

Exploration of Faith

***Aim :** This piece was written for a presentation on the New Age. We wanted to explore the problems we saw with this but didn't want to alienate people, so we took a satirical look at organised Christian religion first before doing the same with the New Age. The piece is therefore in three parts, centred around James and his exploration of faith. Part One is a discussion with his father, reflecting modern and post-modern views, part two follows him to a very traditional church and part three is his exploration of the New Age.*

Characters :

Part One – James, dad

Part Two – James, Hilda & Vera (ladies of the church) & vicar (comic stereotype- think Derek Nimmo meets Dick Emery

Part Three – James, Jan & Pete (New Age followers)

Props & Costumes :

Part One – Outdoor coat & briefcase for James, newspaper for dad

Part Two – 5 chairs, vicar outfit and prayer book, coats, hats, handbags etc for Hilda and Vera

Part Three – 3 chairs, mugs of coffee

***Notes :** The three parts of this work entirely well on their own, as well as together. We have used the first part as an introduction to people's search and journey to faith and the second part as a comic introduction to people's views of church. If you want to use them separately you may have to adapt opening and closing speeches slightly.*

James, dad, Jan and Pete are all realistic everyday people, the vicar and Hilda and Vera are all gross exaggerations (I hope!) and should be played to full comic potential.

If running all the parts together, music is an effective way of moving between the scenes.

Part One: The Argument

Dad is sitting, reading a newspaper. James comes in, as though from work, putting down his briefcase, taking off his coat and sitting down. As he does so. . .

James: Dad

Dad: (*engrossed in evening local paper, and not looking up*) James. Good day at work?

James: The usual you know. Always the usual. You?

Dad: The usual.

Pause as dad reads the paper and James is lost in thought

James: Dad, do you ever wonder if there's more to life than this?

Dad: Well, I hope so. I mean, I'm hoping for a miracle

James: Really?

Dad: Yep. I'm living in hope that my Prodigal Son will get off his backside for once and make his old dad a brew.

James: You know I didn't mean that

Dad: Surprise, surprise.

James: All right, all right, in a minute - but I'm serious. I mean I get up each day, join the queues for the bus, the train, eight hours in the office, and back again

Dad: Oh aye, which is why you can afford all these fancy questions

James: Aren't I allowed to question? To look for better? I can't help the way I feel - I can't help wondering about the future

Dad: Why don't you just concentrate on the present then?

James: Cos I feel dissatisfied with that too!

Dad: Look, James, you know what your problem is, don't you?

James: I've a feeling that I'm about to find out

Dad: You've caught the Millennium Bug

James: (*laughing to himself*) You're a bit out of date there dad I think

Dad: Exactly. That's what all you bright young things think isn't it? That's what I mean.

James: What?!

Dad: You think you're the first ones to think, the only ones to question - you think you know it all

James: But dad, that's exactly what I don't think

Dad: Oh yes, I've seen it all before - you're just hippies with fancier clothes. What goes around comes around - "all togetherness", flares, silly names - I'll be back in fashion myself any day soon.

James: I wouldn't hold your breath! But anyway, what's wrong with that? Isn't it right that we should learn the lessons of the past, for a better future.

Dad: And you think you can do that by soul-searching and navel gazing? Isn't that exactly what science does? Using the human brain for something useful, advancing technology, making a better life for all?

James: But that's not foolproof either is it?

Dad: It's a damn sight more effective than all this "what's right for you is right" - selfishness by any other name.

James: So you really think that reason, and ingenuity, and technology are the instruments of progress?

Dad: I do

James: And that we use these to make a better life?

Dad: Exactly

James: So what about Hiroshima?

Dad: What?

James: The atom bomb, the Holocaust

Dad: Now you're being stupid

James: Chemical and nuclear warfare - no, come on dad, what about them - *they* were developed by human ingenuity and technology. You can't pick and choose

Dad: And neither can you - what about medical advancement, and humans achieving the un-achievable? Space travel? Walking on the moon?

James: But so what, dad. Does it tell us anymore about what life is *really* about?

Dad: You see that's typical of your generation - surrounded by more knowledge than any other generation before, yet you focus on what you *don't* know.

James: But I'm not just talking about the brain, the mind - what about body and soul?

Dad: Oh very stars and crystals!

James: Don't just dismiss it dad, cos you don't get it.

