

Do I have to go to church? It's boring!

By David Pennant

If you have Christian parents who attend a church gathering each Sunday and you are no longer interested in going, then this book is for you, because the truth is, it's probably your church that needs to change, not you.

Think about it. Jesus was anything but boring. He healed people, cast out their demons, fed five thousand people with a boy's picnic lunch, walked on the sea, and calmed storms with a word of command. So if the weekly meeting of the church he came to found is boring, then something must be wrong. Very badly wrong, in fact.

I am at the other end of life from you. Life is like a wide bell. When you are young, you climb up one side. Then you spend many years as an adult going along the flattish top, before beginning the steady decline into old age and death. During my seventy years, I have attended twenty-one churches regularly, including two that I led, and done a lot of thinking about what shape the church should be, and what we have now in the UK is not it. I am on the way down the far side of the bell now. My aim in writing this book is to share with you all the things that nobody told me when I was your age about following Jesus, so that you don't have to spend the whole of your seventy years finding out, like I have.

I promise not to preach. Instead, I will share my story, and the discoveries I made along the way, in the hope that it will help you decide about church. Deal?

Here goes.

Finding God

or rather, God finding me

I first met God at about the age of four. My friends and I were running about in our garden playing some game and it was not going my way at all. I felt really upset, so I went into the house, and into the telephone room where I knew I would not be disturbed, stared at the wardrobe door and blurted out loud, “Oh God, why does everything always have to happen to me?”

Immediately thoughts came to me. It was God’s reply.

“Well, I like that! A loving home, three good meals a day, a happy family, how much more do you want?”

Whoops. Perhaps I had been unfair!

I coloured, ran out of the house, joined back in with the game, and forgot about it, until years later when I remembered the episode.

In those days, the only thing I can recall about my church going was my sister teaching me how to sing the alto part of the sung Church of England responses. That and putting the books away at the end of the service. The red hymn books went on one shelf, and the blue prayer books on another. I enjoyed arranging them neatly. Hardly a deep experience of the Lord.

At eight, I was sent away to boys’ boarding school. There was daily chapel for all – no choice about that. I enjoyed singing in the choir, but the hymns were a pain. I took to seeing how many verses there were in each hymn, so that I could see when we were half way through, which meant by that point it was not too much further to go to the end.

Aged thirteen, I was invited to go on a Falcon sailing cruise on the Norfolk Broads. My elder brother was going. If I had known it was a Christian cruise, I would not have gone. I managed to run our boat so firmly aground when it was my turn at the helm that it took forty minutes to pole it off again. All the tea things on the table in the cabin below had leapt off the table onto the floor with a crash at the impact, I discovered. Crazy! I never took to sailing.

The daily talks went over my head, except for the one on the world, the flesh and the devil. I had heard the phrase before, and I knew that the speaker would come onto the devil after he had done the world and the flesh. When he did so, I felt smug. I don’t recall what he said about any of them, mind you.

On the final morning, I had a shock. I was summoned down to the cabin by the skipper, a man known as Kipper by us boys at school – and asked whether I would like to become a Christian. I felt acutely embarrassed by this. I wanted to say no, not likely, but I sensed he was in for a long session, and would argue with me if I said no, so perhaps the best thing would be to say yes to get it over and done with as fast as possible.

He was very pleased when I said yes and said something about Christ being the centre of my life. I had a mental picture of me being a conker whirled round on the end of a string held by the Lord. I supposed it might allow me to have a life of wider scope, but it seemed a strange idea. Then he said a prayer over me, and gave me some Bible reading notes. Finally, he said that perhaps I might give up the second Pan Book of Horror Stories which I had been reading.

This was serious. I hadn't realised that becoming a Christian was going to affect what I did. That was not my idea at all.

After a while, a friend of mine discovered I was a born again Christian (whatever was one of those, I wondered?) and dragged me along to the school meeting. Some boys called it the God squad, but I thought that was rude and never did so. The meetings were okay – visiting speakers came every week. At least it was all over in thirty minutes.

One speaker talked about the need to avoid strange girls. My friend told me I had to decide now, aged fourteen, that I was not going to mess around with girls but keep myself clean for my wife to come one day. This seemed right, so I agreed to do that.

A couple of years later, I decided to get confirmed in the Church of England. Other boys did it, and it seemed like a good idea. The weekly talks were more interesting than I expected. One evening I was interviewed by the school chaplain who had a loud voice. I found him rather strange. "Pennant, you do say your prayers at night, don't you?" He intoned. "Yes," I lied. I felt bad about this, and for a week or two I tried to say some prayers at night.

Finally, as the Sunday for confirmation by the Bishop approached, there was to be a quiet day in London. This was hideously boring. We boys were all expected to sit there in silence for long periods of time with only our thoughts for company.

There were also four talks by a visiting priest. The first one was arresting.

"You boys mean nothing by this," he announced. "You will go to communion for three weeks and then never go again. You are wasting everyone's time."

I was incensed. How dare he be so rude?

In our long hours of quiet, boys used to get up and go out of the room every now and then. Eventually I grasped that this was so they could visit the loo. Feeling rather bold, I too got up and went out, but instead of going into the toilet, I turned into the chapel, stood at the door, looked at the altar, and announced, "I give my heart to God." I wasn't having this chaplain being rude to me! I was going to do it for real.

At that moment, something unexpected happened. I had a sense that God was there, at the altar, that he had heard what I had said, and that he was pleased. My offer was accepted.

This was a revelation to me. There was a real God after all, and I could know him, and he wasn't against me as I had thought. I date my Christian life from that moment.

All this time I had been going with my parents to the church at home during the holidays every week. It only lasted an hour, and I had developed a kind of staying power. But there was one part of it I did not like. At the end of the service, just before he went back out to the vestry (the room where he kept his black and white robes), the vicar used to stop and say a final prayer that wasn't in the prayer book. "Oh God, forgive the imperfections of our holy things, and grant that as we leave thy house, we may not leave thy presence, but with thee may always dwell."

I was not happy about this at all. God could have an hour on Sundays, that was okay, fair do, but there was no way I wanted him involved with the rest of my week.

Once I had given my heart to God, this attitude began to change. I began to read the Bible for the first time. I was confused – I understood about God, but where did Jesus fit in? It took me a couple of years to realise that Jesus was God who had come to earth to show us how to live. He and God were one and the same, along with the Holy Spirit.

Two years on again (I was at uni by now), I finally decided that the Bible was the word of God as people had told me (1). I began to memorise useful verses from it using a pack of blank cards. I wrote the text on one side, and the reference on the other side, and spent twenty minutes each morning learning them. I soon had a repertoire of three hundred.

My trust in God was not good, however. I had a habit of rebellion. I would sometimes know what God wanted me to do, and grit my teeth and do the opposite, and then feel bad about it later. I remember driving my mum's Mini home one morning in pouring rain. There were three ladies standing at a bus stop, and the Spirit said, "Stop and give them a lift." I felt uncomfortable about this and refused and accelerated past. Then I felt really bad: what was the matter with me? Why couldn't I do what I was told? So I turned first right, sped along the side road, turned right and then right again to go round the block so that I could stop this time and give them a lift, but it was no good. In that few minutes, the bus had come, and they were just climbing on board, so I had missed my chance.

What was the use of giving my heart to God if I was not going to do what he asked? Why bother to ask God to fill me with his Holy Spirit if I wasn't going to do what the Spirit wanted?

About this time, I began to attend Christian camps in the summer holidays, first as a boy and later as an officer. These were good times. I absorbed a great deal and have many happy memories. The highlight of each camp was the evening when the gospel message was clearly presented in a way that allowed boys to respond.

I remember reading Jeremiah all through during one camp, for the first time. The writing seemed very threatening. During that time I heard that the composer Igor Stravinsky had died, so it must have been the summer of 1972. Music was my main subject at school and uni.

Someone said it was good to read through sound commentaries on the Bible, looking up the passages, so I adopted the habit of doing it for thirty minutes each day after lunch. After a while, I changed my strategy, and simply read the Bible books over and over to get a grip on them. I remember with Genesis I would read chapters one to eleven on day one (Creation to Noah), twelve to twenty-four on day two (Abraham), twenty-five to thirty-six on day three (Isaac and Jacob), and thirty-seven to fifty on day four (the Joseph story). Then on day five I would start again. After two or three months, I had discovered all kinds of themes running through the book. It was great.

I trained as a classroom teacher of music in secondary school, but it did not go well. Discipline was a problem. After seven years it was clear I needed to find something else. After casting about for a while, I was accepted for ordination in the Church of England, which I had wondered about for some years, and we moved to Bristol where I attended Trinity College (I was married by then).

The start of my Christian life had been pretty chaotic, but by now I was sorted out, or so I thought, and was in a good place to become a leader in the church.

How utterly wrong I was!

Leading in the church

I did well at the college. I wanted to learn Hebrew and Greek so I could read the Bible in the original languages. This went so well that I was invited to do a PhD in Hebrew, and I ended up studying word plays in the Book of Judges. There were other parts of the course too, but they were less interesting. I remember that one of the questions when we went out on preaching practice was whether our hair was well groomed and our nails neatly cut and clean. I hope mine were.

The mission at Chipping Sodbury was memorable. On the Friday evening I found myself at the youth club where I was told to enter the throng, befriend a young person and talk to them about Christ. This was hopeless: I simply could not begin to do that. It felt so forced. I tried but soon turned my back on the young people and studied the radiator for flaws in the paintwork. But then, I discovered there was another room next door full of noise and chaos where all the young people were shouting abuse and blasphemy. In no time I found myself on the podium in there giving back as good as they gave, vigorously defending our saviour's ancestors and honour to all the shouted attacks. I loved it.

At the end of the evening, when the young people made their way home on foot along the road, the contrast was total. They all seemed gloomily quiet as we drove past them. I preferred them shouting. It seemed real.

Speaking to a crowd came naturally to me, but one to one was hopeless, and still is. To this day I feel ashamed of my weakness in talking to others in person about Jesus.

The day came when I needed to apply for a job. I was trained by now, and knew my Bible too. Ready to go!

All the posts for assistant curate would be put on one side of a sheet of A4 paper in a ring file on a table in the entrance hall of the college after a certain Tuesday lunch. The system was that if you liked the look of one, you removed the page and made your application. If it failed for any reason, you returned the page to the file.

I was busy that day, and did not get to the file until nearly six o' clock. I did not mind this, as I reckoned there might have been an unseemly scramble earlier on, and I did not want to be part of that. My instinct and training from my upbringing was to say After You in any situation where people were involved. The result was that there were not many pages left in the file by the time I got there, but there was one post that looked promising because it contained the words, Preaching a Priority.

