

Confidence in Christ

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20th February 2005, Year A, Lent 2

Genesis 12: 1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4: 1-17; Matthew 17: 1-9

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

As Chris explained last week, the diocese is encouraging parishes to consider “confidence in Christ” as a theme throughout this Lenten period. I would like to first examine the theme and how I came to understand it before I could relate it to my personal journey.

Confidence in Christ — what does it mean to have *confidence* in Christ? In an attempt to get my head around this question I turned to my trusty thesaurus to find alternatives to the word *confidence*. This is what I found:

- Confidence
- Faith
- Belief
- Reliance
- Hope
- Dependence
- Conviction

To me it seemed as though there was a strange automatic pairing that occurred amongst these words — conviction and belief are both strong words with a certainty and clarity about them. They are decisive — they make strong statements — this is what I believe, this is my conviction. They are about me - here and now. Faith and hope on the other hand are more reflective. It is almost an intention rather than a statement of certainty. To have faith and hope in something or someone is to be looking to the future and conjures images of freedom such as a bird flying across the sky or the flow of water in a river — the end of the journey is unknown. The third pair of words is reliance and dependence. These are not strong words like belief or conviction, nor are they free like hope and faith — in fact my first reaction, and possibly a reflection on today’s society, is the negativity of these words. To be dependent or reliant on something or someone else depicts weakness, vulnerability or powerlessness. To rely or depend on someone or something means that regardless of will, you must or are forced into trusting them/it. However, the more I considered these final words, I realised that as personality traits or characteristics, they are positive and strong. Then I looked at the word confidence itself and realised how it can incorporate all these things — it is a word packed full of meaning — it is strong, free, vulnerable and trusting.

Like most people, there have been times in my life where I have been vulnerable and times where I have been strong and through both, my faith or my confidence in Christ has been my support. I never really thought about how I became a Christian which is a question I have been asked on many occasions. I used to disregard the question — what do you mean, when did I **become** Christian? — I guess my prejudices are that I have never been able to accept proselytizing of any sort — that to me conversion is not the aim of the game so to say — to me this question always seemed to have this tone to it — that I was supposed to share some road to Damascus experience but that I felt and still do that it should be in the way we live our lives and the things we do that should make people want to learn about Jesus. It was a question that could be put in a box with the “have you found the Lord” or “do you know the Lord?” type of questions to which my immediate answers (at least in my head) are the “no — have you lost him” or “no but I know his mother” type of answers. I guess part of this was my

own attempt to understand how my faith, how being Christian fitted into a world so estranged to the practising of religion. I didn't stop to think why these questions may be so important to someone else — to someone who had not grown up with the same influences I had. I had taken my faith for granted.

It was in Thailand four years ago that I was confronted with this question again. I had somehow befriended a nurse from the university I was studying at and she asked if I would accompany her to her own church, a Baptist Church in Chonburi which was in the next town. I had my hesitations but decided to go this once. The first question I was asked when I arrived at the church was “when did I become Christian”. At first I found myself wincing inside as I normally did but explained that both my parents were Christian and so I have always been. This delighted them but I couldn't work out why — was this so special? I talked to them about their families to find that most of them were still Buddhist. I have always felt a calmness about Buddhism and admire its principles but for these women the fact that their families were still Buddhist was a source of unhappiness as they had not found eternal life through Christ. It was through this conversation that I began to understand their question a little better. To them, the decision to follow Christ was to disregard the beliefs and practices of their families and friends. It was to turn from what they had known growing up to turn towards Christ. A decision I am sure was not made lightly. In the readings today we find Abraham being asked by God to “go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you”. Like Abraham these women make the decision to follow God's wishes for them and be different - To be different from those around them. We all know how easy it is to join the crowd, that it takes courage to be different. Jesus Himself was different. He offered a different relationship with God. It would have been a much easier life for Him if He had decided to join the crowd instead. We should have confidence and courage to follow Christ's example and that of Abraham to be different to those whose lives and deeds are in opposition to what we are taught through the scriptures. I didn't have a chance to ask them why they became Christians themselves, but I found I was at the beginning of a journey of faith and understanding of my own.

