



Sense Making Faith p73



You who have ears to hear...

It took me forty years to do what I did yesterday.

I'd thought about it many times. All my friends assured me that there was nothing to it. It was a small thing, a tiny thing, - but it was a mountain wall to me. And yesterday, I had to walk up and down, sweating, before screwing up my courage to do it. Several times I walked away, fast. When I finally did it, I was embarrassed to find I was shaking, despite the reassurance of those around me. I thought, even at the last second, of making a bolt for it. I persuaded myself of an awful lot of good reasons why I should not want to do this, did not have to do this, would be no better off for doing this. I reminded myself that once it was done, there would be no going back. It would be an irrevocable act. I signed the form. I paid the money. But there was still the act. At some point or other, I decided, I made a commitment. It happened. It took about 30 seconds. It didn't hurt. But the time I sat there waiting for it to happen seemed years of mental agony.

Yesterday, I had my ears pierced.

Oh is that all? I hear you cry. What a lot of fuss about nothing. I mean, it wasn't as though I had had a large tattoo of the Sacred Heart emblazoned across my hip (although I know someone who has...). It is not as though I had had my septum pierced, or a tongue stud the size of a ball bearing. I did not have my head shaved and a large England flag painted on my skull

(much in evidence where I live during Euro 2000). Just a couple of silly little studs, so what? Grow up and stop being pathetic. Try bungee jumping and *then* whine...

It goes back a long way. When I was a teenager, all my friends went off and got holes punched in their ears. I was neither bothered, nor keen. I thought I might get round to it, one of these days. Then one of my friends had her ears pierced and a revolting infection set in. Even time she rotated her sleepers, out fell a horrible yellow mess that squigged all over her school uniform. Being unbearably squeamish, she would faint every time this happened, - usually as we stood at the bus-stop in the morning. I was recruited to mop up the mess and hand out paracetamol. I thought then, - you can forget this! Ear-piercing is definitely not for me!

As time went on, my aversion to having holes punched in my ears grew greater. When I worked in A&E, nothing fazed me, not burns, not multiple crash victims, not people with large portions of their insides splattered about outside. But what really got me one day was a woman who had caught a long dangly earring in a car window and ripped her ear apart. That cost me my lunch and I promised myself I'd never, never, never do it!

I didn't give it much thought after that. I'm not really interested in jewellery and don't spend time examining adornments in shops. I didn't miss the pierced earring thing. Over time, I accumulated things on wires, as little gifts, which I cavalierly dumped in a box. Everyone in my family just assumed I wore the same kind of stuff as everyone else, not knowing that just thinking about it would make me sweat.

What did it for me was visiting my mother-in-law, who is struggling with cancer. She wanted to give me something of hers, something she could see me wear which would be her gift to me and my memory of her. She gave me her favourite earrings. My heart sank. But I found I couldn't say no. So I determined to do it. I would wear the gift. I would get the holes. Easy. Nothing to it. Then I got to the shop and courage failed me.

And it occurred to me that my feelings yesterday are a timely reminder to me of how people may feel at the time of commitment to God, to the Christian life. How scary it can be to give your life to Christ for ever, how heart-churning to make up your mind to be confirmed. How terrifying to give yourself to another in marriage. How stomach churning to hand over your precious baby to be soaked with water and smeared with oil. Especially if you have a bad experience somewhere in your past, what thoughts may run through your mind? How big the step may seem and how extraordinary. And if your defences are strong, then only love will do it, will make up your mind for you and provide you with the strength to go on. If you have spent half your life saying this is not for you, how much adrenalin accompanies the process of being turned around in conversion, to face the thing you said you'd never do, face the person you swore you'd never be, face the God you said you wouldn't ever believe in?

So today I have a new respect for the 57 people confirmed at Pentecost in my church and for my two brothers both getting married. How much more

they deserve than a clap, a handshake or a vague smile. Lest I start thinking this is all a simple, automatic, easily accomplished act of commitment, I will remember how I walked away from that shop several times before going in, and shook when the assistant pulled on her gloves. I would rather have been anywhere else, but I love my mother-in-law and I want to do this for her. The shop assistant gave me a lollipop. I felt I deserved a chorus of angels.

This is day two of my new life. And so far no yellow gunk has appeared. Thank God for that.

Anne Richards