I had heard about charismatic churches where people got emotional and waved their arms in the air. I knew that if I went to a church like that, I would not fit in. I have always been somewhat reserved. The people would be disappointed with me and I wouldn't be on their wavelength. It would be better to go somewhere that wanted biblical preaching.

I applied by letter, and in due course was invited to come for a weekend visit.

My train journey took a couple of hours. I finally arrived at ten past nine on the Friday night, and I was met by the vicar of the parish. We walked along the platform, and within about thirty yards I realised that he and I were like chalk and cheese from the way he was talking. There was no way I could work with him. I actually stopped dead in my tracks in shock for a moment, but then walked on beside him as he spoke on.

Should I have blurted out, "Look, I'm sorry but I can already sense that this is not going to work. Do you mind if we call it a day and I go home?" The trouble was that at nine fifteen it was too late to catch a train back that night. Also it would sound so rude. I made a decision, that I would go through with the interview. It would be good experience.

In due course, when it was my leaving do at the end of my time there, it emerged that the vicar had had the same thought as me on the platform, that I would be impossible to work with. How strange that we did not manage to share this with each other. Ridiculous, really.

Next day, after a comfortable night and breakfast at the vicarage, I was introduced to several people and saw the parish and the church. There was a fine building project going on; the breeze blocks for the new octagonal church hall were already up to the top of the windows, and it would be finished in a few months. It all seemed impressive. I decided that although the relationship with the vicar would not be easy, the church was clearly going places and was vibrant and alive. Perhaps it would be a good place to work after all.

The post was offered a fortnight later, and I accepted it.

Monday morning was staff meeting, and at the first meeting, the vicar told me that he wanted me to attend a conference at Swanwick, the national conference centre, called Signs and Wonders with David Pytches and Barry Kissel. I was rather pleased. This was clearly part of my ongoing training.

I soon discovered that a dozen people from the parish were going. The subject seemed to be healing the sick. I reckoned that people attending would be on the simple side – naive in fact, because clearly healing the sick by laying on of hands or whatever was a fringe activity today with no substance. I would need to be kind and generous towards them and avoid any sense of being judgmental.

Before the weekend of the conference came, there was a strange episode.

One of the things impressed upon us at college had been that if a woman in the parish rang me at nine p.m. saying "David come round," I was to reply, "I will see you at ten o' clock tomorrow morning." Wise counsel.

Well, about a fortnight into my time, I had exactly that phone call, pretty much on the nail of nine p.m. "David, come round immediately!" Let's call the lady Margaret.

"Margaret," I replied calmly, "I will call on you at ten in the morning."

This was no good. "You must come round now!" Margaret insisted. "This minute!"

I looked at my wife and explained the situation. "You'd better go, but be careful," she replied.

So I walked the two hundred yards to her house, feeling a little nervous. When I rang the doorbell, I discovered that her front room was full of twenty or thirty teenagers all gibbering with fear, because they had seen ghosts in the road, and it was my job as curate to sort the situation out.

I stood there, and racked my brains, and soon realised that I had not had the slightest training for a situation like this from my five years at theological college. The occult, or whatever you called ghosts in the road, had never once been mentioned.

I dimly remembered something I once heard about cutting things off.

"Right," I announced, in an attempt to take charge, "I am going to pray. Please quieten down." The bedlam lessened a little.

"Father, in the name of Jesus, I speak peace into this room, and command anything unhelpful to be cut off. Amen." That might help, I thought.

The noise did lessen, and everyone seemed a bit calmer, except for one fifteen year old boy. He had lost his mother to cancer the year before, I was told, and had never grieved. He was slumped at the foot of the stairs, banging furiously with his fist on the bottom step yelling over and over again "I want my mum."

I realised in that moment that I had absolutely nothing to help him with, and it was a relief when his dad turned up a few minutes later to take him home.

Perhaps I was not so well fitted for parish ministry as I had thought.

Next day, Margaret rang and explained what must have happened. It seemed there was a gentleman of colour of advanced years who had been out walking his dog after dark. The

animal had made its way into some bushes, and he had gone in after it to get it out. The man's white hair and snowy beard had been spotted by some of the young people, who misunderstood the situation and were shocked and frightened by the sight. Everyone was calmer now.

It was a relief, but the lesson of my incompetence was not lost on me.

The conference finally arrived. At the first session, when everybody gathered in the main hall, there was an invitation to all the church leaders to come up to the stage and introduce themselves.

"It's Going Great Guns at Grimsby... Remarkable Revival at Rotherham... Deep Discipleship at Derby..." The contributions all seemed somewhat unreal to me.

When my turn came, I spoke up clearly.

"We are a small group from Nottingham, and I need to tell you that you will have to work very hard to persuade me that there is any substance to this healing business."

It seemed important to me to alert the speakers that they needed to make a proper presentation, and not simply assume that everyone was eating out of their hands.

The unexpected result of this was that throughout the four days of the conference, whenever I was standing in line for food or a coffee, someone next to me would politely enquire, "How are you getting on with it so far?" I would mumble something in appreciation.

At supper time on the first evening, we were all sat at long tables. By way of polite conversation, I asked the man opposite me what he did for a living. He explained that he had had to take early retirement. He had been leading a team of research scientists in Cambridge for twenty-five years in the fields of light, electricity and biology. Their work had led to dozens of patents. It was all to do with video projection, refresh rates and so forth. The reason he had retired was that industry was so desperate to have all their discoveries by yesterday that he could not take the pace and needed to hand over to a younger man.

Remember that in those days, we had only had colour TV for ten years and still used clunky overhead projectors.

I was mightily impressed. I also reflected that maybe my view of the other delegates being simple had been somewhat hasty and arrogant. I would need to pay careful attention to the meetings.

Well, the speaker was engaging, telling us about his life in South America where he had been a missionary and then a bishop. One story of a lady stopping him in the road to ask him to pray

over her dead son impressed me. He had mumbled a prayer over the baby with no faith at all, and then been met by her again next day with the boy alive in her arms, to his utter astonishment. Or something like that. I may have the details wrong.

I was aware of miracles in the gospels, but that kind of thing did not happen in the UK today. It might on the fringes of the mission field far overseas, I supposed.

Then at the end of the evening, we were invited to stand with our hands facing upwards while the Holy Spirit was invited to come. This seemed very strange to me, but I could not fault it theologically, so I stood there feeling awkward. Nothing happened to me, but I was on the balcony from where I could see that plenty was happening in the hall. One young woman was prone on the floor, yelling out I remember. Then people were invited to come forward if they believed God wanted to give them a gift. I spotted a friend of mine from our church in the queue – let's call him Mark.

When the meeting ended, I went to speak to the companion of the woman on the floor, and asked if her friend was alright.

"Oh my sister's fine," came the reply. "After a bit she became self-conscious, so there was no benefit sadly. She's okay." That was a relief.

I may have experienced nothing in the meeting itself, but during the night I had a vivid dream. I was in the gents loo of the staff room at a secondary school where I was a teacher washing my hands. The school clock on the wall was at 1113, and I knew that in two minutes time, when the bell would sound for the end of break, I was to teach a class of boys brand new to the school that I had not met before, and that I was totally unprepared for the lesson. I hadn't a clue what I was going to teach them.

In the meantime, there were lots of nasty metal spines in my hand, which I was pulling out one by one. In the middle of my palm, there was a much bigger piece of metal.

"You will never be able to pull that one out," observed the man standing at the basin next to me washing his hands.

"Oh yes I will," I replied. Even in my dream I knew we were at a healing conference. It would be no problem.

Sure enough, the piece of metal came out without any difficulty and there was no wound. The object turned out to be a key for a bicycle lock, all shiny and new. I discarded it on the side of the basin. Then I woke up.

I shared the dream with several friends the next morning, and by lunchtime I was wondering whether God was speaking to me through it. I decided he was, and the message was simple: the key to this situation is in your hand - don't neglect it.

I have tried to stay with what I learned that weekend ever since.

It would be many years before I grasped the significance of the 1113 on the clock. Luke 11:13, chapter eleven verse thirteen, reads "If you being evil know how to give your children what is good for them, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" It was one of the three hundred verses I had memorised. The Spirit was doing something in me after all.

But all this business about healing today was very strange to me. There seemed no doubt it was happening. A woman who had come with us said her Celiac disease had cleared up. I was impressed when a retired lady stood up and explained that she had been blind in one eye since the age of seven but now she could see out of it after the laying on of hands.

The speaker said at one point that Jesus' final instruction to his twelve disciples had been that they were to teach the believers that would come all he had commanded them (2). Jesus had commanded them to heal the sick, so we should therefore do it too (3). I could not fault that argument.

When I returned home, I was in a whirl. I had never come across anything like this before in the churches I had attended. I carefully wrote up the events of the four days for the vicar and the Parish Church Council in two or three thousand words. It took me about six months to decide, but finally I agreed that healing the sick was for today and a part of the Christian life.

This put me on a collision course with the vicar. I discovered that the reason he had asked me to go on the conference was that the dozen people in the church who had come with me were pestering him to go, and had even paid for his place, but had urged that if he couldn't go, he should least send a member of the staff as the subject was so important. So I had been sent to get him out of a hole. I don't suppose he ever imagined that I would adopt the teaching. It became apparent an important criterion for choosing the new curate had been that there be no hint of anything charismatic about him, and I had passed that test at interview. Now here I was developing in an unexpected and unwelcome direction. Oh dear.

One of my duties was to be in the youth group, as an Anglican influence. I hated that phrase – I only ever wanted to be a Christian influence. If asked what I did for a living, I would explain that I was a Christian leader who happened to work in the Anglican church for the time being. I have never liked denominations.

The youth group went on a weekend away in the mountains. We had a wonderful time. The evening meetings were led by a lovely young couple who believed in inviting the Holy Spirit to come (4). I received a gift of pictures one evening, of imagining a series of images in my mind while praying.

I would share these in prayer meetings, but there was seldom any take-up. I had to learn that this did not matter. I remember one occasion when I announced, "I have a picture of a curved section of railway track that then turned into a boomerang." Nobody said anything. I imagined they thought I was barmy. No matter. They were probably right!

However, a day or two later, one of the young men in the youth group confessed to me that he and his close friend were not speaking, because they had fallen out while messing around with a boomerang down by the railway track. My picture seemed to have been an encouragement to them to sort things out – they had both been in the prayer meeting. It was nice to get some confirmation. It allowed me to settle into the use of the gift.

Some pictures were for sharing, some were just for me, I sensed.

