

INTRODUCTION TO *TURNING TO CHRIST*

The seven sessions in this book explore the questions candidates are asked when they become a follower of Jesus, the beginning of the pilgrim way. If you decide that you want to follow Jesus and become a Christian, then if you haven't already been baptized that is what will happen. Baptism is a public service of commitment to follow Jesus and be part of his Church. You are washed with water as a sign of your sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

If you have been baptized then you will probably be confirmed. This is the service where you own for yourselves promises that were made on your behalf by others. If you have already been baptized and confirmed, then there is still an opportunity to reaffirm your Christian faith, and again the same questions are asked. They go back a very long way. In most respects, the questions that candidates are asked today are the same questions new Christians were asked in the earliest days of the Church.

They fall into two parts. The first set of questions is known as "The Renunciations and Adhesions" (affirmations). The questions are directed to the heart. Some of the language can be a little daunting. We don't always use language about "the devil" and "evil" in everyday life. Don't be worried about this. Some of it will be explored in the sessions.

The Church uses bold language to speak about the reality of sin and evil and the hope of Christ. But the heart of these questions is very simple: it is about which way we are facing and who we are following. So we are invited to turn away from sin, darkness, and evil, and turn towards Christ. He is the one we are invited to follow.

The journey of the Christian faith is a pilgrimage home to Christ. Therefore the most important question of all, the fundamental question at the heart of this book and the reason you are part of it is

this: Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Most of the sessions will be about trying to unravel what this means. Who is Christ? What does it mean to be saved? How can I deal with the damaging reality of sin and evil in my own life and in the life of the world around me?

Here are the questions in full. They are worth reading through, not because you are necessarily ready to answer them yet, but so that you know what this part of the *Pilgrim* course is about and you can begin to consider whether you want to follow Christ.

The celebrant asks the following questions of candidates (when they speak for themselves), and of parents and godparents (when they speak on behalf of infants and younger children):

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

I renounce them.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

I do.

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

I do.

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

I do.

The second set of questions is directed to the mind, and are about what Christians believe. The whole congregation joins those about to be baptized in answering this set of questions. The Baptismal Covenant is a crucial part of The Episcopal Church's theology and practice. Each query is a real question, and our responses actually matter.

The covenant begins with an interrogatory form of the Apostles' Creed, the historic baptismal creed:

Do you believe in God the Father?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

The answer to each is a direct statement taken from the Apostles' Creed, with the whole assembly joining in the recitation along with the candidates for baptism, confirmation, and reaffirmation. (The word "creed" just means "belief.") The Apostles' Creed is therefore one of the most ancient summaries of Christian faith—one that encapsulates the belief of the apostles, the very first followers of Jesus.

They capture the very essence of Christian faith which is belief in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For Christians believe that Jesus is God's Son; that he reveals to us that God is our Father; and that God is available to us through the Holy Spirit.

You won't ever be asked if you understand all this. No one does. But you are asked whether you *believe and trust*. This is called faith. It is a different sort of knowledge. It is the knowledge of being known and loved, and of loving in return. We experience this in human relationships (though we would be hard pushed to prove it). We also experience it in that relationship with God that is the Christian faith.

After these three questions, there are five more questions that work out the implications of Christian faith in one's daily life:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The first question asks if they will participate in the sacramental life of the church. The Christian faith is lived corporately, as a part of a worshiping community. There is no such thing as a “private” religion in the life of the baptized. The next question asks if the candidates will persist in resisting evil and repent when they sin. We are humans, so the question is not if we will sin, but what we do when we sin. Another question asks if we will proclaim our belief in Jesus in word and action. This underscores the duty of the baptized to tell what he or she has seen and heard, and it also makes the point that actions tend to speak louder than words.

Finally, two questions squarely address the social implications of baptism. The fourth question demands equitable treatment of others one encounters in one’s life. The fifth points toward the need for Christians to combat systemic injustice, and it underscores that the love of neighbor is not restricted to other members of the Christian household: one is to respect the dignity of every human being.

The answer to each of these five questions is a resounding: **I will, with God’s help.** Baptism is about discipleship, knowing that God is with us all the way. We are not alone in taking on this serious obligation of Christian practice. God is always helping us along the way.

So, having turned to Christ, you are asked if you believe and trust in the God who Jesus reveals to be personal and communal; a God of infinite loving relationship; a God with whom you are invited to enjoy relationship here on earth and for eternity. Over these seven sessions all this will be celebrated and explored in the hope that you will be able to make this decision yourself one day.