

Commissioned to be Confident

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[0 : 00] Let me ask you a question. What would it take for you to have confidence in somebody?

A 21-year-old music student got on board the cheapest ship she could find that was calling at as many different countries as she could possibly find. And she got on board this ship with a sense of confidence and conviction that God had told her to do just that. And when she got on board the ship, she simply prayed, God, tell me when we get to whatever port it is that you want me to disembark. With confidence she got on board that ship and with confidence she prayed that prayer until eventually she disembarked in Hong Kong and made her way to a place called the Walled City, a place basically controlled by gangs.

And so it was that for over half a century, this woman lived, made her home with and served Christ in that place that was overrun by gang warfare, drugs and crime.

She wrote this. I loved this dark place. I hated what was happening in it, but I wanted to be nowhere else.

It was almost as if I could already see another city in its place, and that city was ablaze with a light. It was my dream. There was no more crying, no more death or pain. The sick were healed.

[2 : 09] Addicts set free. The hungry filled. There were families for orphans, homes for the homeless, and new dignity for the homeless, and new dignity for those who lived in shame.

I've no idea of how to bring this about, but with visionary zeal imagined introducing the walled city people to the one who could change it all. Jesus.

So it was with confidence that this woman served in that place for such a long time. This woman's name, by the way, was Jackie Pullinger. And she famously said this.

God wants us to have softened hearts and toughened feet. The problem is, is that too often it's the other way around and we have hardened hearts and softened feet. But confidence in God is something mysteriously that can get hold of a person and send that person into those places of situations where it's dangerous, it's tough, it's not where we want to be. And yet it can melt the heart that would otherwise become cynical and harden those feet so that we dare to go into those places. Not staying where we're comfortable, but daring to go into those places where resilience is needed. Soften hearts and hardened feet.

That's what confidence does. So let me ask you the question again, what is it that would give you confidence in someone? We're starting a series this week, which we're running right through the autumn here, looking at precisely that question. What does it mean to have confidence in Jesus Christ?

[4 : 15] And in our reading today, we see Jesus right at the end of Matthew's account of the life of Jesus. Jesus has been raised from the dead. And before he returns to his Father in heaven, he sends his disciples out. It's called the Great Commission.

And in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the one who gives his disciples confidence. He says, I want you to go and I want you to make disciples. Notice he doesn't say just go off and convert people.

He says, I want you to make disciples in all nations, baptising them, teaching them everything that I've taught you. He says this, remember, I am with you always.

That is vital to what Christian confidence is about, that Christ is with us always. We might not be conscious of it at all times. We can't see him. We can't reach out and touch him. But that is at the heart of our Christian convictions and the basis of our confidence that Christ is there. He is with you.

It's interesting that it comes right at the end of Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus, because it also begins Matthew's Gospel right in the early part of Matthew's Gospel, where we see the angel visits Joseph and tells Joseph that the baby Jesus is going to be born. And Joseph is told that Jesus will be Emmanuel, which points us back to Old Testament prophecy. Emmanuel means God with us.

[6 : 02] And so Matthew's Gospel begins and ends with that statement that God in Jesus is with us. But of course, at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, before Jesus is even born, nobody has any idea what that means, what it looks like. It's only when we get to the end of Matthew's Gospel, in the reading that we had this morning, when Jesus has lived his life on earth, that then people know what that means, what that looks like, because they've seen what Jesus did, that he went to the cross. And that is what it means when we know that we can be confident in God because he is with us, because he has shown us in Jesus what it means for him to be with us. He goes with us and goes ahead of us to those places we haven't been yet, even death. It's impossible to sum up in a few words what the death of Jesus means.

It's perplexed theologians for centuries. And until we get to eternity, we will never, ever really be able to get our minds around this. But I think the best that I can kind of come up with my own human understanding is that although I don't pretend to understand exactly what the cross of Jesus means and why he died for us, for me, what I see in the death of Jesus and when I'm told that God is in that death, is that I see the God who knows what it is to die. The God who created us and gives us life has actually gone to the point of death himself. So that when Jesus dies on the cross, it is God's way of saying to us, you're not on your own. I've been even to the point of death and being buried and come out the other side. And you can look at that and therefore know that there is nothing, nothing in this life that you can face that you face without me. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15, that the sting of death, the sting of death has been removed. We still face challenges, we still face the reality of dying and indeed death, but somehow death is strangely not the same because its sting has been removed in Jesus. That is the God who is with us and that is the God in whom we can have confidence.

Years ago, the evangelist, the late David Watson, told the story of how one day he looked out in the garden, saw his daughter who was in a panic. She was panicking because there was a bee buzzing around her. She was frightened. And so he ran out to her, wrapped his arms around her. And after a few moments, his daughter felt her father go stiff and then relaxed. And then he released her and he said, it's okay now darling, you don't need to worry. I've just been stung by the bee.

And yet, apparently she still didn't seem that reassured by that. And I wonder if what we have there is something of a picture of what we can be like. We hear the story of Jesus, we read in Paul, that the sting of death has been removed and yet somehow we find it hard to lay hold of confidence in that. The Christian gospel says, God is with you. Look at Jesus and see that story that death was not the end. But it's been raised. Yes, we still face the reality of dying and death, but its sting has been removed.

Now as David Watson looked at his little girl, and she still didn't seem reassured by the fact that he had just taken the sting, he said to her, you really don't need to worry. Bees don't sting twice.

[10 : 26] That is the God we see in Jesus Christ. This is the God who is with us. This is the God who can give us and wants us to have softened hearts and hardened feet.

This is the God in whom we can have confidence. So let's pray together now. And as we come in prayer now, let's know that however lacking in confidence we might feel, however much we might be looking at our own lives right now and mindful of all the different challenges that we face, let's ask God to just remind us afresh and to fill us afresh with that sense of confidence in him.

Lord God, we so often find it hard to trust in you and to lay hold of that confidence that you want us to have. Forgive us for when we have hardened, cynical hearts and softened feet that would keep us in a place of comfort.

Help us instead to have those softened hearts that never give up trusting in you and seeking to reach out to others for you.

And give us hardened feet that we may be resilient and strong, not in our own strength, but in simple trust in you. Lord, whatever we may be facing right now, whatever challenges and problems we've got going on in our lives, whatever things may be keeping us awake at night, whatever that might be, help us in the midst of it to rediscover that mysterious but very real confidence that can be had in you.

[12 : 40] Help us to know that now. Help us to know that each day. In Jesus' name.

Amen.