My main problem with the conference had been that if healing was for today, and it seemed it was, then why were they not also talking about prophecy? Also casting out demons and raising the dead, come to that? Jesus asked for both of these things from his followers, although not prophecy I noted (5). It was Paul who encouraged the church at Corinth to pursue prophecy, since they wanted to use the spiritual gifts (6).

Prophecy would turn up a few years later when the Kansas City prophets burst on the scene. But demonization confronted me sooner rather than later.

One evening, I received a phone call from one of the house group leaders. "Look, there's a young man in our group who's too much for me to cope with. Would you mind taking him on? He has severe difficulties."

Thanks a lot, I thought, but what I actually said was, "Of course. No problem."

This led to an invitation for me to go to Steve's flat (not his real name). Nine fifteen on a cold dark November evening did not seem the best time, perhaps, but no matter. I duly walked round there and rang the bell. Steve invited me in, and then, to my dismay, locked the front door behind me with a mortise key which he then put in his pocket, effectively making me a prisoner.

When he had made me a coffee, he sat on the opposite side of a low table from me, which had a single candle in a candle holder on it. After he had started some very gloomy music with a far Eastern feel playing from his loudspeakers, he lit the candle and then turned off all the lights so

that we were in almost pitch darkness. He then started moaning, rocking back and forth, and soon produced a razor blade and begun drawing it gently across his wrists. A small amount of blood appeared.

I was feeling very threatened by all this. My attempts at drawing him into conversation were getting nowhere. "Steve, I want to help you," I urged. "Please stop doing that." After a bit, he got up and walked through to the bathroom where he lay on the floor and squirmed about a bit, moaning.

I was out of my depth, and I knew it, but I decided I had to do something.

"Steve, look, I know this may sound very difficult, but I am wondering if you have a demon. Might you allow me to pray for you?"

I did not know how he would react to this when I said it. Perhaps he would rise up and attack me. In the event, he nodded his head, so I proceeded to pray. I recalled the verse about what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven (7).

"Father, I am praying for Steve here. In the name of Jesus, I bind whatever is troubling Steve. Amen."

Then, quite simply, he stood up, went to the front door, unlocked it and I could go home.

This was the first of many meetings. Mark and I and perhaps one other person used to gather with Steve down at the church, where we would pray into every aspect of his life. Five dustbin liners of papers soon disappeared from his flat. He had been writing off to people for horoscopes about his life, sending them good money. The material all went.

One evening, I remember having a picture of a huge chain, like the ones behind Brunel in the famous photograph of the great engineer (search Brunel photo). I told the group, "I can see a chain."

"Oh right," said Steve, "unclasping a tiny link chain from round his neck. "It was from my grandma. I was wondering if it ought to go." He wanted to clear everything that might have occult connections out of his life. I was intrigued about the size of the two chains. Perhaps his loomed large in his life. Curious.

There came a day when Steve told us that he felt so much freer; it had been like coming up out of a huge pit. He did not know that he was just about quoting Psalm 40. "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord."

This was great. Psalm forty is such an encouragement to someone like Steve. Similarly, Psalm eighteen is a fine Psalm of deliverance. I was learning how to use Scripture as a toolkit to help people.

A significant healing took place among us as well. Bill Hughes gave me permission to share his story, so I will use his real name.

The curate's house assigned to me and my family (wife plus two very small children) was not large enough for me to have a study, so I wondered whether a garden shed might do for an office. My father, who was visiting, and I called in to the local shed outlet and explained our idea to the man behind the desk.

"I know just what you want," Bill said. "I used to make them in Canada. We put insulation all round the walls inside, and also the floor and roof, and covered it with plywood, and brought electricity from the house. What's more, I will make you some book cases as well."

This seemed wonderful, and as the price quoted seemed reasonable, we made the deal.

I got to know Bill well as he worked away on the project in our garden. The finished office was fine for the task. I completed my PhD in there. I still have one of the three bookcases in my room now.

A few months later, I had a phone call to say that Bill was in hospital, too ill to be visited. This was serious news. I decided to call on his wife Joyce, whom I had not yet met. I made my way to her home, and was surprised to find both she and Bill were there. The medics had told him that his stomach cancer was so advanced as to be inoperable. The date was early October; they had said that he might live until Christmas or might not. I found myself listening to Bill's requests for his funeral. The Old Rugged Cross was to feature prominently, in a jazzy version for clarinet. I felt dazed by the news.

I took to visiting Bill and Joyce twice a week. He seemed to be doing better than I feared. After a week or two, he told me he had ordered his Christmas turkey. Then he started asking if there was anywhere that he could go for prayer for healing. I said that there must be something of the kind in London, I imagined, and I could make enquiries. Then I took my courage in both hands.

"Bill, it so happens that a number of us went on a conference about healing recently, and one member of the church received a significant gift for healing. If you like, I could arrange an evening for Mark and another lady and myself to come round, and we could pray with you."

Bill said he would like that very much. I hoped I had done right in mentioning the possibility.

Mark and the lady were pleased to be asked. When the evening came, Mark led us. We were to gather at his home, where we prayed for the Holy Spirit to equip us. My heart was strangely warmed, to quote John Wesley, when Mark laid hands on it. I felt charged up!

Bill and Joyce welcomed us in. After a coffee, we began. Mark asked Bill to turn his hands up, which he did. We then all sat quietly with our eyes closed, our hands laid gently on Bill. Then we looked up, and chatted for a while. I then became aware that Mark was feeling we should pray again, so we did. It was all very peaceful. Later on after more conversation there was a third quarter of an hour of prayer. During this one, Bill felt strange goings in inside his stomach. "It feels like something wriggling about," he explained – "things joining up." This seemed encouraging.

I thought we had finished, but no, Mark wanted a fourth bout of prayer. When we looked up after this one, Bill was in amazement. "I had a vision," he explained. "I was in the river Jordan, and John the Baptist was there, and he baptised me." We did not know what to make of this.

I continued my twice weekly visits. Bill showed no signs of dying. In the end, he lived for another seven years, before succumbing to a horrid cancer. I had left the parish a few years earlier by then, but I was able to return to take his funeral service, where we enjoyed the Old Rugged Cross as he had wanted. I spoke on him as having been Six Billion Dollar Man, quoting a TV series, I remember.

Afterwards, Joyce explained to me that when Bill had been sent home from hospital, the doctors had told her that he could not live for long, because they had cut out so much of his digestive system that it was impossible for anyone to continue living like that. It seemed a miracle of healing had taken place.

I was left with no doubts. Healing was for today. It was one of the things Jesus wanted his followers to do then, and it is now.

All the same, I found it hard to get started on praying for healing. In Paul's discussion of the body, he included the comment, "some have gifts of healing." It seemed that Mark had such a gift. But how would I know if I had? I did not want to pray over someone's leg or whatever only for there to be no benefit. Raising people's hopes only to dash them struck me as very unkind.

In the end I decided that while some people have a gift for teaching – there had been one outstanding teacher at my school when I was a teenager whose only lesson I attended is still etched clearly in my mind even now – that doesn't stop other people from having a go. Anybody can teach someone how to use a screw driver, for example.

So I began. I would explain to someone that I believed in praying for healing, and that so far nobody had got worse afterwards, so would they like me to pray? I would put my hand near to the place that needed to improve without actually touching the person, because this is what I had been taught.

The first twenty-five people I prayed for showed no improvement as far as I know, but the twenty-sixth was a lady who had such a bad foot that toes had been amputated. I prayed over the foot. When I went back a week later, she said she was sure something had grown where I prayed. She was delighted. She also said how funny I had looked kneeling on the floor at her feet.

I found it was like my pictures. Keep at it, and make it low key. I am not sure I have ever seen someone improve in my presence, but every now and then I meet someone who is pleased with the result of a prayer I offered previously. Generally I have forgotten the incident by then.

I'm not sure any of this church stuff needs to be dramatic. When Elijah encountered God on Mount Horeb, he was not in the earthquake, wind or fire. They were followed by a low whispering sound which led to a conversation between Elijah and God (8). Also Jesus was against the religious leaders who made a big show of things, whether praying ostentatiously in public or parading themselves in fine robes (9). Apply Ockham's razor, or in today's parlance, keep it simple, stupid.

There was more to learn about demonization, I discovered. During one service when I was in the church and my mind was wandering, I was looking idly at one of the stained glass windows which showed Moses holding the two tablets of the law in his hands. As I did so, a distinct thought came to me "That's demonic."

I was taken aback. I was sure it was God speaking. How could a stained glass window be demonic?

I did some research, and it emerged that when the window was unveiled to the parishioners, several decades earlier I imagined, a gasp of astonishment had gone up, because the face of Moses was that of the vicar at the time. This seemed very odd. I then discovered that this was the kind of thing that happens in Freemasonry. It then turned out that many of the men in our church were members of the local Masonic Lodge.

I found this very odd. I knew nothing about Freemasonry. I read some books on the subject, and discovered that in about 1820, a man called Anderson had systematically gone through all the Masonic prayers removing the name of Jesus. Their name for God was Jabulon, a mixture of Jehovah, Baal and Osiris. This was to give the idea that all roads lead to God.

Jesus said he was the way, the truth and the life (10). The 'all religions are equally valuable' idea did not fit.

It seemed to me that our church was not what it appeared as underneath the surface, there was a commitment to Freemasonry. I was not happy about this. The two systems of belief seemed incompatible.

I also heard a chilling allegation. On becoming a mason, the candidate promises that his allegiance to the brotherhood will be greater than to anything or anyone else. But in making this promise, a man effectively curses his own marriage. Jesus said of marriage, that which God has joined together, let not man divide. Joining the brotherhood seemed to involve going against that, and dividing the marriage. That might explain a tendency for wives, daughters and grand daughters of Freemasons to have severe health problems.

To this day, I don't know whether this allegation has a basis in fact or not. Somebody should do research to see if there is a connection between Freemasonry and ill health in the family. What I do know is that a vicar whom I knew once told me of an occasion when he helped a man who had decided to renounce Freemasonry. The vicar led him in a prayer. It then transpired that the man's daughter, who lived elsewhere in the country and had been blind up to that point, became able to see at the time of the prayer being offered, for no obvious reason. This seemed remarkable.

Around this time, I heard a helpful talk which has stayed with me, on Paul's advice to the Galatians. "Make no mistake about this. God is not mocked. A man reaps what he sows. If he sows in the field of his lower nature, he will reap from it a harvest of corruption, but if he sows in the field of the Spirit, he will reap from it a harvest of eternal life (11)."