Dad: Look, James, don't patronise me. I'm dismissing it because I *do* get it - and I don't want it. I mean where's it got your lot? It's all Riverdance and Oprah Winfrey and the Prozac Generation - that's where body and soul has got you.

James: Well, I've got to know for myself

Dad: And there we have it again - self, self, self.

James: Look, all I know is that we've been given a brain to think things through

James: And we've been given intuition to help us distinguish

Dad: We've been given reason

James: We've been given emotion

Dad: We've been given rational minds

James: We've been given searching souls

Dad: *We* are in control.

James: But I don't feel that, dad. I mean *who* has given us all these things, and what for? That's what I've got to find out.

Part Two: The Church

James: My discussion with dad, and the questions I'd had that lead up to it, wouldn't leave me alone. I could no longer simply accept that this was all there was, that science and reason held all the answers, that we were meant to be some sort of human machine with no emotions, no intuition, no soul - I mean surely the very fact that I had such a yearning to feel some purpose, meant that I had to have all those things to start with. But how did I understand any of this any better? How did I make connections - with life, with myself?

Although I didn't have dad's blind trust in the institutions around me (well, how can you have anymore when you're bombarded every day with examples of corruption and prejudice and sleaze), I found myself turning to one of them in search of some answers, or at least a greater understanding - the Church.

Music as 5 chairs are placed in a row facing the audience (if not already put there). A lectern could also be used here as a pulpit. His is placed on the left hand side of the chairs.

James: I was pleasantly surprised at the warm welcome I received at first . .

Vera and Hilda enter. They are stereotypes of the "older lady of the church" figure, complete with hats and handbags. They stop short when they see him, look him up and down and then move towards him in delight. They shake his hand warmly.

Vera) Oh, a man!

Hilda) A young man!

Vera) Good morning

Hilda) And welcome

After giving him one last look over they turn to leave

James) I soon began to discover that this was not the warm spontaneous gesture that I had first thought.

Vera turns back towards him. As she speaks to him she looks through her bag and pulls out a little notebook and pen.

Vera) My name is Mrs. Vera Jacobs - on the rota to welcome new people, searchers, seekers, sinners, lost souls, every second Sunday. Do you fit into any of the above categories? (*Her pen hovers, ready to make the necessary notes*)

James) Well . . .

Vera) Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour and redeemer? Have you felt the weight of your transgressions and the cleansing blood of Christ?

James) I'm sorry, I don't know what you are talking about

Vera) (*She makes a tick in her notebook*) Excellent, right - we have now reached our annual outreach objective. (*She puts her book and pen away*) Well, in you go. Hurry up. We start on the dot. No slovenly ways in the house of the Lord.

James) Right, erm, thanks Vera

Vera stops dead in her tracks and fixes James with a look of steel)

Vera) My dear boy, let us not forget our manners - it is Mrs. Jacobs to you

James) *as Vera turns away* And that was the end of her job for that day, I began to see how this particular church worked

James sits down on the second chair from the left, as Hilda walks in. She looks annoyed when she sees him.

Hilda) Excuse me, I'm afraid you cannot sit there.

James) Oh, I'm sorry, is this your seat?

He jumps up and then stands and watches as Hilda sits down in the chair on the far left.

Hilda) No dear, of course not

James) Right. (*He thinks for a moment and then sits down in the second seat again.*)

Hilda) My dear, I know that you are new, so I shall endeavour to be gracious in the face of your obvious impudence (and in God's holy house as well), but I shall say it once again - you cannot sit there.

James stands up looking confused

James) But you're not sitting there

Hilda) No

James) And no-one else seems to be either

Hilda) Exactly

James) I don't understand

Hilda) No, young man you obviously do not, being new to our fellowship. *(She takes a deep breath)* I have been in this church for the last twenty three years, and I have always sat here, and no-one has ever sat next to me, and that is the way that it will be forever and ever.

Vera has now come back in and sits down on the chair at the far right of the row. As she sits she joins in with

Hilda and Vera) Amen

James is still standing looking confused. He decides to sit on the middle chair. As he sits down the vicar enters far right and walks across to the pulpit. Hilda and Vera have stood up for him. As James realises that they are standing, the vicar reaches the pulpit and the ladies sit down – just as James stands to join them. They tut loudly and he sits down looking embarrassed.

