

Starting

When did your Christian life start?

We know from what we read in the epistles of Paul and from the Acts of the Apostles that people became Christian by choice in those days. But when someone from an Anglican tradition thinks about this it is not so clear.

I think I started being Christian when, one fine Sunday morning, the Rev Assa Byaru hoisted me out of my mother's arms and baptized me in the font of a very English looking church in Kampala, Uganda.

I have no baptism certificate, lost in many moves, but a photo somewhere with the details written on the back.

So that was my first start.

It was my parent's choice. It was the "thing that you did" for a baby. It was a "culturally appropriate" act. It was the warmth and welcome of a priest and a congregation.

It was a sacrament, in which we believe God always is present.

I think I started again by the time I was twelve and was living in England. It occurred to me that I should get confirmed. This was an odd decision since my family never went anywhere near a church.

Now I should back up.

Perhaps praying was the next time I started being Christian. My mother taught me to say night prayers in bed before sleep when I was still small. I prayed for people I loved. My family by name. And I said the Lord's prayer. I also prayed for my family dog and for my bear Todgers. At some point it seemed to me that I needed to include friends and neighbours. Soon I became anxious about all the people, pets and so on who I wasn't praying for, so I studiously concluded each night by asking God to bless all the animals, vegetables and minerals. Just in case.

So my personal relationship with God was alive, if peculiar. But getting confirmed was about the church. I walked into the church in Westbury-upon-Trym on my way home from school and found a young priest in the building (which I now realize was a rare event since a church offices was always in the Vicarage). He told me the confirmation class was starting the next week. An equally serendipitous event. I have no recollection of being confirmed, but that was the beginning of me being a part of the Church.

It was a sense of doing something that settled in me.

It was God in the co-incidences.

It was a good Curate and a good teaching course.

It was a congregation of people I had never encountered, welcoming me into community for no obvious gain, but out of love.

I started being a Christian the next time when I began to read the Gospels. At confirmation I had been given a Bible. I began at the beginning but soon the fun stories of creation and exodus turned to the dusty rules on sacrificing animals and the regulations for running a community in a desert. I ran out of reading steam in Leviticus.

When, at eighteen, I escaped home and went to University I took that Bible and more knowingly began with the Gospels. Matthew first.

I had been on good terms with God, but it was an event in the Gospels that shifted me from a "theist": a god-believer, into "Christian": a believer in Christ. It was while I read the stories, imagining them as a movie in my mind's eye, that suddenly, Jesus turned around from addressing someone else and looked into my mind's eye camera, looked through the lens in to me. He knew I was there! This was no longer voyerism, the one way gaze of an observer. This was me and Jesus, eyeball to eyeball. "David, will you spend your whole life and miss me, or will you give your life to me and find it? Will you give yourself to me? Will you?" The words in the text swayed away from "text" and spoke into my heart. This was no mere

historical teacher. This man was alive in the now, and knew me through and through, like God did, and he wanted me!

Saying "Yes" was the third time I started being Christian.

It was the Bible

It was reading it carefully, unhurriedly, prayerfully.

It was the Spirit of Christ reaching out to me.

It was being in a strange place and open to change.

And finally, it was the priest to whom I went to tell of this outlandish experience, who listened, supported and told me this was my call to respond to.

There have since been at least four more big times that I started being a Christian again.

Advent is the season of starting in the church. It is our new year, and we tell the story of getting ready to have Jesus, a baby, come into our lives in a few weeks. A pregnancy, a birth, a childhood, a youthfulness, a young man, a man in his thirties. Which one is the first meeting with Jesus? When, in the story, does Jesus really arrive?

I have come to believe that our relationship with God through Jesus is like some sort of a dance, or a game of hide-and-seek. God is there, and then draws away, and then reveals him- her- its-self to us again, and then moves off again, and so the dance or game goes on.

God, I think, meets me where I am, and lives me fully as I am.

But God, I think, knows how much more I could be, and how much more of God I could grasp. So God says, as it were, "Come a little further. Come on, It won't hurt (much)"

Before Advent began this year I spent five days in silence, in solitude. I needed to get away from home, and from Church. I needed to be away from all the busyness and from the 50 balls that have to be kept in the air at all times. I needed to remember the one thing that is needful, to sit at the feet of Jesus with my mouth shut, my brain not processing everything, no decisions to be made, no anxieties to be worried over. Just to be in his presence, in silence until the silence soaked into my soul, and I became still at his feet again.

When you lose the ability to be quiet in the presence of Jesus, you cannot hear what he might be saying to you. Then you think it is up to you to work everything out on your own. I had been this way in prayer for too many months.

In my silence with Jesus I heard the invitation to be curious. Some of you frighten me, and I think I need to defend myself. But actually, Jesus says "Be curious. The person who seems frightening is one of my children. Listen to her. Ask him why he is angry or upset. Find out about the faith they hold. Then the way forward will open to you both." Jesus told me not to fix, or manage, or be weighed down by planning every detail, but to trust that God will unfold things, in church and in life, in a good way.

Jesus told me to trust him, and believe in him, and to follow, not try to lead him!

So I begin again. I start being a Christian again!

I have told you a lot about myself, not because I matter, but because you might hear echoes of your own startings. You might discover that you are not alone with this dancing, hide-and-seek god

I think to be alive in Christ is this dance of starting again and again. It is the hide-and-seek God who you get used to having sort-of lost, who appears before you again in a new guise and a new way, making you young in faith all over.

All we have to do is to be lighter on our feet than the person who is planted, holding the fort, trying to be in control.

All we have to do is trust that God will see us through.

All we have to do is know, and deeply believe, that God is not finished with us yet, and the best is still to come.

May Advent bless you with another chance to start being Christian again.