The point the speaker made was that we do make this mistake. We tend to think, I can dabble with drugs or tobacco or misbehave sexually or whatever and get away with it, but the truth is that bad behaviour will catch up with us in the end. We think we are controlling it, but it ends up controlling us. Similarly, it is also tempting to think that the effort in leading a godly life is not worth it. We find it hard work, and feel it will yield no reward, but this too is a mistake. Going God's way will produce a harvest of eternal life in the end. So don't let's give up!

Nowadays I express a thought arising from this as follows: if you knowingly turn your back on God, don't be surprised if you end up confronting the devil.

In other words, we can get ourselves sick or demonised through our own choices to some extent. How grim is that.

Similarly, our healing is in our own hands as well, up to a point. Scripture says “Blessed is he who has regard for the poor... the Lord will raise him up from his sick bed (12).” It is also put the other way round: “He who closes his ears to the cry of the poor will himself cry out and not be heard (13).” Jesus came to bring good news to the poor (14). I find it interesting to note that my treatment of the poor will have an effect on my own health. I can affect how my life goes by my behaviour.

Steve had made poor choices in life, and sunk to a low ebb, but he turned away from it all to God and found relief. There was no apparent reason for Bill’s cancer, but he too found relief on turning to God, and had another seven years of life. I realised from all this that as a Christian minister, my job was not about leading services. I was discovering that I was in the rescue business. I was to explain these matters to people, and help them.

So my first question to you, the young person who finds church boring, is this: is your church actively involved in the lives of hurting people, helping them find strength in God? So many of our churches are little more than a series of meetings laid on for those that care to attend. Outsiders are neglected, especially those who are struggling. Little wonder that the Holy Spirit is reluctant to turn up to our meetings, with the result that it all feels boring.

The thought of casting out demons from other people was daunting to me. I felt the possibility of me causing hurt and damage by my amateur efforts would be considerable. I was therefore very grateful when I came across the book *Christian Set Yourself Free* by Graham and Shirley Powell (15).

Graham was an evangelist in New Zealand who suffered from all kinds of problems – headaches, nightmares, sweats, I forget the rest, but generally a life which was the opposite of peace. He found that serious prayer and fasting was a slight help, but not much use. In the end, he decided he had a demon, but he could not find one Christian person in New Zealand who agreed with him, so he realised he would have to drive it out on his own.

His method was to find passages in Scripture that spoke to his condition and claim them vigorously in a kind of hand to hand combat with the oppressor. “My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (16),” he would insist, “so get off me you wicked spirit!” Another verse he used was “the blood of Jesus cleanses me from all sin (17).” He would keep up this challenge day after day. Finally, after eighteen months intense struggle, he was free.

This was music to my ears. The way to learn to cast out demons was to start on myself. Then nobody else could get hurt. I didn’t have the level of problems that Graham had, I thought, but no matter.

My first foray was against a fear. I was due to lead worship in a few days time at an afternoon meeting, and I was seized with a strong fear that the music I had chosen would be most offensive to some people there. It was like a dread.

I could see that this worry was ridiculous and needed to be tackled. "Fear get off me, in the name of Jesus!" I said out loud. The fear vanished immediately. I was surprised. When it came to the meeting, nobody batted an eyelid at my choice of worship songs.

So if you are struggling with something that has the mastery over you, gentle reader, robbing you of peace, I recommend the approach that Graham stumbled upon. Find your own verses to use, e.g. "Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many and that includes me, so leave me alone, you wicked ... (18)" whatever your problem is.

When you have got this to work in your own life, you can share this approach with others. In my view most people would benefit from using this teaching, because when Jesus said, "the prince of this world is approaching, but he has no hold on me (19)," I suspect he was in the minority, possibly a minority of one.

There was one final important lesson for me in that parish.

We held a mission week one year, and at lunchtime on a certain day, we had been invited to go into a local secondary school and hold a meeting. I was sitting at the back of the roomful of young people, while a colleague was sharing the good news from the front. I found myself thinking, why can't I be allowed to share the gospel like this?

When the meeting broke up, we all made our way out of the school building. My route led through the school hall. It so happened that as I entered it by one door, a male member of staff entered it by another, and we were suddenly and unexpectedly walking shoulder to shoulder through the area. I found it unnerving.

The thought came to me strongly, Speak to this man about his soul.

I knew what that meant. I had read the biography of D L Moody the American evangelist more than once (20). He would not let the sun go down without talking to at least one person each day about his soul. I was being challenged to do the same here. I squirmed inwardly, and pretended not to hear. After a few more steps, our paths separated and I left the building. But before I could feel a sense of relief, I heard the voice of God. It was an audible voice, not simply an impression.

"When are you going to start obeying me?"

I felt awful. I knew I had just disobeyed, been rebellious, and deserved a rebuke. But 'start obeying God'? Hadn't I got ordained? Didn't I spend my waking hours trying to do his will?

This set off a period of soul searching. I was still rebellious at heart, that was clear, despite my best efforts. I was what the Bible calls a faulty bow. A soldier can think he has a useful weapon in his hands, but when it comes to the point, it is worthless.

This clear call to obey God has stayed with me ever since, and become my focus. It is my daily prayer, to obey, and not to fall into fear again. Why was I so scared of what the man might say? Why be such a useless servant? Always do what God asks, no matter how costly it seems.

It was time for me to move on to a second position. I had recently attended a meeting of the Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship

on The Pastoral Care of the Demonised. The visiting speaker told us of his church where there were thirty-four trained teams going out two by two into the community freeing people from demons. At last, I thought, how wonderful to hear of a church that is really on the move. When a vacancy arose in that parish for a second curacy, I applied for the post and was appointed.

Curate in Charge

I now had the oversight of two village churches known as daughter churches of a large parish. “You could write a book here,” said my predecessor on the day of interview. “There is so little to do.”

That seemed disappointing. I determined to fill my time promoting the kingdom of God as best I could.

We moved in to the curate’s house on December 21st. I had been worried about our children getting horribly cold, as on removals day, the front door has to stay open while the furniture is brought in from the van. However, four days before, at a prayer meeting, the verse came up “Pray that it will not be winter when that time comes (21).” I took this as an encouragement to pray for mild weather. The prayer was answered; it was sixteen degrees Centigrade that day, unusually mild for the time of year. Thank you God.

My first service was Christmas Eve midnight communion. I had my chance to address the people.

“Most churches operate like a London bus, with one driver, and all the rest being passengers. That is not my idea. We are all the body of Christ together (22). Our job is to find out the will of God for this village, and do it. The inspiration may come to anyone, not necessarily me. Please let me know if you sense God is speaking to us. Thank you.” Or words to that effect.

Everybody seemed happy with this plan, which was reassuring.

I had already noted that Jesus only said one thing when describing his church. We were to be a battering ram. “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (23).” Our job was rescuing people from hell. The question was what did that look like in our village.

I used to look forward to Sunday mornings, when we all gathered together. However, it would start so slowly. It took forty or fifty minutes of sustained effort before the atmosphere warmed up, I found. By the end we were humming. But next week we had to go through the slow start all over again.

The thought came to me that if people arrived to find exuberant worship already under way, that could help. I remembered a game we used to play as children, called Keep the Kettle Boiling. It was a case of jumping onto a pile of hay in the farm next door one after another. The rule was that there was never to be a break in the flow of us little ones throwing ourselves

down on the heap and then scampering off to the side and joining the back of the short queue while the next child had a go.

What about a church with continuous worship, I wondered. Hard for us in our village, but a real possibility in a city centre, with rotating praise bands. The casinos in Las Vegas stay open twenty-four hours – we had been there on holiday recently – so why couldn't we have twenty-four hour church in the UK, always in action, with doors that are never locked?

We made a limited trial. We began the worship at three p.m. one Sunday and continued it through until ten. People were encouraged to come and go at will. At the end we all felt exhausted but pleased. Whether the experiment had any lasting impact on our Sunday mornings, I rather doubted.

While I was reflecting on this idea of continuous worship in an inner city one day, I found myself imagining a tramp coming in and standing there. At first this seemed out of place, but then I thought, why not? He could enjoy the warmth and some time out of the rain. Let him come.

I brought the insight about obeying Jesus' commands to the twelve with me into the church life, and spoke about it. One thing which troubled me was that as curate, it was my job to take funerals, but what Jesus had actually said to his followers was Raise the Dead (24).

There had been one funeral in my previous parish where I had felt very moved and wanted to try it. The lady who died of cancer was only in her forties. I had got to know her from several visits in her last few weeks. The circumstances of her life were particularly distressing – her husband had abandoned her in her hour of need for another woman. I recall that funeral well. The passage I chose to speak on was from the Song of Songs – “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it (25).” After the service was over, I stood staring at the crematorium for a long time, wondering whether I might go through the door marked staff only and ask to pray over the dead person in an attempt to raise her, but in the end I decided I couldn't do it. What might the staff and the relatives think of this crazy curate? People would be upset.

I felt very sad about it.

Over the next few weeks, the weather was most unsettled, and we seemed to have one torrential downpour after another. It felt as if heaven was weeping, whether over the death of the lady or over my inability to step forward, I was not sure. Perhaps both.

The reality was that I had taken seventy funerals or so by now, but not attempted to raise a single person. Jesus had said, Leave the dead to bury their dead. It did not seem right for a Christian minister to be doing the exact opposite.

After a couple of years, there was a development about seeking the will of God for our situation. I was sitting at my desk one morning when the phone rang. It was Jane.

“David, we must do stuff for the homeless,” she urged.

My heart sank. I had enough problems as it was, without taking on the needs of rough sleepers, as they later came to be called. But what I actually said was, “Well done Jane. Go on telling us what God is saying to us about the homeless.”

The following Sunday evening, I was due to speak on Luke chapter fourteen, where Jesus encouraged his followers to invite the homeless poor to a party rather than the well off. I alerted Jane, and asked if she would be willing to step up at that point in my talk and share what God was saying.

When it came to it, it was worse than I feared. “We are to take the homeless poor into our house,” she insisted, quoting Isaiah (26).

I can’t encourage people to do that! I thought. It could be dangerous.

I wrestled with this problem for eighteen months. It seemed God was asking us to do something about the homeless. At the Christmas services that year, I filled the chancel with large cardboard boxes to keep the plight of the homeless in front of us. We had several collections for homeless charities.

Meanwhile, my thoughts were progressing. I remembered David Pytches’ argument, that healing was part of our calling today because it was one of the things that Jesus had commanded. I looked at the passage he had quoted. It comes at the very end of Matthew’s gospel.

“Jesus said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given unto me. Go forth, therefore, and make all nations my disciples, baptising them... and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you (27).”

