

My Faith Journey. Paul Mitchell. First Sunday in Lent. 18 February 2018

This Lent I am beginning a pattern which I intend to continue across the years ahead. Lent is a time of shared journeying and I have found in other parishes that our journey is richer when we share with one another deeply. I have asked ten other members of the community here to share their faith journeys with us over the coming weeks. As we share please listen for the ways in which these stories resonate with your own. Listen for the connections and shared experiences. Listen and be prepared to be surprised and inspired and encouraged by the variety of the ways in which this journey with God is undertaken and experienced. Be gentle with the speakers and with yourselves, because there may also be some tears.

To begin, I want to share some of my own story. As you will have seen since I arrived here in Toowoomba, my experience of God, the Church, and life are woven into most of my sermons!

I am what has been called a 'cradle Anglican'. I was born into a family deeply connected to the life of the church, regularly worshipping, engaged in the activities of the church, and seeking to reflect on and live out the call of God. I didn't know that at the time with my head, though I think I did with my heart.

One month after I was born I was baptized in the newly built Saint David's Anglican Church in Burnside in Adelaide. I may have been one of the first to be baptized there! My parents had been married in the old church building and even at the time of their wedding it was being expanded to accommodate the growing congregation in the late 50s/early 60s. My father was very involved in the building committee. He told me some years later that there were some things he was determined to ensure. One was that the newfangled idea of the priest standing behind the altar would NOT be able to happen there, so a large pit was placed in the space behind the altar with a light to shine up onto the enormous cross fixed to the eastern wall.

Now that pit has been filled and the clergy preside across the altar there, something my father became comfortable with later after he was ordained in his 40s. My parents remained conservative in some of their views, including reticence about the rightness of women's ordination. At first I accepted that view but later it was the experience of my own call to ordained ministry and exposure to women whose call was, as far as I could see, just as valid as mine, which changed my mind. If God was doing the calling then it was my narrow view which needed to change.

I grew up in the church. I went to Sunday School once, but didn't really enjoy it. I much preferred the music and action and involvement in the service with everyone else! From about 8 years old I was involved in a large CEBS (Church of England Boys Society) group. While that group gave me some foundations of knowledge and some fun experiences it was also a difficult time. I sensed that there was something wrong but it was many years before I was able to identify what exactly. It was later revealed that across CEBS there were many paedophiles who were using the trust they had been given to abuse. There were many good faithful CEBS leaders. But there were some who were evil.

The leader of that group turned out to be the most prolific abuser in the Diocese of Adelaide. He was also the State Commissioner of CEBS. He didn't target me, though another CEBS leader did, who was also my godfather. I know that there are many people who have experienced this first hand, for themselves or in their families, who have found it impossible to remain in the church community. I am thankful for the courage of the many others who have also remained and who see the connection with God as part of the answer to the experience of being abused, not as a barrier.

In the year I was turning 12 there was an opportunity to explore confirmation. I remember distinctly a conversation with my mother. She and I sat together and she asked me if I believed in God. I answered, honestly, I was not sure. She asked me to think about the wind. We cannot see the wind, but we can see the effects of the wind. It is a simple analogy but it has stayed with me. I came back some time later and told her I had decided that I think I did believe and I wanted to learn more. For those confirmation classes we returned to St David's Burnside.

The preparation for confirmation was very boring. It involved learning by heart the Catechism of the Church. We sat in the hard pews and recited and recited until we could parrot back the words. Looking at that experience I am not surprised that, out of the 25 candidates, two weeks after the confirmation I was the only one still regularly attending services. For me it wasn't about the classes. I already knew that I was loved and had already begun the ongoing conversation with God which is prayer. When the newly arrived Archbishop of Adelaide, Keith Rayner, lifted his hands from my head on that confirmation day I thought I would float. The same experience, even more intense, came later when Keith Rayner also ordained me as Deacon and Priest.

When I was about 14 I felt a call to ordained ministry. It came through a friend. As a class from School (I went to Concordia Lutheran College) we had been to see a movie called The Hiding Place, the story of Corrie Ten Boom and her response to Nazi oppression by hiding Jewish people in Holland. It was the sort of movie that led us to ask of each other 'what will you do with your life?' A friend turned to me and said "I have always thought you would be a priest." Instead of being a shock, even though it had never been suggested before, it felt right. I prayed, talked to people I trusted, explored and then began the path towards where I am now.

I was too young to go straight to Theological College from School so I went and did a BA first in Politics, History, Psychology with some Theology thrown in. From what you have heard me speak about since I arrived I am sure none of that mix of subjects is a surprise! I studied and threw myself into learning and the formation of my life by God, but there was still something missing. In the middle of what would have been my second to last year before ordination I was feeling lost. I knew I was still called to be a priest but felt I had lost my way.

We had compulsory times of meditation in the pattern of the College life. To make sure we didn't just sleep or do anything else apart from a narrow interpretation of praying we had to be outside. I was sitting on a wooden bench one day, wrestling with the direction of my life, and I felt someone sit beside me and put an arm around me. BUT when I looked there was no one there. I could still feel the arm around my shoulders but couldn't see anyone. I knew I was being held by God. That wasn't the only time I have had that sort of experience.

From that moment I made a series of decisions which included leaving Theological College. The Warden at the time said if I went I would never be back. Honestly at the time I wasn't sure myself. I went first to India where I participated in a meeting for 15,000 people in Madras, organised by the Taizé Community.

After some time sightseeing in the UK with Peter, my friend who came to Toowoomba for my Commissioning, I went to Taizé in France, intending to stay for a short time then work out what to do next. One of the first things I saw when I entered the Church of the Reconciliation was a copy of a seventh century icon depicting Jesus with his arm around the shoulders of a believer. My experience that day in the grounds of the College was affirmed. I stayed in Taizé, working for them, and I have already shared some of the experiences of those days. While working in London for the community I realised the call to return, continue my studies and to continue to seek to serve through ordained ministry. However far I wandered and wherever I was I knew I was held and prodded by God.

I know, especially from that continuing conversation which is prayer, that often God looks at me and there is eye rolling and head shaking. My path has certainly not been straight, narrow or always pure. Yet I know I am held in that continuing embrace.

The privilege of being able to sit with people celebrating life, birth, marriage and a myriad of joyful times touches me deeply. It is not because of who I am but because of who God is. The privilege of being able to sit with people as they wrestle with life when it sucks is also profound. Sudden death, illness, disaster and disappointment can be heart-wrenching. I have had my share, though I am always amazed when I meet people who live with such enormous suffering who find the courage to get up again each morning. Whatever comfort or encouragement I am able to give at times like that comes not because of who I am but because of who God is.

Now, being here, having come to Toowoomba, I am even more deeply aware of being led. One of the things that I wrestled with early in my life was the desire to control what was happening around me and into the future. I still wrestle with that sometimes. Learning to trust, to be open is essential. Planning, preparation, looking to the future still happen. But I need to keep being reminded that only life woven with God will not unravel.

When I invited people to consider their own faith journeys I asked them to think about people, places, books and passages from scripture which have encouraged them and remained with them on this journey. For me there are so many of those things! But I will end with a passage which I hold in my heart often, and which seems to me to describe the pattern of my life. Hebrews 12 verse 1 and the beginning of verse 2: *"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."* Some day I will preach on that wonderful passage and unpack it for us. Encouragement. Honesty. Perseverance. Courage. Faith. And the companionship of Jesus. Without all these I would not be here. My journey has been shaped by God through these things.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell