

20th February 2011, Wheatley

My Faith Journey

When Peter asked me to share my faith journey with the congregation, my immediate reaction was that there really was not much to share, my story was boring. You hear of cases where people's lives were radically transformed by a sudden conversion, but mine is not like that at all. On the other hand, perhaps that is why we talk of a faith journey rather than a faith moment. Nevertheless, having actually spent time reflecting on my faith journey, it offers clear evidence of God's incredible plan which spans across continents.

I was born in 1983 in the communist Czech Republic and come from a non-believing background. My only memory of ever being in a church in that country is when I sought shelter during a heavy rain storm. My family was the perfect outcome of Lenin's communist ideal of the Soviet anti-religious policy and never believed in anything they could not see. In one of Lenin's books, he summarizes the forty odd years of Christian oppression in Czech. He writes: "Every religious idea, every idea of God, even every flirtation with this idea of God, is unutterable vileness." A country that once produced one of the greatest religious reformists in history, Jan Hus, lost more than two thirds of church goers in just four decades. Today, only 1% of the population is part of the Reformed Church, 30% belong to the Roman Catholics and the rest has no religion at all.

My first encounter with religion came in the form of my aunt, at whose house my sister and I used to spend every school holiday. She was a 7th Day Adventist, believed in the Holy Trinity, did not eat meat and recognized Saturday as the Sabbath. This classification meant that all work had to be done on a Friday before sunset and we were not allowed to play or watch TV on a Saturday. Not even the dishes would be washed and I thought that it was a great idea. These visits gave me peace in my unsettled childhood. My parents divorced when I was six, and whilst my dad remarried, my mum went through a number of relationships. I was heartbroken when I found out that only believers would go to heaven and specifically remember begging my mum to come to faith but with no success. It is astonishing how easily a child accepts the existence of a Creator, when adults find it next to impossible. As I grew older, I lost contact with my aunt as well as God.

When I turned 18, I moved to the UK to work as an au-pair and met Dawie a year later in a club in London, which used to be a church. For the first time in my life, I could see myself settle down with this guy, who was full of love, peace and understanding. I remember thinking that I really needed whatever he had but couldn't pinpoint what it was for a good few years to come. At that time, he did not go to any church, so I really didn't mind him thinking there was a God, although I was convinced he was wrong.

Just under two years after we met we decided to go to South Africa for a visit and ended up staying there for four years. Shortly after our arrival, my father-in-law gave me a Bible for my 21st birthday. It was around the time when Dawie and I got challenged on why we didn't go to church and preferred playing squash on Sundays. This comment worked in Dawie's conscience and we began church hopping. There are thousands of churches in Pretoria, but not too many have English sermons. Originally I didn't mind. I went along to Afrikaans services and genuinely hoped that I could start to believe, as the Christian way

of life seemed to be working wonders for my family in law. They set a great example of walking in love and had me puzzled, as I tried to figure out how they did it. I thought, maybe, if I tried hard and long enough, I could also find peace and have God in my life. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. I will never forget telling Dawie that Christianity wasn't for me, no matter how hard I tried. He was free to attend sermons and even have our children baptized one day but I didn't believe in God and was done trying.

In the midst of this, my lovely friend Kuzette played a huge part in my faith journey. I still believe she was an angel sent to me by God to bring me to the right path. She was a devout Christian and a true inspiration of goodness in the human form. We spent hours talking about faith and God in general and I would ask her endless questions. Some of them she answered without any problems, whilst others she would openly confess she did not have the answers for. She gave me a book called "Case for Faith" by Lee Strobel. It was written by an atheist in an attempt to prove that there is no God, when unpredictably, in the process of writing this the author got converted. I found the book fascinating as I could associate with the writer's doubts and never-ending questions.

It was only when my sister-in-law told us about a new English congregation of the Rietvlei Reformed Church that I decided to give the young American pastor a chance. At our first visit, I felt that perhaps there was something good to be learnt in that place. People were friendly and welcoming and they had a Foundation of Christianity bible study, which we joined. Slowly but surely the questions I had in my head were being met with logical answers and although I wasn't ready to accept Jesus as yet, my life got more fulfilled and I had a purpose. On 25th March 2007 I finally got baptized, almost year and a half of diligent bible study and church going later. I was 24 then and although I did not know all the ins and outs of my faith yet, I had peace in my decision and it felt as the most natural thing ever.

Without any doubt, the biggest jump of faith I ever had to take was when we left South Africa to return to England after four years of successful life in Pretoria. We were well established in our church, both had good jobs, owned our lovely house with a dog, had two cars and a family all around us. The crime was getting worse but apart from that there was nothing particularly wrong. Simply put, we were happy. Yet, there was this nagging in my mind that we had to leave to be closer to my family and I knew it was God's will. Due to the pressure of our circumstances, the move happened faster than what we were ready for. I cried the whole flight and did not like Oxford when we arrived. We had no jobs arranged, no place to stay and only enough money to pull us through for a month. We still had a mortgage to pay in South Africa so there was a big pressure to start earning immediately. With God's help, I got a job within a week and Dawie started a week after me. We moved to Wheatley after four months flat share and were so thankful to have privacy and immediately felt at home in the village. We started going to the URC in September 2008, found friends and life was looking up again. God had brought us through the tough times and made me more humble and dependent on Him.

Although we were settled in Wheatley, I still wondered why we had to come here. The stress of the adjustment was gone and I longed to know the purpose behind the move. Eventually, I found out. My mum came to visit us last Christmas and as a life-long materialist and atheist, she witnessed our way of

life. Shortly after her visit she opened up about her heartaches. The biggest worry to her was money, as the nature of her work in real estate means uncertain pay. I shared with her that when I feel scared and lost, I pray. I suggested that since she has been following her own mind all her life and it got her to this mess, perhaps it was time to ask God for help and try it His way for a change. The next day she sent me a long sms where she described how she opened her heart to God and invited Him into her life. Then she spent the entire night worrying about how to pay her outstanding bills and was amazed to find an unexpected cheque in her post box the following morning. A miracle! Suddenly, I understood God's reason for our move to the UK and was at absolute awe when I realized how great His plans are.

Just like my mum, I still have a long way to walk on my faith journey but try to put my mind and soul into getting to know God more closely. I study the Bible, pray every morning and every night, talk to Him during the day, yet I struggle to be the person He wants me to be. After all, I am a very young Christian and there are so many obstacles for me to learn from. I know I'm not there yet, but at least I'm making progress. And when I grow weak and feel like I can't go on anymore, I know that God's promise from Philippians chapter 4 verse 13 stands: "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."

Thanks be to God. Amen.