

# **BELONGING AT ST ANDREW'S**

## **PART I: BEING SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS**



One statement St Andrew's makes, prized by the community:

**WELCOME TO ST ANDREW'S ON THE TERRACE**

*Wherever you are on your faith journey,  
wherever you have come from and wherever you are going to,  
whatever you believe, whatever you do not believe,  
you are welcome here.*

You can decide how you will connect!  
This set of booklets aims to help with that decision

## **SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS**

Many say they are spiritual but not religious these days. There's a reason that's a common saying at this point of the world's history. It's a bigger thing than only how you feel or only how I feel. It represents a major shift in our development.

### **We are post-Enlightenment people – what does that mean?**

We live in interesting times. Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century (c. 1750) the Western world has prized reason. Many of us don't realise how thoroughly we've been socialised into that. We *naturally* expect proof for everything. We *assume* logic will be the only basis for good decisions.

Following any spiritual or religious path however, inevitably brings us in contact with ideas which are pre-Enlightenment or supra-rational. The world religions' holy books were written well before 1750. They are not based primarily on reason, though may not be unreasonable. They spring from intuitive understandings and spiritual insights. Most cannot be empirically proven. They are not rational nor irrational but supra-rational.

'Once upon a time', religious ideas held sway over society. Since the first century CE Christianity has been the dominant religious ideal which held sway over Western society. Christendom is a period stretching roughly from the fourth century to the twentieth. During Christendom, the Christian church was the main religious influence in society. In some places and during some eras, it was also the civic ruling authority. Questioning religious ideas, therefore, was not popular or, even sometimes, safe! Power mixed with religion can produce difficult outcomes.

Since the 1960's, Western society has begun to look beyond the institutional Christian church for meaning and purpose. The Christian symbol-system worked well for the pre-Enlightenment mindset. Increasingly, however, in our time, it makes less sense to scientifically trained minds. Our technologically enhanced

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lifestyles have also introduced other ideas which make Christian ideals look outdated.

### **Three ways to look at spirituality and religion**

First, prior to the Enlightenment we could be called '*naïve*' in our approach to spirituality and religion. Secondly, since the Enlightenment, we've applied *critical thinking* to religious ideas and their contemporary relevance. This has led many to assume religious ideas are irrelevant in twenty-first century thinking. As a consequence they have called themselves atheist. Some who applied such critical thinking left the church.

There is a third position, however, that of '*post-critical naiveté*'. This kind of person knows religion cannot be lived as if we were pre-scientific or pre-Enlightenment beings. They know, however, there is still mystery, wonder and spirituality which enhances our relationships and our world. They know powerful myths still guide our living and spirituality. They believe ethical guidelines can and should affect the well-being of our planet, society and individuals. These people might call themselves non-theist.

These three stages in thinking about faith are one stage theory of how faith changes and develops. There are other faith-stage theories. They're mentioned in Part III.

### **Post critical naiveté in practice**

What does this mean in practice? A post-Enlightenment person, might *not* think anymore that the world was made in 6 days by a personified Creator. They might *not* imagine God as a grey haired old man sitting on a throne in heaven. They might *not* see supernatural happenings as empirically credible.

They might, however, see the ancient story of the phoenix rising from the ashes, the legend of Persephone returning from the underworld and the three-day drama of Jesus' death, burial and rising as powerful myths. These myths all remind us that when death occurs, this is not the end. They remind us there may well be new life which regenerates after a period of transformation. What's more, these myths tell us truly new life can only happen *when* we have allowed that giving up, letting go, that 'dying'.



This movement from death to life is the most powerful myth in our society. We see it demonstrated in the metamorphosis of the caterpillar to the butterfly, in the use of compost in a garden, in the demolishing of the old to make way for the new. In our own lives we give up childhood for adulthood, we 'die' to an old habit to make changes in our lifestyle, we leave a job to begin another. Supremely, we grieve a loved one who has died, yet find, to our surprise, life has newness for us to discover from our bereavement.

This powerful myth is represented in the Christian scriptures by the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Many contemporary people find the physical resurrection of the body hard to believe. Yet, they live out the cycle of death and resurrection over and over again, sometimes on a daily basis. They also turn to different saviour figures whom they believe will help them make the transformation from the old to the new. These can be as diverse as personal trainers, revered rugby captains, popular musicians, political leaders or other authority figures.

### **How does this understanding of myth define a key difference between religion and spirituality?**

During Christendom, most expected the Church to be the active agent in living out these myths. At Christmas, congregations kept watch as the story of new birth was acted out in nativity plays,

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singing of carols, candlelight services, the lighting of advent wreaths. At Easter, similarly, the congregation watched as the Church commemorated Jesus' death and burial in a Middle Eastern tomb-garden. Then the Church celebrated joyful release on Easter Day as the congregations observed.

Sometimes this meant individuals never let that death-to-life process be their own spiritual experience. For them, *only* Jesus died and was transformed. It was not *themselves* who participated in the mystery again and again. This is the core difference between being spiritual and religious. The congregational members who remain *only* spectators year after year are participating in routine religious ritual. The person who consciously experiences many deaths and transformations in their own life is living a spiritual path. That is the real spiritual activity. The ritual is only a symbol of what is going on inside.

