

Views from the Pews - Archibald Baxter

As we follow Christ's example of hospitality, Church is more than Sunday Eucharist. It can in fact become a blizzard of coffee mornings, breakfasts, lunches after church, Bible discussion groups and quiz evenings. Rubbing shoulders with fellow parishioners is a key part of faith for many, as we turn to others for knowledge, experience, and support.

But not all faith journeys are thus, particularly in the case of Archibald Baxter who, at a crucial part of his life was definitely not part of any identifiable denomination or sect, but who was a man of Christian conscience and belief. Baxter flew solo, which cost him when he resisted the draft in WWI. He is reported to have claimed a 'Christian Conscience' but resisted classification, at a time when Quakers for instance had some grudging respect from the authorities. Baxter's alone-ness led to what we would now deplore; his imprisonment and transport to France, culminating in what soldiers understandably called 'crucifixion', officially Field Punishment No 1, tied to a crossbeam and left exposed to enemy fire for hours on end.

It is clear that the authorities feared Baxter and his ilk, feared his influence, and devoted time and resources to break him. Largely because he refused to discuss his faith with more than a few intimates, certainly not with the authorities, he was outside the pale, refusing categorisation.

Whether we agree with him or not, and some say he brought this on himself, we can accept that following Christ may be an isolated and isolating act, carried on well outside the institutional boundaries of both church and state.

We may disagree with him, but the history of Christian Pacifism in New Zealand has a lot to teach us about what faith is, and where it can lead. The Last Supper is closely followed by Calvary, and this is something we risk forgetting as we sing of a Child born in a manger; we risk forgetting what happened later.

Archibald Baxter returned home alive, remained an active socialist and pacifist, but did not fly solo for ever, being received into the Roman Catholic Church later in life under the influence of his son, the poet we know as James K Baxter.

Those who follow Christ may travel many different roads; surely they are part of the Body even if they travel alone.

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