

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
St Peter's Box Hill  
I Corinthians 1:1-9  
January 20,2008

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CHRISTIAN CONFIDENCE

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Over the holiday season I have had quite a binge of reading Christmas gifts. My family and friends are well trained and know that nothing gives me greater delight than a book order that I can choose for myself.

Detective novels, biography, contemporary fiction are all included. One of the books that have spoken to me is the late Donald Horne's last book titled "Memoirs on Dying." His wife who pens the penultimate chapter writes the last chapter.

Horne was a secular humanist who does not believe in God. On one occasion his son asks him if he is a bit frightened about death. "He responds that he has not feared death since he gave up believe in God in his matriculation year." I compared this with another powerful book by the late Michael Mayne - a former dean of Westminster Abbey entitled "The Enduring Melody" an account of his final ten months whilst facing an incurable cancer.

I compared the two books; they shared many aspects of that last journey. A fundamental honesty, a regret of what they were leaving, a sense of gratitude for support from others.

As a Christian and Priest and Bishop I prefer the sense of hope that comes through Mayne's book. Indeed it was a book that I read in part to my wife in her final weeks. Chief among them is this extract from a letter Mayne received just prior to his death.

"I rest on God who will assuredly not allow me to find the leaning of life in his love and forgiveness, to be wholly dependant upon him for the gift of myself, and then to destroy that meaning and revoke that gift.

He who holds me in existence now can and will hold me in it still, through and beyond the dissolution of my mortal frame.

For this is the essence of love, to affirm the right of the beloved to exist. And what God affirms, nothing and no-one can contradict."

We both found a great sense of Christian confidence in those words and I often come back to them.

In our post modern age confidence is a virtue in short rations among many people.

The only confidence that many have is the confidence that we cannot be confident about life.

Yet the New Testament reading this morning is all about confidence and in three words sums up that paragraph I read from Mayne. "God is faithful"

Unfortunately this can become lost in the dogmatism of some Christians..It was this dogmatism that did much to turn Donald Horne off organised religion and eventually God.

The second reading this morning provides the introduction of a letter or an epistle by St Paul to the Church at Corinth., As we read through this epistle we are confronted by a real can of "ecclesiastical " worms. Their enthusiasm ( or at least some of them) lead them to conclude that they had already arrived at the fullness of the Christian life. Nothing more could be added to their faith or experience - They had arrived!

Cadbury a contemporary Nt scholar describes the Corinthian Church as an "over converted Church." I can understand what Cadbury means, for there are some Christians today who appear to be over-converted; so certain and pious that for me they neither inspire or encourage faith but usually have the contrary effect. On the other hand a critical comment of many contemporary churches are that they are "under converted" and often display indecision, hesitancy and vagueness. For many this uncertainty has developed from disappointment with organised religion and the Christian Church. Unfortunately it has been transferred to the essence of faith and Christian discipleship.

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That is why it is important to hear again the words of the epistle. It points to some powerful clues that are relevant for a Christian Confidence that is neither arrogant or smug but life giving and empowering.

We can be confident as Christians for some fundamental reasons that are still contemporary today.

We can be confident

(1) BECAUSE GOD IS FAITHFUL

"God is faithful" is a recurring theme throughout the entire bible.

God is faithful

This faithfulness is promised and seen at the very heart of the gospel. John 3:16. In the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus we see the ultimate signs of God's faithfulness.

It is a declaration that God is faithful in keeping his promises.

to a Church -seeking to be faithful in mission,

" Lo I am with you always."

to Christians who feel confused with the complexities of a new age,

"where two or three are gathered together in my name"

to those who feel disempowered by experience or events,

" what you ask for in prayer believing--"

God is faithful; not that we are promised exemption from life's struggles or hardships. But rather in the midst of them he promises and provides resources which enable us to face life creatively and with direction.

Later in this long letter to the Corinthians Paul picks up this theme again;

"God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." ( I Corinthians 10:13)

This theme is basic to the Christian gospel but like all basic things they can be overlooked and taken for granted.

Gospel ??? Do we believe it?

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We can be confident because God is faithful. because

## (2) GOD HAS CALLED US.

This theme appears in a number of ways in the nine verses of the New Testament reading.

V.1 Paul called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God."

V2 " To the Church of God that is in Corinth called to be Saints  
( holy)

V9 " God is faithful, by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son"

Yes the evangelical truth is correct - we do need to call upon God whether this is called a decision, response or commitment.

But like all truths it does need the counterbalance which is that GOD HAS CALLED US.

God has called us to be Christians and we celebrate this in baptism. Whilst there is always tremendous power in the baptism of an adult we should not minimise the truth of the baptism of infants or children. When we baptise a baby we are witnessing to the reality that Christ loves us before we can respond to him.

This sense of call has always been a strength in my ministry as a Deacon, Priest and Bishop. That sense of call affirmed by the Laying on of Hands in Ordination has given me a strong sense of affirmation and confidence. I feel for clergy who have lost that sense of empowerment and confidence or whose theology does not make room for the tremendous grace of God.

We can be confident as Christians because God is faithful  
has called us.

## (3) BECAUSE GOD HAS GIFTED US.

Paul could write to this turbulent and divided church " you are not lacking in any spiritual gift"

This passage is one of the most hopeful in the New Testament. Paul is saying to this unexceptional; group of Christians living in Corinth with all their fault, and division;

" that within their gathering all the gifts were present which God has given to his church."

That is not a promise reserved for Corinth in the first century but is available to us at St Peter's this morning.

I discovered as a Diocesan Bishop that often the best time of growth in ministry was when a parish was vacant - i.e. without an Incumbent. In country communities without retired or sector priests living nearby the task of ministry came back to where it belongs - to the baptised.

Often at a parish meeting we would note the essential tasks of ministry which needed to be maintained - and then allocate them to different people within the community.

Often it meant that when a Priest came six or twelve months afterwards that he or she were able to concentrate upon their ministry instead of becoming waylaid by other tasks and functions.

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Some of you will know that I am in the habit of rephrasing sentences when people say " I don't have much to offer"; I am only a ----.

The New Testament declares that we can be confident in our Christian discipleship because we have been gifted by God, called by God who is faithful.

We can also be confident as Christians

(4) BECAUSE GOD HAS ENRICHED US.

"In every way you have been enriched in him"

The process of enrichment involves making up that which is lacking in the original mineral by adding another source.

This is what Paul says that God offers and has done with us. So often we need to hear these promises and allow them to become established within our lives.

Finally we can be confident because

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(5) GOD WILL STRENGTHEN US TO THE END.

He will keep you strong,

firm - or sustain you to the end ... different translations.

The God who promises also delivers. It is not as if we have been left orphaned, with no direction and sustenance for the interim, much less that we will be left stranded as we face the future.

In other words it adds the dimension that we can be confident not only in this life but also after death. Recently I was speaking with another retired Bishop who is a little older than myself.

He both testified and lamented; " it's been great fun but it has all gone so quickly" I can identify with that sentiment but can with authenticity say with the poet;

"grow old with me the best is yet to come,  
the last of life for which the first was made."

We can be confident not that we will be exempt from the tragedies of life or the infirmities of our body and mind; but because we are sustained to the end death is not the final word.

We need these words from St Paul this morning.

We can be confident

because God is faithful,

has called us,

gifted us,

enriched us

and will sustain us.

That provides us with the confidence tht enabled Michael Mayne to die in the confidence "that what God affirms and offers nothing and no-one can contradict or cancel." God is faithful and of that we can be confident..