**My Testimony – How I found Christ in Me Marie Walsh 24/04/2020**

In the letters of St Paul to the church in Galatia, he writes urgently- Remember the Good News. Remember what it felt like when you met Christ, when you trusted that God’s desire for you was love, that the Spirit came into your life to transform you. Remember, says Paul, and don’t let go of the Good News that God has come to us in Christ and the Good News that God is not finished with the world but will come again.

In Acts 22 and 26, Paul imprisoned and in chains, gives his testimony to King Agrippa. He describes his old life, the impact that Christ has had upon him, and the way encountering Jesus turned his own sense of faith and identity upside down. Paul explains that when we become bound up with Christ, when we align our life with Christ’s life, it is as though we become a whole new person. It is as though we receive a whole new identity, learning again from scratch who we are.

Paul speaks of his incorporation into Christ. Not just God meeting him in the coming of the Christ child. Not just God promising that in the fullness of time all things would be made new. But God living within Paul, breathing life into his actions, slowly transforming his frailties, aligning his life to the love modelled by Jesus. Paul says:

*“What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn’t work. So I quit being a “law man” so that I could be God’s man. Christ’s life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not “mine,” but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.”Galatians 2:19-21(MSG)*

Remember that Paul had persecuted the early disciples of Jesus.

And he ended up as a founder, teacher and companion of churches.

His letters show us the passion and fervour of his life, and that he, alongside the churches he partnered with, was trying to work out many of the same questions of faith as we grapple with even now. The questions of what it means to live in the messy middle.

My story of faith reads like Paul’s, in that my encounter with God in a moment has turned absolutely everything upside down and I can feel the Holy Spirit work within in.

So what was my moment of transformation, when I could see that I died with Christ and rose again with him living within me?

I normally sit at the back of the church, and I often silently cry during worship- - not because I am sad, but because I have understood what it means to know God's love, to feel Christ within me, to know Him and feel the peace He brings. All the dots have been connected and I know what I have been searching for, why I needed to start living, rather than live dying, to listen, to believe and let go. To surrender to my God. The veil has been lifted and I can finally see.

On November 2, 2018, I was on my way home from a “Kids of Nauru Prayer Virgil” in Sydney Travelling with me was my minister, Rev Bec Lindsey from Hope Uniting Church, Maroubra. I said to Bec that I have often felt like a refugee, not because I am fleeing persecution, war or natural disaster in my homeland, but because I have never had a home where I have felt safe, and  because my body often feels displaced and fragmented from within.

 Those of you who know me intimately, are aware that I have a history of complex trauma, due to, what mental health professionals call, catastrophic child abuse, At the age of 9, I tried to end my life. I was briefly hospitalised, then sent home and the abuse continued into my teenager and adult years. From parents, to other multiple childhood perpetrators, various partners and finally my husband- abuse became a normal and secretive part of my life. I lied in order to protect my perpetrators, under threat of death. I coped with the pain of the abuse they perpetrated on me by self-harming, drinking, drug taking, escaping into homelessness- which led to further abuse- and numerous attempts to end my life because of the never-ending abyss of pain, anguish, hopelessness, isolation and darkness that swallowed me. I was the walking dead.

After 10 years of domestic violence, I left my husband yet the abuse continued through breaches of AVO’s, family court battles, nightmares- a life lived in fear. I had also ceased working full-time due to a work-related incident.

In 2008, trying to support my two young childrenon a minimal income I soon found myself at the Centrelink office once again asking for a referral for a food voucher. Having already used all my entitlements, I was told “no”. I was absolutely devastated and broke down crying. A social worker heard me, and spoke to me. She handed me a flyer from an organisation called “Christians against Poverty’ (CAP) and told me to try them.

And Jesus came to me through a knock on my door and standing there was Christina holding a box fruit and vegetables, who would change my life forever.

Christina, a volunteer with CAP was also a Christian who lived by her faith. She helped me with my debts and would often invite me to church but I always said “no”. I did not believe in God. In fact, I hated Him. My mother had always told me and that God punished me because I was bad, “Satan’s Child”. Another perpetrator told me God told him to hurt me because God loves me. Confessing to my priest that I had a termination as a young teenager, after having been violently raped, he called me a “murderer” and I was told that I will never be buried by the church and then told to leave his church. Going to another church to be married, I went to my priest for help after my husband had been hitting me, only to be told, “I needed to be a better wife and then he wouldn’t hit me”. So yes, I hated God and never wanted to step foot ion His house again.

In Dec 2008, Christina gave me an invitation to her church’s Christmas Spectacular. My son, hungry and looking at the flyer said to me, “Can we go. There’s free food.” I couldn’t bear the thought that my son was starving so I agreed. We arrived at the church, which looked nothing like the churches I had been to previously, and sat inside. Suddenly they were playing music with drums and guitars, and they were singing – I thought that wasn’t allowed in church.

And then the service began.

Someone inside me started to stir, something unfamiliar yet at the same time welcoming. I felt my senses come alive, my heart beating, the blood pouring through my veins, my breath-inhaling and exhaling, sounds I have never heard before, smells, sights, bright and vivid- for the first time in my life, I felt alive!