This requirement is not a voluntary add-on for keen Christians; it is strongly worded. These are the terms if you want to call yourself a follower of Jesus.

I decided to rake through the gospel carefully, and see what other commands of Jesus there were besides healing. Being of an academic turn of mind, I looked for every use of the imperative tense on Jesus’ lips.

I had no idea whether there would be many commands or few. I was aware that as far as I knew, this was an area that had received little attention. People were forever talking about the importance of worship, for example, but calls for obeying the Lord were rare. Very rare, in fact.

Witness my surprise when I found that there were one hundred and eighty commands (28). Far more than I had expected.

Some seemed trivial for believers today. We are hardly called to go into the city and follow a man with a jar on his head and then prepare an upper room for a Passover meal (three commands in one sentence (29)). But Love your enemies, seek first the kingdom of God, pray that God will send out labourers into his harvest (30)? These instructions seemed much more apt for today.

As I reflected on the last of these three, I realised that in all the Sunday morning services I had attended, we had made countless requests to God, but the one prayer that Jesus asked us to make, that God send out workers to gather in the harvest, was seldom if ever included. Maybe never.

I have noted it, so that whenever I am called to lead prayers on a Sunday morning, I will always include this request.

About this time, I found myself preaching on Mark chapter seven, where Jesus does not mince his words. He quoted Isaiah. "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

When it came to the talk, I invited everyone to identify practices in the church which were traditions of men but did not come from Jesus. Up to that moment, I had always assumed that while some of the practices we heard in the Church of England were a bit strange, broadly speaking, we were on the right lines. With my felt tip pen in my hand, I stood by the overhead projector ready to jot down anything people might identify.

The result was a shock. There seemed to be no end of the contributions. I noted down twenty or thirty areas of church life where we were not following Jesus.

That insight has stayed with me ever since.

I decided I had better check everything. Like funerals, taking weddings would have to go. Jesus had attended a wedding where he helped with the supply of wine which ran out and talked about marriage, true, but there was no hint that his followers were to conduct weddings.

I began to wonder about our worship. Around then, I heard of a nasty attack on a church leader I knew by an Anglican bishop. The supposed wrong-doing seemed very slight to me. Then in the press, a few days later, I saw a statement by that bishop saying that worship was the *raison d'être* of the church, its central role. That statement coming from his mouth made me wonder. Suppose not, I asked myself?

I scanned my list of commands, and to my great surprise found that worship was not on it. I looked again. There was no doubt about it: Jesus never raised the subject of worship with the twelve. He did talk about it when the Samaritan woman raised it as a way of getting her out of having to talk about her adultery I noted, and replied to her that worship of God should be in spirit and in truth (31). Note the implied rebuke: how could her worship be in spirit and in truth with her life in the state it was? But he never gave any instruction to the twelve about worship.

Curiously, when the Samaritan woman went back into the town and the disciples found him, there was an exchange about food during which Jesus revealed what he really cared about: “My food is to do the will of my Father until I have finished his work (32).” It was obeying God that motivated him: gathered worship did not excite him at all.

How could that be, I wondered? Surely worship is central. Fifty thousand buildings dedicated to gathered worship spread across the UK can't be wrong, can they? Or can they? Perhaps they can.

I noted that every religion round the world has its temples and shrines and worships its deity. Maybe we are all responding to a deep felt need or instinct rather than following the call of Jesus.

It was time to look carefully at the Scriptures.

The call to worship in the Psalms was strong, but I reflected that we are called to follow Jesus, not King David. Also, David stated that the praise of God was always on his lips (33), not just at a weekly gathering, in contrast to my teenage attitude of not wanting God involved in my week, thank you. There were other passages too, about singing in Ephesians and Colossians (34). And what about Revelation chapter four, where the twenty-four elders round the throne of God were in continuous worship day and night? This sounded like the permanent city centre church I had wanted to establish.

I then realised that this unending worship was taking place in heaven in John's vision, where by definition there has been an end to sorrow, crying and pain. But we are still on earth, and have been given a commission to go to all nations with good news for the poor. In our attempt to make worship central, we were jumping the gun. There will be all of eternity to worship God after we have died, but for now, we need to get on and obey Jesus.

In the thirty years since I made this discovery, I have not found one person who fully agrees with me about gathered worship being a distraction at best, and an act of disobedience at worst. It's hard to decide that two thousand years of church practice have been misguided, but it's not impossible. After all, modern medicine is very different from the doctoring of the middle ages, which we now regard as quackery. Even the great Newton was overtaken by Einstein after

three hundred years in the driving seat. The same thing needs to happen to our worship services in my view. Our gatherings should be to plan and carry out our outreach instead.

I have also noted a cherry picking approach to Scripture. People who are convinced that worship is the thing look in the Bible for passages which support their view when they hear me challenging the idea. I want to do something quite different with the Bible, which is to possess the mind of Christ, as Paul claimed to do (37). It's not a case of can Scripture be made to support my view, but rather, what is the will of my Lord? There's an important difference.

To give an example, suppose you are a keen rower, and want support from God for your hobby. With a little ingenuity, you can find it right there in the gospels! Jesus was forever criss-crossing the Sea of Galilee by boat. He even calmed a storm when things were tough for the rowers, and walked on the water when the occasion arose. His life was water-centred. Wonderful. Job done.

This kind of approach won't work if snooker is your passion, but then snooker was not invented in those days so never mind. You will need some other line of reasoning.

Anyway, if you are unhappy with my thoughts about worship, please consider the following facts. Jesus sang just one hymn that we know of – “when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (36).” The Greek there is one word: hymn-sung. It is brushed off as an aside. He healed thousands of people and cast out thousands of demons. During my life, I reckon I have sung or accompanied twenty-five thousand hymns, healed some hundreds of people, and cast out about sixty demons. Note the contrast. It can't be right.

(Incidentally, if you have been wondering what happened about the thirty-four teams casting out demons right and left, it turned out to be all moonshine. There were no teams. I had been deceived.)

If a church were to worship the Lord *as well as* obeying Jesus, that would be one thing, but in my experience, our so-called churches worship the Lord *instead of* obeying Jesus. I say so-called, because in my opinion, such churches are not real churches at all but only in name. Perhaps they should be called religious assemblies.

Over the following ten years, I wrote the book that my predecessor had predicted. It was called The Priorities of Jesus. The title, suggested by a publisher friend of mine, says it all. I had 2200 copies printed, of which there are six hundred still left in my home today. It is also available as a cheap Kindle from Amazon, and as a free download online. Some of its contents are reproduced here. It contains the list of Jesus' commands, which is also available online. I thought the book would sweep the world, but it hasn't.

Anyway, back to the church I was attempting to lead. The day came when I stood up one Sunday morning and announced that I believed God wanted us to keep the church building open the following winter for people who had nowhere else to go. The permanent worship was to turn into permanent service (37). King David kept the temple open with a team of over two hundred door keepers, I told them (38). There were fifty churches in our town to draw on for help. With effort and planning, I reckoned we could assemble a team and should do it.

To my dismay, not one person was prepared to back me or even talk about it. There were plenty of objections – it was impractical, our building was not designed with this in mind, even “We don’t want these people in our village.” So much for loving our enemies!

The vicar of the parish was not keen either. It turned out that as Curate in Charge, I had no authority. A church warden explained to me there were no hyphens between the three words of my title.

“What do you mean?” I enquired.

“To be Curate-In-Charge with hyphens, the Bishop would have needed to lay hands on you.”

I was curious. “Supposing he had laid hands on me and I was Curate-In-Charge with hyphens, what then?” I enquired.

“Then you would have had virtually no authority,” came the reply. Thanks!

I think on balance that having virtually no authority would have been better than having no authority, but it would still not have been enough. The church building did not belong to me. I suppose I could have kept the doors open single handed and moved a mattress in there so I could snatch some sleep occasionally and welcomed people in, but it did not seem a good idea. I needed to abandon the dream. I had reached the end of the road.

Note the contrast. I had no authority, but Jesus had all authority in heaven and earth. The church people had been happy with the idea of doing God’s will in our parish in theory, but when it came to it, we shied away from it in practice, refusing even to discuss it. It was like my rebellious youth all over again.

It so happened that there was an extremely cold snap that winter lasting eight days. Heavy frosts, a foot of snow everywhere. It turned out we had money to heat the empty building to preserve our pipes, rather than letting them freeze, giving the lie to those who said we could not afford to heat the building for the project. I dread to think how many homeless people had their lives shortened by the cold snap. Life expectancy on the streets is low even on good days, I’m told.

About this time, I needed to drive my children to an event somewhere in town one afternoon. I was thinking about our situation as we cruised along. These people look as if they are committed to God, I reflected, but all they have actually committed is two fingers. I meant by this that we had only given God a small signal of agreement, a slight raising of the hand in acknowledgement, as it were.

Then I suddenly realised what I had just thought. To commit two fingers is to tell someone where they can go, in a very rude manner. I had not meant it like that, but they were the words that had come to me. As we approached a roundabout, we drew up behind a car with a tartan sticker on its rear bumper in the shape of a hand with a V sign. Very rude again. I then became aware of the worship song the children were listening to on the car audio system sung by the wonderful Christian entertainer Ishmael at that moment. The words were "... and I care that much about you..." Capable of a second highly insulting meaning.

It seemed that my thought of committing two fingers had been a word of God to me, and that it was confirmed by two witnesses. The F word. That is what God thought of our attitude towards him.

I was so shocked by this that I did not mention what had happened to anybody for eighteen months.

We were in rebellion. Agreeing to find out the will of God and do it had only been words. When it came to something difficult and challenging, we backed off. Nobody from the church came to see me to talk it over; they all looked the other way, until the idea fell by the wayside, as it surely would if it had no support.

Perhaps I had been deceived about the project. I am open to that idea. But if that was the case, then why did people not say so to me? Nobody told me that I had misheard from God. To this day I don't know what they thought about that aspect of it.

There is a full account of it all in *The Priorities of Jesus*. Maybe the book has done some good, because I am aware of several schemes round the country now that take rough sleepers into church buildings during the winter. They tend to work by involving a number of different churches who each open their building every so often in rotation. Exeter, Newport South Wales, Brighton, Maidstone, and Cambridge, I believe. I have never checked what actually happens there, and I may have the place details wrong, but it seems as if there are now churches responding to the nudge to do something about homeless vagrants. And how much closer to the mission Jesus gave us than my permanent worship idea.

For me personally, it was a disaster. What next?

The Other End

So far I have only told you about the main church in my charge, which was two hundred yards from our home, the curate's house. All this time I had also been leading a smaller church two miles away as well. I need to bring you up to date on that.