When did I become Christian? In John's gospel today we read of being reborn of the spirit to enter the Kingdom of God. We have a tradition of welcoming people into the faith and into confidence in Christ through Baptism. Did I become Christian when I was Baptised as a child? Although this was not a decision I made for myself but one that was made for me by my parents and God Parents — one that I made last year on Zara Mann's behalf as her God Mother. Was I born Christian because I was born to two white Anglo-Saxon parents who were both practising Christians? But not everyone who has been brought up in the tradition of Christ has chosen to believe themselves. In our reading from Romans today we are told that it is through faith that Abraham and his descendants were to inherit the world. It was a choice made to have faith in God, to follow the journey of faith and not just accept what we have merely inherited.

If I had been born into another family and culture would I be standing here today? Would I be Christian? Would I choose Christ? I respect the teachings of other faiths and acknowledge that people who truly live by them, live fulfilled lives like those who truly live by the teachings of Christ. So, as a non-believer would I convert? This I honestly cannot answer. And this makes me sad. Not because I feel I would be living an unfulfilled life by practising another faith, but because standing before you today I am Christian and I take comfort in having confidence in Christ. So when did this happen? When did I become Christian if not because of birth or even rebirth through Baptism?

We believe that through Baptism we are cleansed by the Holy Spirit and as Rev. William Barclay writes in his first volume on the Gospel of John, “water and the spirit stand for the cleansing and the strengthening power of Christ, which wipes out the past and which gives us victory in the future.” But is this enough? Is this the complete rebirth that Christ talks to Nicodemus about in the Gospel? I think that while it is important, it is not enough to simply allow ourselves to be cleansed by the Spirit. I feel that the rebirth comes from this **as well as** having confidence in Christ. Having a relationship with Christ that is vulnerable but gives us strength, it is full of faith and hope, it is dependent and reliable. Again I turn to Rev. Barclay to express this in one simple sentence. “The change comes when we love Jesus and allow Him into our hearts”. I became Christian when I allowed Christ into my heart. I cannot be scientific about it — I do not have a time or a date. I am not able to say when I chose to believe as I did not have a road to Damascus experience, nor was I called to faith as dramatically as Abraham, nor was it documented like the Disciples. But I know I became Christian when I allowed Christ into my heart - when I began to have confidence in Him.

So why did I choose to allow Christ into my heart? How is this reflected in my life? I try to live a good life, to be an example of Christ. And last year I was paid the biggest compliment I can imagine. I was talking to a new colleague about a number of issues and it came up in the conversation that I worship here at St Philips. To my astonishment, she turned to me and said I knew you were Christian. I didn't know how I should respond — I asked her why. She said that my demeanour had an element of goodness and peace and inner calm about it that she thought reflected faith in Christ. I hope and pray that I continue to have the courage to allow Christ into my heart to live and work as an example of Christ in the world. It is a relationship with Christ that is sometimes vulnerable and sometimes strong; is dependable and reliant; has hope.

A number of years ago I was not in a good place emotionally. I was depressed. No-one really knew as I was good at hiding it. I guess I did not feel I had any right to feel the way I did — I had been brought up in a good home with very supportive family and friends around me, I had been privileged to travel the world at a young age, and was then studying a course at university that I thoroughly enjoyed. But I was depressed and there were a number of reasons to make me so that I don't want to go into today. Through this time there was one place I found true comfort. This was in prayer. Because I did not have to pretend I was ok - God already knew. While I felt vulnerable at having the walls that I had built up around me taken away, I also found it comforting especially as I tried to deal with my “demons”. Coincidentally it happened to be Lent and we were approaching Good Friday. And it was during a quiet and unnoticed visit to St Philip's that I had a very personal and powerful experience.

I knelt watching this simple but stunning cross, praying, trying to work through my problems. I started to think about the Easter story. I reflected on the humanity of Christ — of His personal and very human experience on the cross. And as I stayed there praying to Christ, I felt a sense of freedom come over me — like I had been able to stand up tall — it was a realisation that I could overcome these demons - that I had begun the healing process. I am not claiming some miraculous exorcism as it might seem. I **am** claiming that confidence in Christ —trusting Christ— opening my heart to Him at a time when I was most vulnerable gave me the strength to overcome the issues I was dealing with.

Like most people there have been times in my life where I have been vulnerable and thankfully, there have been more times where I have been strong, and my faith or confidence in Christ has been my support. To me, confidence in Christ is the realisation that in Christ there is hope, there is strength, there is trust, there is freedom and there is joy. I rejoice in the

knowledge that according to our gospel reading today, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”