And as I listened to the message from the Bible, this woman came up to me, and put $20 in my hand saying “The Lord wants you to have this.” And then she was gone, she never gave me her name or told me how she knew I had no money, and needed milk and bread so that we could have something to eat.

After the service we went out to the courtyard. There were food stalls with pizza and kebabs. My son wanted a kebab and the queue was long. When it was finally our turn, the kebabs had just finished and all that was left was pizza. My son was disappointed but we thankfully took the pizza. As we walked away from the stall, the same lady who had given me the money in the church, was in front of me again. She said that she had enough to eat and had an extra kebab, would my son like to eat it. Of course, he took it and again she disappeared.

That night was like no other. The feeling inside me that had started in church had grown into a thirst for more. I needed to go back to that church. Opening the first page of the bible they gave me in church, I eagerly read it, savouring ever word- I needed to know more about who this Jesus person was, who God was and the Holy Spirit. There was a fire burning inside me that I could not put out. And it was there that I gave my life to Christ.

Christina and her husband Neil did not see me as a demon, mental case, alcoholic, drug addict or homeless bum. They saw me, a child of God, who like Jesus had been persecuted, abused. And when she held me in her arms and I cried for first time in many years, really cried for all that I had lost, for the child that had been hurt. It was in her arms that I saw for the first time that God had been there with me all along, from the very beginning. He was there, when I was pleading for the pain to stop, the pain coming from the people who were meant to be my parents, my carer, my protector.

Yet it was God who protected me, who saved me. Jesus wept when He saw was happening to His child and with His Father, they saved me when I was too young to protect myself, too young to even understand who God was.

The long term affects of childhood trauma has affected every area of my life. But through death I have found life. I am human and I am vulnerable and I don’t know all the answers but I do know that God loves me. I can leave my pain at the foot of the cross and Jesus carries it for His child. He walks with me, He carries me, and He holds me when I hold my pain. I never gave anyone permission to hurt me. I do give myself to heal with Christ walking alongside me, carrying me and holding me when I hold my pain. I am no longer afraid to be authentic, to take up my cross and follow Jesus.

I once said in Bible Study at Hope Uniting Church that God does not discriminate. My minister said, “He goes to those who are the most broken first.” But in some way, we are all broken, and minimising that by comparing ourselves to others, is irrelevant. There will always be someone worse off then you, but the real beauty is that God will always find you in your darkness. He is my refuge. My Saviour. My Hope. My Healer. My Lord- and I would lay down my life for Him.

Before coming to Eden, I was homeless, sleeping rough in the Blue Mountains in Katoomba. Cold, hungry, homeless, having had people spilt on me and urinate on me, while I slept, I woke up in pouring rain, feeling devastated and hopeless. Sitting next to me on the kerb was a young man, 27yrs old who has been homeless since he left his home in the Northern Territory at the age of 17. Looking at me, he quite simply said, "Thank God for this shops awning, otherwise we would also be standing in the rain." Such a simple statement that keeps coming back to me.

God does not discriminate; we all go through times of trouble, times of pain. We face stigma and discrimination from others and from within ourselves. God offers the same shelter within His house to everyone - we are the ones with free will to stand in the rain or under cover, even when we can't see how much we have in God. He always offers us shelter, but it is up to us to take the first step (I do realise you all know this, but feels good to write it).

From the depths of the Nazi death camps, Corrie ten Boom, who spent time in a concentration camp after she was arrested for helping Jews wrote:

*“No matter how deep our darkness. He is deeper still”*

Jesus was there suffering when I was suffering. Every tear I shed, He sheds.

God never lets go of us. Jesus is there always, even when you can’t see Him or hear Him or feel Him. He is there and through the blood of the cross, we can anchor ourselves in Him.

So now I walk with Jesus. He is the centre of my life. My Saviour. My Lord. My Healer. I am passionate for God, for Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I have transformed my life from within so that I might become more and more like Christ.

And just like Jesus, I humble myself, fighting for those who cannot be seen, who cannot be heard, who have no voice. I seek justice for the most marginalised and vulnerable in our community. I am passionate about Christ, human rights and mental health reform. I can't change my past but I can help change it for others. and in turn with God walking alongside me, I am healing, as He sends out "beacons of hope" to light my path, that my feet always seems to find, even when I can't feel my feet let alone know where the ground could possibly be.

We live in a broken world where there is a lot of pain and a lot of trouble. Jesus offers us peace, through a personal intermate relationship – we share the same space, the same tears and the same joy.

No matter how broken we are, we belong to God and He can make us whole.

I never gave anyone permission to hurt me. I do give myself permission to feel, to grieve, to heal, to grow, to love, to live connecting with others as I ground myself by connecting to my body, to the earth, to my God.

And as we stand in this place (via zoom), may we recognise Christ in us today as watch and wait for signs of God’s presence, even now transforming our lives, even now turning the world upside down with love for His Creation.