When I first saw the building on my interview, a wooden mission hall with stinging nettles growing beside it and weeds in the gravel, I laughed out loud. It looked ridiculous. Why would anyone want to go inside? Still, if this was to be my first church, so be it. At least things could not get any worse under my leadership!

Note the arrogance again, and also my assumption that the state of the building said something negative about the people. Will I ever learn?

We organised a Saturday to do the place up. The people turned out with garden tools and paint brushes. They proved to be a lovely bunch. We got the whole building re-coated with a preservative during the day. It looked fine. The unwanted greenery was removed. The gravel became weed-free. It all looked heaps better.

Too bad that the building had parking for only four cars, was away from where people lived and in the narrowest part of a country lane. Our catchment area was small, and so were we. Some local believers used to take a car into one of the larger churches in town on Sundays, I soon discovered.

There was a little hole in the woodwork about a foot above the ground that we did not repair that day. I was told that young people in cars liked to race along the lane, swing onto our gravel at speed, reverse violently out into the road and roar off down the lane back in the direction they had come from. Good fun on a Saturday night, I guess.

One of these racing drivers had hit the church slightly in his two wheel turn, leaving a splintered plank or two with a small hole. Tiresome, or should I say, tyresome. There had been no apology from anyone.

The Sunday arrangement was 0930 service at the mission hall followed by 1100 at the main end, as I saw it. This was unsatisfactory. It meant that I was forever looking at my watch after the service and then having to race in my car, like those boys I suppose, and arrive at the other church at the last minute just as the lone bell stopped tolling. The result was that I never got to know the mission hall people as I would like to have done. I knew the ones that served on their committee well, but that was about it. I did do some home visiting, but not enough in retrospect. I tended to channel my visiting to the sick and bereaved who needed it most in my view.

At the end of one Sunday, at three minutes past midnight, the phone rang. This was an unusual hour for a call.

“Hello, I live two doors away from the mission hall, and just to tell you that it’s on fire. Both the town’s fire engines are here.”

I immediately knew we were in trouble. Sure enough, the building was engulfed in huge flames. It transpired that someone had pushed a fire lighter in through the small hole. The fire would have taken a while to get hold amongst the hymn books before spreading o the whole building. It was still a spectacular blaze when I got there ten minutes after the phone call. All I could do was watch.

The vicar was on holiday abroad so I had to handle the press and local radio. I answered the questions as best I could. There were three local papers at that time, and it made the front page of them all.

I carefully noted the false facts in the reports, and worked out that the error rate was one per vertical inch of print, or every two sentences. I already knew that newspaper reporting is seldom accurate, but I was still shocked. Names spelt wrong, details incorrect. One of the papers had fewer errors than the others which was reassuring at first, until I came to the statement, “The decision has already been taken to rebuild.”

Oh no it hadn’t! It was a bald lie. Also it was damaging to us, as people who had read it would think as the weeks turned into months before anything happened, what’s the matter with those idiots? Why aren’t they getting on with it?

I suppose someone thought the statement made the article read better. Who cares about truth anyway?

Note the same level of accuracy as the report of the teams delivering people from demons. Interesting.

The decision to rebuild would actually take eighteen months. Here’s how it was reached.

A few days after the blaze, the vicar returned from his holiday. Over the following week, I heard him say three times in my presence, “I am the vicar of this parish.” Fair enough. My opinion did not count, it seemed.

All the same, I felt the need to take some practical steps. I rang the bishop to ask for permission to remove the charred remains.

“In order for you to do that,” he explained, “I would need to revoke the licence, and I have to tell you that in view of the situation and potential of the building, were you to apply for a new licence, I would be unlikely to grant it.”

Great. So removing the eyesore could easily obliterate that church for ever.

Next I tried the council, because I had discovered that they could serve a D Notice forcing us to remove the building. Then revocation of the licence need not arise.

“No, sorry,” they replied. “A D Notice is served in cases where there are pedestrians that walk past an unsafe building who are at risk. Your building out in the country presents no such risk, so a D Notice is not servable.” Or something like that.

So we were stuck. The choices were either for the church to close for good or to rebuild as before, maybe calling it repair. Clearing the site as part of a process of rebuilding would not create the licence issue, it transpired.

Somewhere in the mist of all this, a diocesan buildings advisor came to visit me for a morning. He was a property developer. We cruised around the area in his car.

“All these fields round here belong to property developers,” he explained.

“But isn’t this all green belt?”

“Oh yes, but the dam will burst somewhere and areas will be released for building one day. The water pressure is mounting each year. So the property developers buy the land speculatively before it becomes valuable.”

And then, on finally seeing the charred ruin, “This was an arson attack waiting to happen,” he pronounced. Prophecy or hindsight, I was not sure which.

His words about the developers gave me an idea and I soon found myself sitting in the Council offices opposite a man I immediately took to. He would go on to give a quarter of a century’s service in that post, largely unheralded.

“That field across the road from the church belongs to a property developer,” I began.

“Suppose we approach them and put down some sort of rubber grid to make a parking surface there,” I suggested. “With a small hole in the hedge for the cars to drive in. The rubber would be almost invisible.”

“Ah, that would be change of use” came the reply.

“Yes, but so what?”

“Planning permission required.” The gentleman reached for a local map. “Now, various big-wigs on the council live here, here... and here.” He stabbed the map in several places with his finger. “Note the contour lines indicating hills – the parking would be clearly visible from their windows. A bit of an eyesore. I doubt they would vote in favour. Also, So-and-so lives here,” he announced with finality. This fact was clearly a deciding one.

So that too was a non-starter.

I think it may have been either from him or the diocesan buildings guru that I discovered a little known fact, that a site for a church in the centre of the village had been left to the diocese soon after the second world war in somebody’s will. The site was a field in the green belt, and there had been a couple of horses grazing on it ever since. A pleasant spot to see out one’s days, I imagined. Maybe I could be put out to grass too one day.

This seemed promising. The neighbouring parish had a similar-sized daughter church to ours that was also struggling, which met in a disused school. We could have sold our plot, and they could have sold their buildings, a new parish could have been carved out and with the combined money, a brand new church would rise from the ashes to serve the community in a much more central position.

I put the idea to our vicar but he was not the least bit interested, so I couldn’t pursue it any further. It would not even be right to talk it over with others, given the vicar’s attitude. Shame.

There was a loss adjuster in the congregation at our other church, and he knew what to do in making our insurance claim. He spent weeks beavering away. The day came when there was a figure. We were going to receive £103,000. Pleasing. I happened to overhear that an architect had been invited to view the site one afternoon, without knowing about our windfall. I turned up at the meeting, uninvited, and found the vicar, church wardens and loss adjuster there. The architect said that he could get us a church built in breeze block and brick on the site for about £91,000.

There was a collective sigh of relief. Job done, everyone reckoned, except me.

I had been arguing for some months that a church on that plot without proper parking was doomed to fail. We had been eighteen on the morning of the fire, about our average attendance. A family that moved into our area recently had come to see me as they wanted to join the church; what was the Sunday School provision for the children?

I had to tell them that there was no Sunday school and I couldn’t see how there was going to be one because we were so small, and that although I hated saying it, my advice to them was to

join a larger church in town. What else could either I or a predecessor or a successor there say? Their need had to take priority over ours, I reckoned.

I believed we had been getting on fine meeting in the village hall for over a year. In fact it was better, as there was plenty of parking there, and people would be more likely to come in that neutral environment. It was also more central. The friendlier venue might help our outreach.

People did not want to hear that. We want our little church back was the attitude. I found myself in a minority of one.

In the end, I was able to come round. It happened like this. One Sunday morning, we abandoned the service, and everyone was to spend the time praying instead. I and most of the others walked the three hundred yards to the church in thoughtful silence and stared at the charred timbers waiting on the Lord. Others preferred to remain in their seats in the village hall.

I received the words, "I will build my church." Simple as that.

When we gathered to share our impressions, there were several contributions, including one about King Solomon building the temple in 2 Chronicles from a man who did not know his Bible, which impressed me.

On summing up what people had shared, I found myself able to say that we could go ahead, as long as we did a double building project; not just bricks and mortar but rebuilding ourselves as Christ's body, full of love, bringing the good news to the village in a way we had not done before.

Everyone was pleased. The rebuilding could start.

Note that for all the committee meetings and reports and what-not, the actual decision to rebuild was taken by just a handful of the key people on site one rainy afternoon. After that, it was simply a case of getting everyone to rubber stamp it. I was learning about church politics.

The construction took months, but the day came when the Bishop arrived for a special service of dedication, and rubbed his finger on the wall in the shape of a cross. My contribution was slight – there were dignitaries and all sorts there, but I did manage to sing a song from the keyboard which was a favourite of mine at the time and felt apt. I hoped it would set the tone for the future of the new church building.

The words were, "I want to serve the purpose of God in my generation. I want to serve the purpose of God while I am alive. I want to give my life for something that will last forever. Oh I delight, I delight to do your will. What is on your heart? Show me what to do. Let me know your will, and I will follow you (39)."

Might we manage the second part of the challenge I had issued to the people, to be a rebuilt body of Christ, really loving and serving our neighbours?

Crisis

Back to the situation at the main church of the two. Following the failure of the Noah's ark for the homeless project (as I thought of it, to get them in out of the rain), my ministry was in tatters. Finding out the will of God for our village and doing it was clearly off the table. It had all been mere talk.

I grew to hate the Sunday morning service. It all seemed so hollow.

There were other problems. It was time for me to look for a move to become a vicar somewhere, but what bishop would want to take on someone who wanted to use the church building for homeless people, keeping it permanently open? My ideal model for a church by now was King David's Cave of Adullam, where he was on the run from Saul, and four hundred desperate men who had run away from their masters came and joined him (40). Even worse for the bishop would be my desire not to take weddings and funerals on grounds of conscience. And as for healing the sick and casting out demons and raising the dead being central for all believers, what would he make of that?

Then there were problems at home. My wife had grown increasingly unhappy. She thought she had married a teacher who was a stuffy evangelical, and the way I had turned out was very different. She found it impossible to support me, and there was a real danger that the ever-increasing strain might end our marriage.

The vicar gave me six months to leave the parish, as my time was now up. I felt very pressurised. The Archdeacon came at my request, grasped the situation, and advised me to return to teaching. I consulted someone in London who gave counsel to clergy and he advised me to take two or three years out of the ministry so that my wife and I could sort ourselves out.

When a job came up at a local school where a teacher was wanted who could be both Head of Music and Head of RE, I decided to apply for it. I had misgivings, as discipline had always been a challenge, but I needed to support my family and something had to be done.

