

Joy's testimony – baptism 29 January 2017

Thank you everyone for being here to witness this. If anyone had told me a few years ago that this would be happening, I would never have believed them. I think I always assumed that having faith was like a lightning bolt moment – really dramatic and kind of like a switch being turned on somewhere inside. For me this wasn't the case and I spent a while wondering when this revelation would come. It did come, but more of a gradual journey, which I'll tell you about now.

I remember as a child receiving a Gideon Bible and wondering, "What was this all about, and why was the print so small?" I knew my mum had attended Sunday School – she even had books to prove it, but although she believed, and encouraged me to believe, church wasn't something we 'did'. Praying, on the other hand, was something I did regularly – it was as though I thought God might do exactly what I wanted so for a while it was presents "Please bring me a doll's house with nice carpets" and then more heartfelt pleas, "Please let me avoid that girl who bullies me in the corridor at school"

So life went on, and I really wasn't sure. I didn't get the doll's house, the bully still got me.... And as I grew up, God seemed to fade and I'd say 'yes, probably there was something out there but I didn't have time to find out what or who'.

Moving on to after the boys were born, I explored faith a bit more. I pored over our family Bible and I became curious. I read a bit, looked up verses on the internet and it was all a bit disjointed. A bit like a jigsaw with too many blue sky pieces you couldn't fit together.

Queueing up for a parent assembly one day, I met a really nice mum – one of the boys' friends' mum. She and I talked on the stairs. She was a minister at Oakes and her name was Mags. But how could she be? She wore a big hat with a pompom and was just as clumsy as I was when we both nearly tripped down the stairs! Our friendship blossomed and I asked her so many questions. She asked me just one "Why not come to church?" I said no – how could I? I had boys who wouldn't sit down or be quiet (not much has changed), I didn't know anyone, it would be an ordeal. Anyone who knows Mags would understand that none of these excuses would work. The next Sunday, there we were, sitting here dressed in our best and it felt like we'd come home. All my pre-conceived notions of what attending church might be like were blown away. And here we are. My faith developed – not overnight, but with the gentle guiding of those around, always willing to listen and seeming to provide answers to questions I'd never even thought of.

I felt proud to be part of Oakes, and more at peace than ever before. But feeling at peace was something I would do less and less as my life outside of Oakes seemed to be coming apart at the seams. My husband Syd (the boys' dad) was turning from what I now realise was a functioning alcoholic into the later stages of the disease. I can only remember every day being one nightmare after another, and having to find strength where I could. I felt so helpless and hopeless, trying to help, not being able to, having to face watching someone doing this to themselves and realise that this disease takes no prisoners. There was only one comfort, and that was God. The only thing I could pray for was strength. He gave it. He gave it to me as I went to work after having no sleep. He gave it to me as I talked to doctors at

home, at hospitals, at rehab clinics. And he gave it to me as we said goodbye, realising that now finally Syd was at peace. Through my darkest days, when I felt so afraid for us all, God was there. I didn't have to search. He didn't judge any of us. When there was no light at the end of the tunnel, God's light never faded. I saw that power so clearly, that in the midst of it all, there was someone I could offer this up to – it wasn't my worry and struggle, it was in God's hands.

Through this time my Oakes family showed me God's love in every way imaginable – spiritual, emotional, practical.... I was awestruck. I felt guilty! I didn't deserve this help, surely. How could I be so loved? I realised I could cope, and I wasn't alone. I was walking with God, and with all those who loved him.

After Syd died, trying to get back on track was hard. We had to make a new life, try to remember the good times, and try to make the bad fade away. It was slow progress.

Life dealt another blow very soon after, when my mum (who had been my support throughout) became ill and was diagnosed with lung cancer. Again I had days when I raged – how was this fair? But mostly, I turned to God. My mum died, only 9 months after being diagnosed, but in those 9 months she had, I never heard any self-pity from her. The only concern she had was for us, her loved ones, that we should carry on and be cared for. Her thoughts were clear, and she told me, over one of our many afternoon cups of tea, that it gave her peace to know that we had our church family who could always care for us.

Again, this was a difficult time for us but we weren't alone. I know that as hard as these last years have been, my faith now is unshakeable and can say that I'm sure I could not have got through them without it.

I feel as though this is the right time for me, to declare my commitment to God, as he has to me.

I'd like to close by quoting this, from Isaiah:

“In that day you will say, ‘I will praise the Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation. I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself is my strength and my defence. He has become my salvation’”

Thank you