

‘I felt God’s presence as I held our babies’

James Wilkinson was an atheist. But he started to investigate faith after his wife gave birth to twins via IVF

WHEN James Wilkinson discovered that it would be difficult for him and his wife to have children, he actually felt fairly calm.

He considered himself to be an atheist, but had an overwhelming sense that they would one day become parents. Now he believes that sense of hope came from God.

In 2017, his wife Ema gave birth to twins Floyd and Finn after their first cycle of IVF treatment. And it was holding onto his newborn babies that gave James his first sense of the presence of God.

It prompted him to find out more about the Christian faith. Now he’s a regular worshipper at Harbour Church in Portsmouth, attending the main Sunday morning service at St George’s, Portsea, as well as the family-friendly afternoon service at St Alban’s Church, Copnor.

“I always really wanted kids, and I had no concerns that it wasn’t going to happen,” said James. “It was almost like it was a foregone conclusion.

“Maybe God was actually working in me even before I knew it. I’ve always been quite an optimistic person, so perhaps that sense of hope actually came from the foundation of faith that I’d grown up with.”

James, now 39, had been brought up in a Christian family, attending nursery, Sunday School, cubs and scouts at Eastney Methodist Church. His mum was Church of England and his dad was a Catholic, and he grew up having a sense of Christian morality.

Although he had been taught about faith and knew Jesus as a historical figure with some good ideas, he had never really believed Jesus was the Son of

God. He said: “I didn’t really have any feeling about God, because as far as I was concerned, there was nothing there. I wasn’t anti-religious, but I was an atheist.”

James has been working for the University of Portsmouth for 17 years as an IT specialist. He currently supports the Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries.

His first marriage lasted for six years. During that relationship, James suspected that he would find it difficult to become a biological father. Although he and his first wife had wanted children, none were forthcoming and they didn’t pursue becoming parents with any serious intent.

After that marriage broke down, he met Ema and he became a stepdad to Peter, now aged 9. They were married in April 2015, and – after flurry of various tests – they discovered they were both affected by fertility issues.

“The fact that both of us had issues doesn’t really make it any easier,” he said, “but it does give you a shared understanding that really helps in supporting each other. It wasn’t like either of us could blame the other. We would both have struggled with fertility with any other partner, so being together meant that we could help each other to cope with the problem.”

They investigated IVF, and signed up to a donorship programme. That would have meant collecting some of Ema’s eggs and donating them to other women who found it difficult to ovulate. In the end, they could only collect four eggs from Ema, so none of them ended up being donated.

Floyd and Finn, who are identical twins, came from a single embryo. When they were born, in May 2017, it was a significant moment in James’s journey towards faith.

“I started to feel the presence of God through my children,” he said. “I remember holding my babies and being overwhelmed by a feeling of protective love that actually came from somewhere else. The image that came to mind was of a lighthouse with waves crashing against it. That’s how I felt. I also felt God’s presence steadying me so that I wasn’t completely overwhelmed by love for these boys.”

Ema’s family had usually opted for naming ceremonies at John Pounds Church for their children, but she realised that James would probably prefer the boys to be baptised in a church.

James looked at his baptism certificate and realised that he had been christened in nearby St Alban’s Church, Copnor. He approached the church, which currently hosts a Sunday afternoon congregation from Harbour Church. They sent round



James and Ema Wilkinson with Peter, Floyd and Finn

the Rev Andrew Hargreaves – our mission development officer and a member of the congregation – to offer baptism preparation.

“Andrew asked me where I would place myself on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of my faith journey,” said James. “I said ‘two’, which surprised me as I thought I was an atheist. When I examined it more deeply, I realised that that was probably true. That came as quite a revelation to me – a moment of self-reflection where I realised something fundamental within me had changed.

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“I started thinking about why I wanted the boys to be christened. While I was thinking, I went to Harbour Church’s Easter spectacular last year at Copnor. Over the course of the next few months, I realised that I did have a belief in God.

“I had also been changing my mind about various aspects of society, culture and politics. I started reading a Jordan Peterson book – he’s a clinical psychologist from Canada, and had a good argument as to the psychological benefits of belief.

“Andrew also offered to meet me

once a week to look at passages from John’s Gospel in which Jesus says who he is. That was helpful as my questions were about why Jesus was so important, what his death and sacrifice were for, and so on. I had never read any of the Bible, so it was a great place to start.

He carried on attending the Sunday afternoon family services at St Alban’s, Copnor, with his children, and started going to the main Sunday morning Harbour Church service too. Peter often comes to those morning services at St George’s. Last autumn he signed up for the Alpha Course at Harbour Church, a weekly group for those who have questions about faith.

“I enjoy the lively songs at Harbour Church, the quiet prayer times and the chance to develop my relationship with God,” he said. “It does feel like God is there in the room. Ema doesn’t come in the morning, but she loves the afternoon services and the sense of community. She’s also part of the Tots and Toddlers group that meets there, as it’s a really supportive network. I do help sometimes at the 4pm service, but I also feel as though I’m still a fairly new Christian, learning a lot about church and faith.”

James publicly declared his new-found faith when he was confirmed by Bishop Christopher in our cathedral last November.