

## **We Believe (Part One)**

**W**hen I was maybe nine or ten my great-uncle died and he was, as they used to say, “chapel” and that’s where the funeral service was going to be held. Those were the days when we were taught, as Catholics, that we weren’t allowed to attend the services of other denominations but, to double-check, I went to my headmistress and asked her what I should do and, sure enough, she told me I wasn’t allowed to go. I reported this to my parents and was duly told this was my uncle’s funeral and I was going. In the event I sat there silently throughout because that was Plan B, the escape clause, that if you somehow ended up in another church you were OK as long as you didn’t join in any of the prayers or sang any of the hymns! Of course, back then we hadn’t yet heard the word “ecumenism”. Anyway, as it happens, I didn’t get struck by lightning.

**F**our or five years later I found myself attending a Sunday youth club run by the Presbyterian church – I went there because my friends did and because there wasn’t a Catholic youth club to go to. It occurred to me that if I was welcomed to their youth club, then it seemed the polite thing to do to also go with my friends to their services from time to time. Of course I would have already been to Mass in the morning and so I felt it was OK to then go to a Presbyterian service in the evening and, once again, I never did get struck by lightning even though, again, this was many years before anyone even mentioned the word ecumenism.

**I** don’t remember thinking about things specifically in this way, but I have no doubt that these experiences must have sown some sort of seed in my mind that, contrary to typically held views at the time, there might well be a few other people than just Catholics going to heaven. Indeed my mother wasn’t a Catholic but she raised me to be one and probably went to Mass more than many so-called Catholics did.

**I**t was around 1972, working as a lay-missionary in Africa, that I recall attending my first official ecumenical gathering at which members of the various local churches worked our way together through a number of St Paul’s letters, sharing our thoughts and reflections. My theological horizons were broadened still further when I was working in Saudi Arabia, a very strict Muslim country where Christian churches are not permitted. While, officially, you would be taking a very serious risk in broaching the subject of religion with Muslims there, I spent many very interesting and educational hours talking informally with Saudi colleagues about their faith and answering their questions about my own. We weren’t trying to convert one another; we were just trying to understand one another’s faith within a context that respected those beliefs. And despite the acts of terrorism that we have seen carried out in the name of Islam (but which are, of course, a total contradiction

to the actual tenets of that religion), my experience of the deep personal faith of the Muslims I knew in Saudi convinced me even more that not only would heaven not be just for Catholics, it wouldn't even be just for Christians.

**T**his doesn't for a moment take anything away from the commitment we have made to our Christian faith – the Church still teaches that our following of Christ is the surest way to salvation. But it isn't an exclusive club we have joined. Jesus' teaching makes that very clear when he said to his apostles: "There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well." (Jn 10 v16) So what are we saying? Well...

**T**here are, for example, many different ways of getting to London from the north of England by road depending on whether we want to get there as directly as possible, whether we prefer minor roads to motorways, and whether we want to take in a little scenery along the way. If someone were to ask us the best way to get there, we would understandably recommend the way we normally go, explaining the pros and cons and why that is our choice. And if someone said they were going to use a route that we considered unfit, unsafe or unnecessarily risky for some other reason, we would surely tell them.

**I**n a sense that's how it is with the choices facing people in terms of their faith. While there are many ways to God available, we would always recommend the way we have chosen precisely because of the reasons it continues to be our choice, and, understandably, we would be a little concerned if we thought someone's choice was putting them in a situation of unnecessary risk. And so when we are invited to renew our baptismal promises at a baptism or at the Easter Vigil for example, the rite concludes with the statement: "This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord." It doesn't mean we don't allow for other denominations or other faiths, but rather this is our profession of, and recommitment to, the Catholic faith we believe is the surest guarantee of the opportunity for salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ.

