Lent 5A Reflection on “Confidence” April 01 2020

St Peter’s Lutheran Church Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

‘Peace that demands unreal conditions is a deception. There is no life without work, anxieties, or tensions. Peace is not found in avoiding these but in understanding them and confidently controlling their force. One of the most tranquil faces in art is Raphael’s St Nicholas, an intensively active bishop. The stories about his miracles may be legends, but they attest to his great reputation for practical involvement in the personal distresses of his people. Even here, Raphael shows him not lost in silent prayer but reading, with his crozier upright in his hand. The unmistakable inner confidence we can see has nothing at all to do with an unstressed life; it comes from his insight into the significance of those stresses, their value and their motivation’ (Beckett:72).

Would you like to hear a joke to kick things off tonight? Because you’re not here to throw rotten tomatoes at me, I’m going to be brave and tell you one.

Two friends are walking through a game park and they come across a lion that has not eaten for days. The lion starts chasing the two friends. They run as fast as they can but one of them runs out of puff and decides to stop running and say a prayer, "Please turn this lion into a Christian, Lord." He looks to see if the lion is still chasing and he sees the lion on its knees. Happy to see his prayer answered, he turns around and heads towards the lion. As he comes closer to the lion, he hears the lion praying: "Thank you Lord for the food I am about to receive."

My two cents worth: Confidence does not equate with stupidity.

Dear Saints, how perfect is Holy Spirit’s planning and timing that he should guide and teach us this evening about… confidence.

Let’s face it, it’s hard to be confident if there’s been a death or divorce in your family recently; if your job is at risk; if your marriage is shaky; if someone in your family is facing a serious problem with their health.

On the other hand, it’s easy to feel confident when your family is healthy, your income is ample, your superannuation is growing, your sinuses have overcome Adelaide’s hay fever season, and your aches and pains are minimal.

But both these scenarios are extremely superficial. God is almost superfluous in such circumstances. In the former case, we believe that we have to be strong and deal with things in our own strength. In the latter, we tend to congratulate ourselves on how well we’re doing.

Real confidence, biblical confidence, especially poignant in these uncertain times, is much greater and deeper than our feelings or thoughts. It’s based not on our circumstances, but on God’s sufficiency; not on our productivity, but on God’s provision; not on our performance, but on God’s providence. St Paul is renowned for his confidence and inspires us this evening with this time-honoured wisdom: *“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. 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”* (1 Corinthians 10:13). If you study a catalogue of Paul’s trials, you will find that he is definitely qualified to speak this way on God’s behalf.

There is a big difference between self-confidence and God-confidence, and no one needs to guess which one helps us combat the greatest human weakness - temptation.

Beloved Saints, we’re all susceptible to temptation, nobody is immune to succumbing to it. I can assure you that every temptation that comes your way, is directed at many others as well. The great temptation at this very moment is to let this worldwide pandemic consume our attention, thus drawing us away from our devotion to God. Saints, let’s stand together (figuratively of course, I don’t want anyone getting arrested) with a determination to withstand temptation. There are two ways we can go. With God-confidence we will stand. With self-confidence we will fall.

It’ always our sin-weakened nature that yields to temptation. I don’t say this to degrade anyone, or to make anyone feel invalidated and unworthy, but to make everyone realise that we ALWAYS NEED JESUS. We need Jesus more than every breath we take, not only for our salvation, but to finish the race, having kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7).

Sadly, there are those who think they can't fall to any temptation, they can't err, and they adopt an "holier than thou" attitude. The risk is that they may fall and struggle to stand again. Often, when such people fall, they’re unable to rise again due to their pride and the shame it has brought them, and their hearts harden.

It’s also true that we all need to fall sometimes, and God will let us, lest we risk feeling more righteous than others, becoming judgemental and ready to blame. We can fall into the trap of thinking we are better than others. Sometimes God may allow us to fall seemingly endlessly, until we realise it is only by God’s grace that we stand or have been standing for as long as we have.

Dear friends, even though you will fall, Jesus, who has been tempted in every conceivable way, and triumphed, will raise you up again; you will prevail.

It’s the devil’s lie that says you have to be strong, you have to be independent, you have to be better than everyone else, and only the fittest will survive. Bunkem. The devil is a liar. Jesus has already overcome the devil and says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Always stand in the strength of the Lord. Always depend on God’s wisdom and his blessings. Be God-confident, not self-confident.

To be self-confident is to be proud and pride comes before the fall. To be God-confident is to be humble and rely on what he has done for us in Christ.

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS. Jesus leads the way. Jesus was humble. Jesus relied on God in all things. Jesus was God-confident, completely emptying himself of his heavenly status and taking on the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7). Rely on God in all things, and Jesus will help you resist temptation, just as he did in the wilderness. Be God-confident, not self-confident.

For the mathematicians among us, try this on for size: The shortest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 117. The longest chapter in the Bible [one of Luther’s favourites] is Psalm 119. The chapter between the two is Psalm 118, which also happens to be the exact middle chapter of the Bible. There are 594 chapters before Psalm 118 and there are 594 chapters after Psalm 118. And the middle verse in the Bible? Verse 8 of Psalm 118 which says… “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in mortals” (NRSV). I’ll say it again: “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in mortals”. Coincidence? Or, “… in accordance with the eternal purpose that he [God] has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him” (Ephesians 3:11-12).

So, from where do we gain our confidence? Our spouse? Our best friend? Ourselves? No... Our confidence comes from having access to God through faith in Jesus. Does our confidence come from our achievements, our education, our wits, or our problem-solving abilities? No... Our confidence comes from having access to God through faith in Jesus. Does our confidence come from our possessions, our health insurance, our government? Of course not. Is there any person on this planet, is there any object in this whole world, is there any ideal, concept or philosophy, that we gain our confidence from? No. Should we get caught up in all the hype and hysteria surrounding this coronavirus? No! Regardless of anything that happens in this world, including this insipid pandemic, we are assured that we have access to God’s loving grace, protection and provision through faith in Jesus according to God’s eternal purpose. Be God-confident, Saints. Be God-confident. Amen.

Almighty God, please cause us to depend on you in all things that we will be God-confident not self-confident, in Jesus name. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.