

My confidence in Christ

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Lord, journey with us, we pray, as we share together, seeking to follow Jesus.

I have been asked to share a little of my journey of faith. During Lent this year, our lay ministers each talked about “Confidence in Christ” and what it means to them. I thought I might try to do something similar, if I may, as a way looking at some scripture as well just Brian McKinlay’s spiritual biography.

But let me begin with some biography. About a month ago we celebrated the feast of St. Philip. It’s also the feast of “St. James the Less”, as he is called. As I mentioned to a few people at the time, this reminded me of when as a boy of nine, ten and eleven, I attended the St. James the Less Church of England Sunday School in Pomborneit North, a tiny hamlet in the Western District of Victoria. (At the time, my father, John, was the only teacher at the local primary school.)

It was a rather traditional Sunday school and we older children were being prepared for confirmation. I learnt Anglican customs and much of the *Book of Common Prayer* catechism by heart.

So on the feast day of St Philip *and* St James this year, I gave thanks for our family here at St Philip’s, but also for a little Sunday school named after St James, where a faithful lady named Marguerite McGarvie taught me to remember that, in God’s good grace, I have become, as the Catechism says, “a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.”

From the earliest years of my life, I have always felt an assurance that there is a heavenly Father who loves me. But from that time in Pomborneit North, I have also known that I am a person of the church and that my life is bound up with the fellowship of God’s people.

There is second life-forming event from my youngest days that I would like to tell you about, please. As I grew, I began to limp more and more. The medical specialists eventually worked out that I had had poliomyelitis as an infant. The treatment, though painless, was long and tedious. I have been much better off than many that encountered polio, but some effects remain and it has caused some problem or some kind of pain almost every day of my life.

The results of polio forced me to be vulnerable and open, to be someone that needs and accepts help, comfort and support. Once again, I was drawn towards the Christian family. I deeply, deeply, value the love, care and community of God’s people, the church.

I went to Monash University about the same time that a church called Waverley Christian Fellowship was beginning not far from the University. I joined it when there were just a few dozen members and stayed for most of the next 21 years. (Now it is very large and is called City Life Church.) As the church grew, many SE Asian people from the University and nearby joined us. I was a deacon and much involved in pastoral care and teaching among the Asian members of the fellowship. I spent thousands of hours in church work and practical help of all kinds. But equally, I received fellowship, friendship and learning experiences beyond value.

The great commandment is to serve the Lord with all our heart soul, strength and mind. I love the idea of serving God with the best possible theology, liturgy and thinking, while at the same time being open and responsive to the Holy Spirit and the mysteries of our faith. This is one reason why I appreciate being an Anglican.

When I came to Canberra in 1986 to work as a science librarian, even though I had already completed qualifications in arts, teaching, computer science and librarianship, what I was really hoping to do one day was to study theology. I am grateful to the Lord that I am now enjoying the opportunity to do that.

As my church in Melbourne had not been part of a denomination, I looked around Canberra for a fellowship to join. After a while I was guided to St. George's Anglican in Pearce, which is where I was when I met James. Once again we stayed for a long time — I was there for about 16 years — until we came here a year ago. While at St George's, on separate occasions James and I were received by Bishop George into communicant membership of the Anglican Church.

At St George's, I was Minister of the Word at two services per month, once at eight o'clock and once at ten o'clock, as well as leading intercessions once a month on other Sundays in each service. I also preached a few times. James did many things, too. I mention this only to say that I have had some training and experience in the role of a Lay Minister and to thank Rob who has been gracious enough to take it largely on trust that I would do the job responsibly. Forgive me for being rather formal, but I want to say firmly and unequivocally that I will always submit myself to the headship and leadership of Rob and the Parish Wardens in anything to do with the life of our parish. That is essential. Over the years I believe God has taught me that, even though I may have gifts and strengths, for my own safety and growth I must stay under the covering of leadership — it's part of that vulnerability I mentioned earlier. My job is to be a skillful servant, an encourager — someone like Aaron and Hur, who held up the arms of Moses so that the battle could be won. Do you remember the story? You can find it Exodus 17.

Next Saturday is the feast of St. Barnabas, whose name means "son of consolation" or "son of encouragement" (Acts 4.36). I love to give and receive encouragement!

All this, then, to say that what gives me confidence in Christ — who give me confidence actually — is God's people, indwelt by the Spirit, living together as God's house. For the last part of my words, I want to illustrate this with some scripture verses especially precious to me.

Psalm 27: One thing I have asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

Psalm 84: How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. [...] Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. [...] For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

Psalm 93: The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God.

I am glad that the story of Abraham is among our readings today (Genesis 12.1-9, Romans 4.13-25), for Abraham's journey speaks to me of the journey that I believe God has challenged me, and perhaps all of us, to undertake in our different ways. I love the commentary on Abraham's faith found in Hebrews chapter 11:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. [...] For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

That's what I look for, that's my hope: a city, the church, the people of God, glorious, spotless, beautiful, redeemed, and brought to a glorious inheritance in Christ. "Fine words," one might say. But for me, they mean simple, practical, expression of love and worshipful work, here, now, today — with patience and persistence. That's why, after only a year in this parish, I have presumed to accept roles as Parish councilor, a Synod representative and a candidate for lay ministry. It's simply because I really, really care about God's people and God's family, to serve them with all that I have and all that I am. Perhaps that's why I sometimes seem too anxious to get things done. I pray you will forgive me if that has been so. James and I are honored and thankful for the welcome we have received here; this has been best shown by allowing us to get to work!

It is my desire above all, to be a pillar in God's house — not to be shaken, but to stand, to support, to encourage and, once again, to serve, with skill, hopefully with humility and, God willing, with wisdom.

Revelation 3: "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: "I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. [...] [H]old fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."

That's what I look towards. It's part of why I have confidence in Christ.