To be a Christian demands faith but for millions of modern people, faith is the sticking point. They say, ‘If you can’t prove it, I can’t believe it, I can’t accept it on faith’ while ignoring the fact that they already do accept things on faith. All our most basic beliefs, whatever they are, we accept on faith.

Materialists believe that only physical things exist; that so-called spiritual things like love and hate and fear and courage are illusions. They may possibly be right, but they can’t prove it. They choose to accept their belief by an act of faith.

Humanists believe that people are the only important reality. Again, they can’t prove that. They choose their belief by faith.

Atheists say ‘There is no God’ but they can’t prove that any more than Theists can prove that there is a God. They choose to accept it by faith.

Of course the majority of people don’t label themselves in this way. They don’t have such well-labeled beliefs.

But many modern men and women have a trusting and child-like faith in the belief that the accumulation of wealth and material possessions will somehow bring them happiness and security. There seems to be very little evidence to support this belief but their faith - the assumption under girding the belief - is nevertheless unfailing.

Faith is a given, part of our human condition. Everyone has it and everyone has the God-given right to put their faith in any belief of their choosing.

Christians are those who choose to put their faith in God and in Jesus as Lord.

Credo

The things Anglicans choose to believe by faith are stated in the Christian creeds. The Latin word credo has usually been translated as ‘I believe’ but the Latin word for ‘believe’ is opinio and it means to have an opinion or to make an intellectual assertion.

Credo means something much more important. It means ‘I give you my heart’ and it is a pledge of faith and commitment.

For Christians Credo is a pledge of our faith in God and a pledge of loyalty and commitment to Jesus as Lord.

Conversion

The Church has a technical word for this pledge of faith. We call it conversion.

Anglicans are inclined to view conversion with suspicion. It conjures up visions of emotional crusades and television evangelists and that is something most Anglicans would prefer to avoid.

But while the more dramatic conversions grab the headlines, the process of conversion is usually a much more gentle thing.

The word conversion comes from the Greek strefine meaning ‘to turn around’ or ‘to change direction’. It means leaving behind old commitments in favour of a new commitment. It means surrendering to the possibility of a new awareness. And it is sometimes - but not always - accompanied by intense and very personal feelings.

It’s a bit like falling in love.

Two people meet and are attracted to one another. They spend time together, sharing thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams. Their attraction grows until they decide to make an act of commitment to one another; to give their hearts to one another and to
define their lives through their life together. Their act of commitment may or may not be accompanied by intense and very personal feelings. Some people describe their love affairs in terms of raging passion. Others are more restrained. Whatever the feelings, the commitment is just as real.

Saint Paul underwent a sudden and dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. Saint Augustine of Hippo claimed that his awareness of conversion came years after it actually happened.

The Anglican scholar, author and broadcaster, Clive Staples Lewis, claimed he was converted to Christianity in the sidecar of his brother’s motorcycle on an excursion to Whipsnade Zoo. Describing the experience he wrote: ‘When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and when we reached the zoo I did’. C.S.Lewis’ conversion came after years of intense intellectual struggle and debate. By 1929 he was prepared to concede that a God existed. But it took another two years before he was able to describe himself as ‘the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England’.

The important thing about conversion is not how it happens but whether it happens. To say credo - I give you my heart - is to place our faith in God and in Jesus as Lord. That’s what we mean by conversion.

Before conversion, Christianity is at best an interesting philosophy; something we can know about. Only after conversion does it become a matter of faith; something we know and own.

False conversion

Some churches sell conversion like aspirin - it helps relieve the pain. They say that if we put our trust in Jesus all our troubles will disappear. In fact the opposite is probably the case.

Jesus never promised his disciples peace through tranquility. His promise is perhaps best described in the words of an old hymn:

Contented, peaceful fishermen, Until they knew the peace of God, Which filled their hearts brimful; And broke them too.

True conversion is not an arrival; it’s the beginning of a journey. It is not an assurance of comfort; it’s a promise of adventure. It is not a retreat from doubt and reason; it’s an invitation to live and test the Gospel of Jesus Christ, an invitation to life.

Think about it

Anthropologist Margaret Mead was born into an agnostic family. When she was 11 years old she announced her intention to become an Anglican. Her parents, naturally, did all they could to dissuade her. Later she wrote: ‘My mother’s over cognitive approach to religion - she had made me try to read the story of the Nativity in German when I was 7 in order to demonstrate to me the crudity of the story of the Incarnation - simply failed; all it did was make me regard credibility as irrelevant. What I wanted was a form of religion that gave expression to an already existing faith’.

Keith Rayner, Archbishop of Australia, put it like this: ‘Conversion must come first. We were once inclined to think of evangelism as an activity of the ’Evangelical’ wing of the Church. But as one whose spiritual roots lie more on the Catholic side of the Anglican Church I say unashamedly that we must give high priority to evangelism. I have to say that I have real reservations about some forms of high pressure evangelism. But that we must have a love for souls, a readiness to share our faith with others, a willingness to call for a personal, wholehearted response to Jesus Christ, I have no doubt at all.’

When people cease believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything.
- G. K. Chesterton

This I know to be true: that unless I first believe, I shall not understand.
- St Anselm. Archbishop of Canterbury 1033-1109