I was taken on. We were able to buy a home with help from my parents. It has served us well for twenty-seven years now.

At the end of my first day in the classroom, when I went home I thought, what have I done? I found the young people un-cooperative. Even in the school orchestra, which should have been fun, it turned out that none of the violinists were willing to play second violin. My suggestion that they take it in turns and alternated between firsts and seconds was refused. You can't have an orchestra if the members are in rebellion.

I was acutely unhappy and not just because I had left parish work. My back was in constant pain – I had a lumber strain many years before, and it still tended to play up in times of stress. I was aware things were not right: when I had a free lesson, of which there were about five a week in my timetable, I found I would spend the forty minutes simply staring out of the staff room window in distraction. I could not use the time to prepare as I should. My daily walk to the school took me along a deserted route through a wood, and before long I realised that I was weeping profusely at the same point of my walk each morning. Sobbing my eyes out.

Staff had to eat lunch with the boys as part of our duties. There were two ways back to my classroom from the dining hall, one of which went out through the front door of the school and round some buildings before re-entering the school after a hundred yards, close to the music room. One day, as I went through the front door after lunch ended, I was suddenly seized with the most tremendous longing to walk off down the drive and never come back. It is the strongest temptation I have ever faced. I was horrified, and made sure I always avoided that route back to the music room from that day on. No good allowing that thought to surface.

It couldn't last. Discipline broke down again, and there came a day when I pulled a boy's hair and had to resign. This had not been the first time; it had happened before in classroom teaching during riots when my back was up against the wall. It's a technique that was used on me at school. I hated it. I hated having to do it to others but felt at that moment I had no choice. Even a worm will turn, I had been told at school. I was evidently that worm.

A friend who was a highly successful teacher in a very difficult school for forty years once told me that really, if there is a serious issue with discipline, it's better to leave teaching as soon as you can. Wise words. I was glad to have done so seven years before, and regretted needing to return to the classroom.

At first, I was so relieved not to have to go into work each morning. Then it hit me; I had lost my employment through abusing a child. Unspeakable. I felt awful.

Six months later, we were on a long-planned holiday in Wengen, a beautiful car-free village in the Swiss Alps near Interlaken. One morning before breakfast time it was beautifully sunny. I went outside onto the balcony from our room and looked up at the glorious snow covered peaks. Not a cloud in a deep blue sky. Possibly the finest view in Europe that morning. Suddenly, and without warning, I found myself begging God with all the intensity I could find that he would end my life. No prayer was ever more urgent.

Looking back on it, there had been plenty of hints that this was coming in the years before. At the Sunday evening service, people were encouraged to share words or pictures that they had from the Lord. I recall one evening when someone called out "I must decrease and He must increase," the words of John the Baptist. Twenty minutes later someone else called out exactly

the same words. In the vestry afterwards, I commented to the other person there with me how some silly person had not been listening the first time. "Oh no," came the reply, "the second person came in late, after the first person had spoken."

This was striking. Our supposed words from God were not just will o' the wisps. And Jesus really must increase, and us decrease, I reckoned. I also noted my unpleasant tendency to form opinions and judge people.

On another occasion, somebody shared the words "Back to the Future." Nobody responded. I thought nothing of it until I arrived home to find a copy of the film Back to the Future on the hall table. It had been lent to my son. I had better watch it with him, I thought.

I was only able to stay for the first hour of it, but the last scene I watched ended with the white haired inventor saying earnestly, "It's a good thing we don't know what's coming in the future, because if we did, we wouldn't be able to handle it." I dimly wondered whether those words were relevant to me.

There had been a third strand. I had developed the habit of wandering in the local cemetery in order to pray. I used to go there about once a week if the weather permitted. At the far end of it, an area of many fine trees, there would be nobody about to disturb me as I went round and round a large loop of tarmac paths. I found myself praying, "You can increase the pain if you want." A strange prayer, but it kept on coming.

Things were painful even then. The Sunday evening service, the highlight of the week where we all shared, was gradually dwindling. It had been thirty plus when I arrived. By the time I left, it was twelve. Far from the church going well, people had begun leaving. There was a spell of a few months when the ones that lived at a distance all started finding other churches. They would invite me to their homes and carefully explain that they felt a call to go somewhere more local.

We lost twenty percent of our members within a few months, and these were the key people, not just the hangers on. It was difficult to deal with. I had to say to myself, at least they are going to other churches and not just leaving for time in the pub. I smiled on being told, said I fully understood, which I did, and wished them well. They were grateful. They did not want to upset me.

My successor would close the Sunday evening service down altogether after I left. A great tragedy. I still miss it now sometimes.

I had another indication of difficult times ahead. A visiting pastor from California gave a conference locally. He had a gift of prophetic words for people. I sought him out and got to

know him. During one conversation, he suddenly said to me, “And you’ll be hanging on by the edge!”

This was remarkable. During the previous twenty-four hours I had had two pictures which I had not shared with anybody. The first was of an amusing car bumper sticker, this time of fingers emerging from a car boot, as if there was someone trapped inside. The second had been of me not standing in the church pulpit but facing it, hanging on to the lip of it for dear life, with a horrid drop below me. Now here was this man interpreting my pictures for me without even knowing what they were. It was like Daniel in the Old Testament book who did just that for King Nebuchadnezzar (41).

So you might think that when I became suicidal, these advance warnings would have helped, but they didn’t really. I was so traumatised by the collapse of my calling and ministry and descent into child abuse that I forgot everything else. For about twenty months I found myself begging God to end my life, about once a month. I remember one episode when I was lying on the floor in our bedroom hammering on the carpet crying out, rather like the unfortunate boy in my first parish years before.

There was one encouragement. A builder who I only knew dimly rang up and asked to come and see me. He arrived on a Friday after lunch. He said that when he had been praying about three weeks earlier, I had come into his mind. He saw me lying under a bush, like Elijah asking to God to end his life (42). This seemed apt: I had actually asked God to end my life that very morning.

The builder went on to say that like Elijah, after he met God in the cave on Mount Horeb, I would be given more work to do for Him.

I was so pleased. Thrilled in fact. But then, after a few days, I realised I was thinking about Abraham a lot. Didn’t he have to wait a long time before God’s promise to him was fulfilled? I hoped this new thought wasn’t a word to me.

Then I received a rare invitation: would I help with the Sunday School the following Sunday morning by playing a song for the little children at church on the keyboard that they were to learn? I duly went along. I forget the song, but the theme of the lesson was all about Abraham, and the fact that he had to wait a long time to receive the promise (43). I realised then that I was in for a long wait before the work for God would materialise. It’s been twenty-five years now, and I am still waiting.

My suicidal thoughts did pass in the end. I found during that time that I would be my normal self for several weeks at a stretch, and then suddenly plunge down to a very deep level without warning. I have since met somebody else who has had the same experience with suicidal

longings. It was like walking over a snow field on a glacier with hidden crevasses every now and then.

I suppose the secret was to be roped up to others. There was a day when we were on holiday in Iceland and the rest of the party were all keen to swim in a geothermal pool. I was not interested, and wondered about going for a walk on the fine cliffs overlooking the sea instead, but suddenly I realised that if I did so I would throw myself off. I felt dreadful, but in my confusion I knew that the secret would be to stay close to the others in the pool. I did so, filled with horrible feelings and unable to think at all, until the mood passed off a few hours later and I felt normal again.

A counsellor advised me to have the phone number for the Samaritans in my pocket, and even to ring them when I did not feel the need, and say hello, so that when a real need did arise it would not seem so hard to phone up, but I never did.

Anyway. Life had to be lived. What was I going to do?

After spending some months researching our family tree while my wife went out to work, I started teaching piano lessons. I had been helped towards this by an unemployment group run by a local church, where the theme was, when you are out of work, find out what you are good at and pursue it.

The teaching started very slowly. I still only had eight pupils a week after three years. At least my wife's work was going very well. She went on to have a fine career.

Then there came a break through. Our Christian giving had dropped away to almost nothing during this time. I knew it wasn't right. I needed to do something about it, even though money was tight.

At this time, I had a phone call from a local school wanting someone to teach piano and keyboard. I expressed interest, told the head of music about myself, including that I had been a clergyman, and he said he would ring back with a time for me to go in.

A fortnight passed and I heard nothing. This was too bad. My talk of having been a church leader had clearly put him off.

I felt angry, but instead of sounding off, I wrote a careful letter saying I was sad nothing had come of the opening, but that if the opportunity came up again, I would like to be considered, and wished the head of music all the best for his future career.

Two days later the phone rang again. "No, no, you misunderstand, I've been off with the 'flu, I will ring up and get you to come in."

The days mounted up and I still heard nothing. It was virtually the end of term. So strange.

All this time I had been sorting out our giving, and on Good Friday morning I went to the post box and sent off a standing order to the Charities Aid Foundation which we had used for our giving before, reviving our account. Later that same day an envelope arrived from the head teacher at the school containing a contract for me to sign. I was to start teaching piano at the beginning of the following term. There might be as much as three days a week of work to do. Extraordinary.

So I had been signed up without them even having met me.

My piano teaching took off from that point, and in the end I peaked at giving sixty lessons a week. Twenty-five thousand lessons in all, over the years; about the same number as the hymns and songs I had played and sung.

The great thing about one to one teaching was that I could be my sunny self. Discipline was not an issue. I remember reading a book for aspiring classroom teachers instructing us when starting in a new school in September not to smile before Easter. I found I could not do that. I had been a round peg in a square hole in the classroom.

I also remember a boy I could not handle at all. One day, I observed him standing quietly in line outside the classroom of another member of staff. When I got the chance, I asked the teacher how he did it.

“Oh yes, I had heard about him. When I first had that class, I walked along the line and without saying anything I picked him up and threw him against the opposite wall. I had no trouble from him after that.”

Such methods appalled me. I found it very difficult to be harsh. The boys thought I was soft. I probably was. The result was not good. Most successful teachers seem to have a knack, or learn a good way of working, firm but fair. I never did. Iron fist in velvet glove, someone instructed me. The velvet glove was okay, but inside was an unstable mixture of iron and clay.

You may wonder why I have told you about the hair-pulling. Might it not have been wiser to have kept quiet about it? People may be appalled. Why create problems for myself?

My answer is two-fold. I want this account to be one of integrity. It is important to be truthful. I hate the way I have been lied to and I don't want to deceive you. The fact is that for all my good intentions, I ended up doing something disgraceful of which I am ashamed. That needs to be a part of the story.