Psychologically speaking, the difference between the spectator and the participator is a question of consciousness. An unconscious person does not realise how a myth acts out in their own life. The conscious person does, and cooperates with the unfolding myth as they participate in it.

The religious person will often also comply with a religious moral code – in relationships, in charitable behaviour and civic responsibility. They do this, however, because the church urged, demanded or called them to do so, i.e.; they do it 'because they had to'. The authentically spiritual person acts with compassion and seeks justice as an inevitable flow-on of the dying/transforming movements they have experienced within themselves over a long period of time.

People can be religious and not spiritual. They can be spiritual and not religious. They can also be spiritual *and* religious. A healthy, vital religious institution supports the spiritual person in living the inner life of continual transformation authentically.



Of course, life is never this clear cut. People who are not fully conscious nevertheless may act with true compassion, can be devoted to their religion and effective agents of compassion in the world. This analysis is not to judge any one person. We all have different backgrounds and different opportunities with which our different personalities interact and so our paths differ from each other. We are all, however, valuable human beings, whatever path we tread.

### **How does this work out at St Andrew's?**

At St Andrew's, everyone, it is expected, will be on a spiritual path. Many have been intentionally walking that path a long time before they came through the doors here. Just being a living breathing human beings means we are on a spiritual journey!

This path may be resourced in different ways. Here at St Andrew's one way is through the weekly Sunday Gatherings, with their music, prayer and reflections. Another way is through the community life as we share morning tea and lunches together, the monthly congregation conversation (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of the month after church) or attend Cuppa and Chat on Wednesdays. Another way is through groups such as the social justice group (meets 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after church) the Exploring Faith theological reflection group (meets 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after church) or Spirited Conversations (1<sup>st</sup> Monday night of the month, May to October). Others attend Centering Prayer on Thursday and other reflective activities that follow the church year (Advent and Lenten reflections).

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That is, everyone makes their personal choice of events and resources offered by the church to keep them spiritually vital. For some, they add to this through the books they read, spiritual practices at home and other places, and their keen enjoyment of the world we live in, both the natural world and the culture of our city and nation.

Occasionally a person may choose to meet with a spiritual director who accompanies them on their spiritual path. Retreats offered by outside organisations as well as the church are also popular resources.

## **Belief and Faith**

Christian *belief* is generally taken to mean belief in a set of propositions or doctrines. These are summarised in confessions of faith or creeds. A well-known example is the Apostles' Creed dating from the early centuries of the Christian Church (but not from the apostles!). The Presbyterian Church has what are called Subordinate Standards. These are statements of belief which are thought of as coming second in importance to the Bible. Part III looks at the history of developments in how the church expresses its faith and belief.

*Faith* can be best thought of as trust. Faith is trusting something we are not 100% sure of. Faith involves a kind of a 'leap' into what might be somewhat unknown. For example, trusting enough to commit yourself to walking a spiritual path – following the Way Jesus taught us to be, takes faith. That step requires a leap of the imagination because it is unknown at the start exactly what might happen.

Under these definitions it can be seen that religion encourages and often requires *belief* in certain propositions. These act



somewhat like fences built around an institution's life so people know who is in and who is out.

Do you agree with the statements in this chart?

<b>Faith</b>	<b>Belief</b>
listens for God	acts on what it "knows"
isolates us in silence	brings people together
presupposes doubt	excludes doubt
sees God as ultimate	sees convictions as settled and ultimate
struggles with God	explains God
is individual	forms the group
is the basis of our relationship with God	is the basis of religion

Spirituality or the spiritual walk requires *faith and trust*. The spiritual walk or the one who leads us on it, acts more like a well of living water. We are naturally attracted to that Source. Then the 'fences' of belief become less important.

In real life of course, the lines between faith and belief and trust are less clear than they sound here. It is always the same with things spiritual, start to put them into words and suddenly they sound more prescriptive than they really are!

Christians talk a lot about grace. Grace is something 'grace-full', something serendipitous. We receive grace whether we deserve or earn it or not. Grace can be likened to a feather gently drifting down, a soap bubble glistening in the sun, a deep feeling of being accepted and loved, a feeling of being 'allowed', noticed, let off, helped up, forgiven, welcomed at the gate to home, all of the above. However much or however little we believe or trust, we are all offered grace and loved without conditions or limits, whoever we are, wherever we have come from, whatever we believe or do not believe. As a community of faith, St Andrew's believes this firmly and tries to live up to such a high standard of welcome and acceptance. We don't always succeed all the time but generally we keep on trying!



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## **My beliefs and faith have changed – what's that about?**

It is common for people to change in the way they believe or trust or act as they grow older. Approximately around midlife, we may find that our early learnings in Christianity don't fit our thinking or lives anymore. We begin to question and doubt ideas we were very certain about when we were younger. At St Andrew's we value 'living the questions' – working at our doubts, wrestling with them so we can come to an authentic place of trust which suits our individual personality and yet draws from the centuries old store of spiritual treasure in our faith.

