” What I am arguing is that we are all in the same boat here, whether we are back here for the first time in years, or whether we have been around Church for a while. For the question – was I ever a Christian – is a very useful one, no matter what stage we are at. For it enables us to begin again with a sense of freshness, to come to the fundamental questions of faith with new resources, to bring the maturity of hard won adult life experience that will inject more reality into the faith picture we base our lives on. Here, together, in God’s house this morning we are at a place of great opportunity. It is as though we are with the disciples outside Caesarea Philippi with Jesus standing before us asking, “Who do you say I am,” and this time we can come up with an answer that is really worth hearing. What is more it might propel us into a style of Christian living that will make us feel intensely alive.