

**"But Even if He Does Not..."**  
**Chris CSF**

*I would say my faith began in earnest when I was 15 years old. I had been baptised as a baby but never taken as a child to a Sunday morning Service. As a teenager I remember hearing from others in my class about their Confirmation lessons, and I suddenly had a real yearning to be confirmed myself.*



My first encounter with Church was quite difficult, but I've valued the experience in later life, because I can understand how an adult feels coming to Church for the first time; and this has stood me in good stead for working among people involved with Parish Missions. This particular church was set a little way back from the main road. I remember trudging the long distance from pavement to church door, and then feeling so unworthy as I sat through my first Eucharist. After all this time, I had no right to be there! I also remember the colourful robes and the pageant being acted out before me, and I wondered where Christ fitted in. My ideas changed as I began to understand the meaning of the Eucharist, but these were my early impressions. Years later, when I attended my first Franciscan Eucharist in Stepney, I was impressed by the totally plain chasuble worn by the celebrant. And although I'm now used to the colour and spectacle of many Parish Eucharists, I still prefer the more simple approach.

Up to this moment, I've been lucky enough to stay healthy. But on two occasions when I was a little "under par" I remember people's words having a pivotal effect on my faith. The first incident occurred when I was 18. I'd been going to church regularly for three years and there were times when I would have liked to use Sunday morning differently. Then came the appendicitis, which allowed me a few Sundays off with my feet up. I postponed my return to church by a few more weeks, and then someone remarked on my absence. "Lots of young people leave Church at your age," he said as though he'd been expecting it all along. That was all I needed. Basically, I had no intention of leaving church, and having heard this remark, I was back the following week with renewed enthusiasm.

When I was in my thirties, I was diagnosed with pneumonia and I had six weeks off work. It turned out to be a real Lenten time when I was forced to stop, think and take stock of my life. I didn't feel it was going anywhere. This was a personal view of course. Somebody doing exactly the same as I was might have been completely fulfilled. But I recognised during my illness that I was heading for a huge void. A friend came to visit me when I was at my lowest and most vulnerable. She stayed chatting for a long time and I was

exhausted. Towards the end of her visit she said: "You do realise that when your parents die, it's just you and the television set!" "Not likely," I thought. And I'm quite sure this unintentionally well-timed remark helped me into a religious community.

When I joined the Community of St Francis in 1989, I brought with me quite a simple faith. My prayers were made up of people I wished to pray for; sometimes it's called the "shopping list style". I wasn't good at meditation. I wanted to "do" something with the time; but I didn't question - didn't doubt. And as I came towards Life Profession, I remember saying thank you a lot in my prayers, because I considered I was quite lucky to have this very full sense of Christ dwelling within me.

When I had worked with deafblind people for about three years, the job became more demanding, and I valued my faith more than I had before. One day, I learned that a very dear friend - a deafblind lady - had a particularly cruel, disfiguring type of cancer. The tumour was small when it was diagnosed - the size of a pea. I thought that if I prayed and prayed the tumour would go. God would surely deal with something the size of a pea. But he didn't. He just let it grow. I prayed every day for a year and still he let it grow. The lady died a more perfect and accepting person than I felt I could ever be. How could I get into the pulpit and preach Christ's miracle, when it hadn't happened for my friend!

For the first time it was all so confusing. I remember feeling a responsibility to communicate a sincerity of faith which I couldn't acknowledge in myself. I felt rather a fraud and yet I had sermons to preach and a Holy Week to prepare for. I couldn't just let people down. And I couldn't stop telling them of the love of Christ even though I felt cheated of that love in my own experience. Gradually, I came through as anyone comes through the sadness and injustice of that kind of loss. I realised that Christ had been there in the same strength all the time. He had seen my frustration - a frowning figure inwardly shouting my displeasure like a small child in an irrational rage. He saw all this and he waited. He waited with the tolerance and understanding of a loving parent. He would have known I would return with a faith far deeper and more complete. Indeed, my faith seemed to be more balanced, because it held within it the threads of reality.

In my work, I often encounter sadness, confusion, disfigurement and bereavement. I very often hear the question why? And although I can never give an answer, there is a quote which always has lots of meaning for me. I've found it only in the New International Version of the Bible in Daniel 3.17-18. "The God we serve is able to save us," said Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as they faced the blazing furnace. "But even if he does not ..." For me, those last words are a real hallmark of faith. It's easy to believe unquestioningly when things are going well. But faith isn't about God doing as he's told!

I believe now in very small miracles. I'm convinced that life is full of them. I teach somebody a symbol in Braille, and it may take hours for him to

remember the dot formation without the aid of sight; and still longer before his fingers can recognise it. Yet when he manages to commit this symbol to memory, it's a small miracle and I thank God for it.

It's difficult to know how far my faith has grown in the 19 years I've spent in Community. I remember visiting one of our CSF hermits in Wales and hearing how very deep her prayer life had become. I thought I would never reach such depths and I'm quite sure I never shall. But I thank God that he's always there for me. He doesn't create people without fault or blemish, but he creates us to do his work on earth. And in order to do that, we need a faith that is always changing, growing and responding. I thank God for the challenges he sets before me, and I pray that my faith can respond. **f**