

Over the lead up to Easter, there was some talk in the newspapers about people who were sympathetic to Christian faith, but who said that they couldn't 'believe' the doctrines.

This group of people counts themselves 'out' because they think that there is a hurdle of belief to jump over, which, they believe most Christians *have* already jumped over. They have difficulties with the 'doctrines'.

But there is a lot they love about Christian faith. they love the Bible stories, and they love some of the Church music, and they love the way Christianity supports people in need, and is on about social justice, but they then they say 'Oh, but I cannot believe the doctrines'.

So in the absence of one of those people, to whom I would ask 'What doctrines?' there are some things to say.

The first one is that most Christians don't know what they believe either. This is not a particularly positive place to start, but it points to the fact that viewed from outside, Christians are seen as all 'positive belief' when for many there is something else going on.

There is currently doing the rounds the motto 'Believing-Belonging-Behaving'. The idea is that people are asked to 'believe' first, then they 'belong' and then their 'behaving' starts to change. But this is not the 'norm' for the way people come to faith. Most people who are exposed to Christianity as children 'get' the faith by experiencing something 'awesome' or beyond them before they have any words. They are brought by their parents. In teenage

years they come because there is a peer group: that is they believe because they 'belong.' And this is where many people stop. They find that they can be loyal, and make a good contribution to the Church, and can be fed and nurtured by the rituals and the fellowship. But to give a reasoned account of what they 'believe' is not on the radar screen.

So many people actually come to faith via belonging first. Some people come via behaving. Malcolm X became a muslim when he was in prison. He had been investigating the faith, but he first identified as a Muslim when in the food line at the prison canteen said 'I don't eat pork.'

So believing and belonging and behaving are part of a complex process that we have come to call 'being in Christ'.

But that is not all. Loving the music is a way of believing. I do not understand people who want to drive a wedge between what moves them musically and what they 'believe'. St. Augustine said. 'The one who sings prays twice'. So at least if the one who sings has trouble with the doctrine of prayer, by singing they are at least praying once!

When I was younger and working in Wangarra, I went to hear Haendel's 'Messiah' at the cathedral. I was a 'non-believer' at that stage. But coming away from that experience I said 'If I were a believer, then *that* is what I'd believe in.' The problems I had with belief were not ones to do with doctrines, but ones to do with identity. I did not want to identify with the same kind of religion as my parents. I wanted to differentiate myself from my family, and the kind of religion I had inherited. So when I said 'I love 'The 'Messiah' but I'm not sure about

the Jesus I learned about from my family, I was saying something about whom I identified with, about where I thought I belonged, not what I believed in.

Often this is the case with people who love 'the music' or the 'language of the King James Bible'. It is one thing to identify with parts of the Christian tradition. It is another step to identify 'as a Christian.' This is a hard step, but it does not have much to do with belief.

There is another story that has been significant to me in my journey, having to do with 'belief'. After I gave myself permission to identify as a Christian, simply on the grounds that the *question* about Jesus would not let me go, I began to study theology. I was eager to then work through the beliefs in order to get a version of them that I found satisfying, if I were going to be 'honest to God'.

After three years of study, I had a period of intense anxiety. I said to myself 'I have studied for three years trying to 'get at' God, and I have a lot more knowledge *about* God, but I do not think I *know* God.

Then I read the story about the great Rabbi the Baal Shem Tov. It is a long story, but the gist of it is this. He has to avert a disaster. He goes to his study and says 'God, I have forgotten all the 'magic' that was needed to avert these disasters, but I know the *story* about them, and that will have to be enough. And it was.

This was a breakthrough for me. God is truly 'in light inaccessible hid from our eyes'. It is impossible to 'get at' God. But I knew and loved the stories. They were alive for me. I knew and loved the God who sponsored and who was the 'God of the stories'. So to believe in God is not

to do something hard. To believe in God, if one loves tree stories, is to say 'Yes' to the reality that is behind these stories. The reality itself is not available directly to us. But by participating in the rituals which are acted stories, and by letting the stories shape our lives we are *in fact* showing not only our 'belief *that*' something is true about God, but that we also 'believe' in the sense of *trust in* that same God.

So as it turns out, for the people who put up stop signs about their lack of belief, the main problem is not 'belief'. No one can 'believe' in God. All we *have* is the stories. We can rely on and trust in the God who is the reality behind these stories, but that is all. So the 'stop sign' becomes a false stop sign.

Perhaps the real 'stop sign' is the one to do with whom we identify. *something* shapes all our identities. In an economy, we are identified as 'consumers' or 'customers' and 'producers'. sometimes we we identify as husbands or wives or mothers or fathers. Most people have some from of 'identification'. But for those people who allow the story of the Bible to become their story, 'Christian' becomes their form of identity. This is the way we 'believe'.

Your 'Companion on The Way' and



Paul Dalzell.