But secondly, there must be many, many people who have secrets from earlier in their life that they don't want people to know about. I met one once. He explained that the Lord had told him to confess a bad habit to me which was an ongoing problem. I agreed to pray for him. He pointed out that there are certain sins which one can own up to, for example alcoholism. It is socially acceptable to have a drink problem; indeed, if you want to attend a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, then at the beginning of your first meeting you have to stand up in the room and say, "I am an alcoholic." As everybody present is also an alcoholic, it's OK. It's because everyone is on the same terms that there can be mutual help.

But then there are other sins that you cannot own up to, because society will be down on you like a ton of bricks if you do. Also, the attitude today in society is once an evil person, always an evil person. It's not easy to escape from one's past, so maybe it's better to bury it.

This notion goes against the Christian message, which is of God 'straightening the backs of those who are bowed down' or 'reaching down to them on the scrap heap and raising them up', like we saw in Psalm 40 (44). It also ignores an important verse in the book of James: "confess your sins to one another and you will be healed (45)." Note too that Jesus said, "there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed (46)." It's good to come out of the dark into the light, to open up to a trusted friend who can pray with you, like Steve had done in my first parish.

Anyway, if you want to think badly of me, so be it. I agree with you: I think badly of myself.

Recently I came across a photograph of me as a three year old and my response was to feel sad. If only I could go back to that age and have my life over again and make a better job of it. But I can't, and the thing to do today is to live for Jesus as best I can, trying to show love and compassion to everyone I meet. And tomorrow too.

Incidentally, I draw comfort from bad deeds in Scripture. Some, like Moses killing the Egyptian, date from before the person found God, but there are others, such as David arranging the death of Uriah the Hittite so that he could have his wife, that came afterwards (47). David paid for his wickedness by seeing the death of his baby and the collapse of his family around him as the years passed, but God never rejected him, and Jesus was happy to name him. Paul too, who described himself as the chief of sinners, wrote about the struggle between good and evil that he observed in himself which was still taking place years after his commitment to God (48).

Conclusion

My story about church involvement is almost over, but there is one more thing to say.

We have a small poster on a wall which reads Out of Poison Make Medicine. I seem to have been able to do just that in recent years without realising it or planning it. For example, when my cousin became a recluse in her old age, after bad experiences in her latter years, I was sorry for her. I used to send her Christmas cards and the occasional letter with family news. Then someone told me that I could phone. She would not answer the phone, but after a few rings, the answer phone would kick in, and I could record a friendly message, so I started doing just that. In the end, I was one of the only people she would allow into her home.

I think my difficult experiences have helped me in relating to people in need like her.

I have another friend who feels honoured to be included here. I first met Clive after church during coffee in the hall. He was sitting on a seat on his own, looking morose, so I went over, sat on the chair next to him and said hello. Within a minute, he was sharing with me how very badly hurt he had been by using Ouija boards in Germany years before. Remarkable openness to a stranger. My response was, I can relate to this man!

Clive has many labels and experiences that would make most people run a mile – schizophrenia, psychosis, paranormal experience, bi-polar, brain damage from birth, voices in the head and others. It's quite a collection! They don't bother me at all. He has a wonderful and enviable gift of friendship. When he and I are walking through town together, it is hardly possible to walk a hundred yards without Clive greeting someone he knows. Marvellous. We have been friends for many years now.

Since leaving the ministry, I have spent my spare time writing books – this is my ninth, and composing piano pieces which are mostly unplayed, and waiting on God. I have created some websites trying to communicate, with little effect. For a while, I was a volunteer at The Bible Society, but when I spoke on their behalf, the church I was visiting was so upset at what I said that it seemed better to desist. People cannot deal with what I have to say.

I have also volunteered at a local community project, welcoming people coming in off the street. They would open up with their problems in some cases, and it was a case of sharing appropriate Bible verses and praying with them. My best one concerned a lady who told us that her husband who lived overseas had a heart of stone. It was a joy to turn her to Ezekiel, where God says to the Israelites, "I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh," and see her face turn white with shock at finding her words in the Bible (49). Great fun! Such an encouragement to her.

Looking ahead, I wonder what God might allow me to do. But if you were God, would you take me on? I don't think I would.

I would love to be part of a group where the aim was to do everything Jesus said and nothing but what Jesus said. It would look very different from today's churches. Maybe only a handful of people meeting in a home.

I hope some of my story will have helped you answer your question, do I have to go to church. To me, there are deeper questions below it: what is a church anyway, and do I want to follow Jesus? It's up to you to decide. But what I would ask is, either be properly committed or leave all well alone. Don't be half-hearted, or lukewarm as the people of Laodicea were. God's response to that was to spit them out of his mouth. How horrible to be thought vomit-worthy by the almighty!

As for me, I am in for the long haul. Indeed, I would still follow Jesus if an archaeologist was able to produce the bones of his crucified body and debunk the resurrection, because of the fabulous accounts of his life in the gospels. I would like my seven years in parish work to have gone better, and I hope for some fresh opportunity to come along one day, but if that proves to be a vain hope, I still have no regrets, because I have tried to honour Jesus despite my weaknesses and failings.

At least I have no illusions about my own worthlessness. When Richard Nixon was caught out in the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, I saw a placard in a photo in Time magazine which read 'Impeach The Expletive Deleted'! One of the features of the case was the tape recordings of conversations in the White House which were full of swear words that were erased by the press for popular consumption.

At the time, I thought to myself, if he's an expletive-deleted then I must be an expletive-deleted expletive-deleted! And sadly, although I always wanted to be a good person, I have found no reason since then to change my mind. Every now and then I see deep inside myself and observe the person I really am. It's not pretty. But what I want to say in my defence is that at least I am an expletive-deleted expletive-deleted that is doing his best to follow and obey his lord.

Final thought: if you are not going to follow Jesus, what are you going to do instead? Toy with drugs, maybe, and probably be dead by thirty? Make money your goal? (The love of money is a root of all evil (50)). Have a 'good time' and end up like the prodigal son (51)? Sin looks attractive, but the thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy. Jesus comes to bring abundant life instead (52).

Thank you for reading, and may God bless you! Get in touch if you want. I'd be happy to talk things over.

Epilogue

Last Sunday morning I cycled to church as usual. I did not go inside because our family is shielding from Covid. My aim was to meet the people going in, and catch up. I had some nice conversations.

I don't know what took place inside, but I am confident that the commands of Jesus did not get a look in, there was no training in healing the sick or casting out demons, that if Holy Communion was celebrated there won't have been a meal with it, that there was no review of how our outreach has been going, oh let's not go on, it's too depressing!

If you're wondering why I am so concerned about healing the sick and casting out demons, it's because Jesus was. Remember the thirty something teams going out into the community casting out demons that never existed? Jesus sent out seventy-two of his wider circle of followers on a mission to spread the good news and heal the sick. They came back jubilant because even the demons submitted to them, so this is the basic heart of the gospel for all of us (53).

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Notes and further reading

None of my writing online is copyright, except for the Kindles available from Amazon. Download and share it freely, as it is like to disappear once I have gone.

1. 2 Timothy 3:16 (chapter three, verse sixteen)
2. Matthew 28:20
3. Matthew 10:8. This instruction was given also to the seventy-two that Jesus sent out, a wider circle of followers, Luke 10:9
4. Ezekiel 37:9-10. An inspiring chapter (read from verse one) as is chapter 47:1-12, a favourite of mine.
5. Matthew 10:8. The seventy-two also had success with demons, Luke 10:17
6. 1 Corinthians 14:1 & 12. Note that Paul only wrote about using the spiritual gifts because the believers at Corinth had expressed an interest in them. So we should not insist that using the spiritual gifts is an essential part of following Jesus. I say this because I have met Christians who don't like the idea of the spiritual gifts at all. My own view is that I find them helpful in any form of Christian service. How are you going to get someone off drugs, for example, if you shy away from using the gifts? I am particularly keen to prophesy, to hear from God and pass on the message, despite the fact that

prophets end up in pain (Hebrews 11:32-38). Following Jesus is not about preserving ourselves, but helping others (Luke 14:26-27, John 11:24-25)

7. Matthew 16:19
8. 1 Kings 19:11-14
9. Matthew 6:5, 23:5
10. John 14:6. I recall a cartoon from Voice Magazine when I was a student, published by the IVF, now the UCCF. Two people were having a conversation. "All religions are the same. Name any two and you will see!" exclaimed one. "Melanesian Frog worship and Christian Science" came back the laconic reply. Fun.
11. Galatians 6:7-8
12. Psalm 41:1-3
13. Proverbs 21:13
14. Luke 4:18-21
15. Christian Set Yourself Free, Graham and Shirley Powell, New Wine Press, 1986.
16. 1 Corinthians 6:19
17. 1 John 1:7
18. Matthew 18:28
19. John 14:30
20. Moody Without Sankey, John Pollock, Hodder and Stoughton, 1966.
21. Matthew 24:20
22. I Corinthians 12:27
23. Matthew 16:18
24. Matthew 10:8
25. Song of Songs 8:7
26. Isaiah 58:7
27. Matthew 28:19-20
28. You can download the list of commands from www.diychurch.co.uk
29. Matthew 14:13-14
30. Matthew 5:46, 6:33 & 9:38
31. John 4:24
32. John 4:34
33. Psalm 34:1
34. Ephesians 5:19-20, Colossians 3:16. For a careful examination of all the Bible passages that appear to encourage gathered worship in churches, see www.diychurch.co.uk where there are links to the videos I have on www.youtube.com on the subject. They are best watched in order. So far they have had almost no hits.
35. I Corinthians 2:16
36. Matthew 14:26

37. It so happens that in both Hebrew and Greek, worship and service are expressed by the same word. I have written several articles on this similarity, whose central point is that worship without service is not on.
38. I Chronicles chapter 26. There were even four gatekeepers out on the road, verse 18.
39. Mark Altrogge, quoted by kind permission. His website is www.forevergratefulmusic.com.
40. 1 Samuel 22:1-2
41. Daniel chapter 3
42. 1 Kings 19:4
43. Abraham was 75 in Genesis 12:4 and 100 when Isaac was born in Genesis 17:17
44. Psalm 145:14 and Psalm 113
45. James 5:16
46. Luke 12:2
47. Moses in Exodus 2:12, David in 2 Samuel 11:14-15. The story of his family collapse takes up the rest of 2 Samuel
48. 1 Timothy 1:16, Romans 7:14-25
49. Ezekiel 36:26
50. 1 Timothy 6:10
51. Luke 15:11-32
52. John 10:10
53. Luke 10:1, 8 & 17

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Some Bible quotations are from memory, however.