**E**choing Our Lord's teaching in the gospel that "unless a person is born through water and the Spirit, they cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3 v5), the Catechism teaches that "Baptism is necessary for salvation." (para 1257) Understandably we might find ourselves wondering, therefore, about those who die without being baptised. Referring especially to children (but, of course, in a wider sense we are all God's children), the Catechism says: "the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God...who desires that all should be saved." (para 1261) In other words while the Church upholds the place and importance of baptism, it is also saying we

surely don't believe in a God who creates a soul and then must condemn it just because we have failed to pour water.<sup>1</sup>

There is also the situation of those who, also created by God, have never had the opportunity of baptism because they have never had the word of God preached to them. "They will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher." (Romans 10 v 14) Their not coming to knowledge of Jesus isn't their fault. If there is any blame to be attached, it may be ours for not having brought them the gospel. Therefore why would God condemn them? – they didn't know any better.

The Church's teaching is very compassionate on the subject of those who haven't come to faith in Jesus Christ. On Judaism: "The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant." (para 839 of the Catechism) On Islam: "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims who profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us adore the one, merciful God." (para 841) On other world religions: "The Catholic Church recognizes in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since he gives life and breath and all things, and wants all people to be saved." (para 843) And, in its document *Lumen Gentium* (para 16), Vatican II says: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation."

Using an admittedly physical image, when we get to the pearly gates, we may well find ourselves standing in line along with a lot of people we never expected to be there. But then, one step away from the beatific vision and the glory of heaven, are we really going to start questioning God's choices, resenting the fact that it isn't an all-Catholic, not even an all-Christian, club we are about to enter? I hope not because if we do, we're probably not going to get in ourselves.

And that's the whole point, really: making sure, by the way we have chosen, that we are worthy of the salvation God offers us through his Son. Like a club membership (to continue the analogy), the potential for salvation is useless to us if we are never going to take advantage of it by enjoying the benefits it has to offer. The pilgrimage of faith that we are on isn't a downhill freewheel ride into heaven –

---

<sup>1</sup> The thankfully long-outdated, concept of "Limbo" was only ever a man-made construct in that the Church had painted itself into a theological corner in teaching that baptism was necessary for salvation but then didn't have a truly theological answer for the situation of those who, for no fault of their own, had not been baptised before death. Hell was for those who had rejected God through a choice for sin. A baby or child is incapable of such a choice. Why invent the nebulous "Limbo" rather than believing in a return to God in heaven, a return they had done nothing to not deserve?

we can afford to take nothing for granted. We accept the gift that God has offered us and then we need to open that gift and put it to use. We have to actively embrace the opportunity for salvation and, because we do that within the context of our following of Christ, our constant yardstick has to be the carrying out of what he asks of us. Following Christ doesn't just mean physically following in his footsteps, but following - in the sense of copying - the example of his life, living by and according to his teachings and those of the Church he founded to carry on his work. "Reborn as children of God, the baptised must profess before all people the faith they have received from God through the Church and participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God." (para 1270 of the Catechism)

**T**hat's where the gospel for the Sunday for which I am writing this comes in: Luke 13 v 22-30. Jesus warns against complacency and presumption. *Complacency* in being satisfied with the effort we are making and, like the young man who came to Jesus looking for a pat on the back because he had kept the letter of the law, feeling that all we need to do is show up and the pearly gates will be thrown wide open for us. "We once ate and drank in your company; you taught in our streets" but he will reply, "I do not know where you come from. Away from me." *Presumption* in thinking that it's an exclusive club we belong to and just the fact of belonging is its own guarantee. "Try your best to enter by the narrow door, because I tell you, many will try to enter and will not succeed. There are those now last who will be first, and those now first who will be last."

**I**t's the same message as Jesus taught in the parable (Mt 20) of the landowner hiring workers at various times throughout the day and paying everyone the same wage he agreed with the first to be hired. "Why be envious because I am generous?". Or the father's response to the brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15): "You are with me always and all I have is yours.<sup>2</sup> But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice because your brother here was dead and has come to life."

**O**ur principle concern has to be ensuring we ourselves are worthy of the salvation God offers us in Christ – but not in a self-centred effort at self-preservation, rather within the communal context of working, *and hoping*, for the salvation of as many members as possible of the body of Christ... even those who don't as yet know that's what they are.

\* \* \*

Fr Neil McNicholas

---

<sup>2</sup> though, again, not to be presumptuous.