Vicar) The Lord be with you

James, Hilda and Vera look at a point towards the back of the room, as though that is where the vicar in the pulpit is. The responses are so familiar to the ladies that they say them in a singsong fashion

Vera and Hilda) And also with you

During the vicar's words, the two ladies nod thoughtfully while James continues to look confused

Vicar) Welcome brethren old and new to our Quinquagesima Service of Morning Prayer according to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, as written by our dear brother in Christ, Thomas Cranmer, bless his beloved soul, this morning. Welcome. As we consider our remembered and revered saintly friends of Perpetua, Felicity and their Companions, Martyrs of Carthage, we remember our own battles and the call to perseverance in faith.

Let us begin with a word of prayer.

The two ladies and the vicar close their eyes ready for prayer.

James) I realised that I had made a mistake coming here to look for any answers. It wasn't that I objected to ritual, I just didn't know it, and it wasn't that I disagreed with the vicar, I just didn't understand him. And I didn't get the impression

Vicar) The Lord is here

Vera and Hilda) His Spirit is with us

James) that there was much room

Vicar) Lift up your hearts

Vera and Hilda) We lift them to the Lord

James) for questions.

As though at the end of a chant

Vicar, Vera and Hilda) Amen.

Part Three - New Age Discussion

James) So, I was still no nearer to finding any answers, or even really understanding my questions any further. My visit to the church had been brief and unsatisfying. I felt that I needed more dialogue, a chance to explore some of my feelings as well as my thoughts, away from the rigidity of the old institutions. It seemed that I was being drawn to something new, something modern, something still developing and moving forward. I'd heard the term, so now I wanted to find out more about the New Age.

There are three chairs set out. Jan and Pete come in and sit down, chatting over coffee.

James) Er . . good afternoon, hi, er. . my friend suggested that I come and see you

Jan) (warm tone) Oh right, yeah, you must be James. Have a seat.

James) Right, okay. (*Hovers by the empty chair*) Is this okay?

Pete) Of course. Why?

James) Oh no just something that happened earlier

He goes to pull the chair back

Jan) But don't move it

James) Sorry?

Jan) Feng Shui, you know

James) Oh right

Jan) *We're* not bothered, but we wouldn't want to upset those who are

James) Right, yeah, of course

He sits down

Pete) Now what is it that you're worried about?

James) Well, everything really! I'm not exactly worried. I've just got a few questions

Pete) What are we doing here?

James) Well, I was told to come . . .

Pete) No. Your questions, like - what are we doing here

James) Oh I see, yeah exactly

Jan) What is truth?

James) Yeah, that's it

Pete) What happens when we die?

Jan) and then there's all the worries - the environment

Pete) the need for unity

Jan) World Peace

Pete) A fairer world to live in

James) Exactly!

Silence . . .

James) So . . . ?

Jan) So . . what?

James) So what can the New Age tell me?

Pete) Well, . . .it can tell you that there are a lot of questions.

Jan) Which you should feel free to explore, and to draw your own conclusions.

James) But what's the truth?

Pete) Exactly. What is truth?

Jan) You see if something is true for you, then surely it's true?

James) But who decides that?

Pete) Well, what do you want? Some sort of judge figure, taking away your right to decide?

James) No but . . .

Jan) Look, we save ourselves nowadays, James, simple as that - you've got the power to do good or bad, and you choose - isn't that what you want?

James) Well, I suppose so, but it feels like a lot of responsibility. Do I get any help?

Pete) Well we can give you books

Jan) Horoscopes

Pete) Crystals

Jan) charts

Pete) The earth itself can help you

James) But what should I believe?

Jan) Whatever you want, James,

Pete) Whatever you want.

Jan and Pete freeze as James stands up and addresses the audience directly

James) I suppose this should have made me feel better. I'd been told that it was okay to question, and that the answers weren't all cut and dried; and that choices had been given back to me. But somehow this all made me feel rather uneasy. It all seemed too simple if anything, and yet, too full of contradictions. I mean what if I thought something was right and someone else thought it was wrong, what then? Where was the leadership, the benchmark? And if I was responsible for my own salvation, what happened if I went wrong?

It seemed to me that I was no nearer finding answers or understanding the questions sitting in my soul. The two sides seemed too extreme - I didn't want the rigidity of the religious church, but I needed more structure than the New Age. I wanted to be able to turn to both facts and experience, and above all I wanted to meet something of the longing in me. . . .