At this stage we may begin or continue to value the spiritual resources found in other religions as well as those found in Christianity. The nondualistic approach of many Eastern religions can critique the mostly dualist approach in Western Christianity. Looking at the Bible through nondualist lenses, for example, we recognise Jesus' teaching was less dualistic than his subsequent followers have made Christianity to be.



As we work through these questions we may come to a new synthesis of all the material and all our experiences. In the process we will probably have to change our spiritual practices, as we will most likely outgrow some of them. It is all part of the adventure of walking the spiritual path.

Then we find a new cycle of exploration can begin and we find ourselves exploring further dimensions in the spiritual life. It's a continuing adventure!

## **Religion usually involves an institution – how do we live with that?**

It is important to remember grace when we are faced with the undeniable fact that St Andrew's exists within a larger body called the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. PCANZ is a religious institution. Like others of its type it has religious rules about its life. As a Protestant church, PCANZ has faith statements which frame the belief-system of the denomination.

Organisations are entitled to define who is considered reliable enough to organise the institution; working for and making decisions about its life. So, as well as being spiritual beings, some people choose to also become institutional members of the Presbyterian 'thing' (to be religious in a Presbyterian sense). From that membership those who will lead are nominated and elected. (Hopefully they will be also have a spiritually vital life!)

It's all fun and games



... 'til someone actually *defines*  
Christianity.

The spiritual path of many at St Andrew's has led them to a post critical naiveté. They have critiqued pre-Enlightenment religious ideas and rituals. They have critiqued a 'churchianity' where people hold to statements of belief but may not make much difference in the world. They do not see a religious ritual as being effective if it does not result in humility, the showing of mercy and compassion and the active search for justice for all.

On some issues, St Andrew's stance on inclusivity and equality means we find ourselves disagreeing with our own denomination. With a few other churches in the PCANZ we stand for peace, for

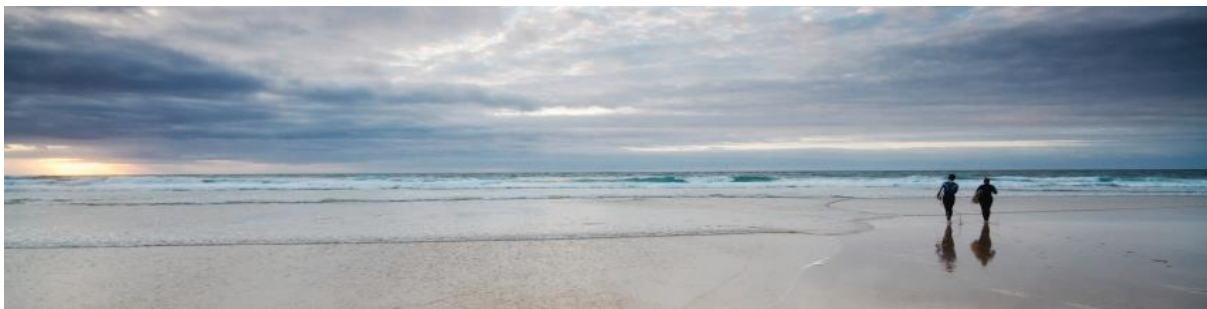
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equality of sexual orientation, for nuclear freedom and full inclusivity.

In remaining a religious institution, increasingly mainstream churches are becoming more and more conservative as members leave to find a path which is for them more relevant in twenty first century living. St Andrew's members and minister have spoken out in General Assembly (a biennial meeting of elders and ministers) and in the media on issues such as nuclear freedom, peace, same sex marriage and inclusivity – the latter especially with regard to sexual orientation. As a parish we remain in the PCANZ so we have the continuing right, privilege and responsibility to speak out in these ways and to act in accordance with our conscience even where this differs from church policy.

The church itself has changed its theological viewpoint over time. From 1560 to 1647 to 2010 there has been some movement in Presbyterian theology. St Andrew's has chosen what is called a 'progressive' stance - all of this is explained more in Part III of this series.

It can be daunting, but being on the spiritual path is rewarding too. In the church, spiritually vital people are necessary to keep our institutions fresh! We're glad you're thinking about how you can be on this journey in a way which is authentic for you too.



God

God, I knew you once in Sunday school  
at least, I think I did  
wasn't it you who liked us doing all those word-finds?  
wasn't it you who wanted me to learn all those verses off by heart?

You came with the musty smell of  
infrequently used Sunday school rooms  
broken crayons  
and old fashioned drawings of a fair haired, Caucasian Jesus.

As soon as I could,  
I didn't come back.  
Life without Sunday school  
seemed more exciting  
and the more I lived my life without you,  
God-of-word-finds-and-musty-smells,  
the less relevant they seemed,  
the less relevant you seemed.

But now, something stirs within  
I'm not sure what  
it's not ambition  
or love,  
I know those feelings.

It's different from those  
and nothing to do with a word-find.  
It does not smell at all musty  
No bible-verse-by-heart in sight  
It even feels...

inviting  
exciting  
like Life somehow.

Susan Jones

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