

## **'This is His story this is His song – This is my story, this is my song' – Rev John's story**

**'Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened' Winston Churchill**

Imagine I've only got 10 minutes to cover my first real encounter with God nearly 45 years ago until now. I will share the early part of a rather long journey, but especially because it is with great British reserve that we don't like to talk about ourselves too much – well some of us!

I was brought up in a very loving home in Glasgow in the mid-1950s, 60s and early 70s. I used to think quite a lot about two questions: What is life all about? What happens after death?

I attended Church and Sunday school in the local Church of Scotland Parish church which was expected of all respectable families of that era: if you missed four of the once-monthly communions in the year, the elders would visit and you could be struck off the church electoral roll – imagine doing that today! However, for the first 18 years of my life it never made any real impression upon me or seemed to answer my two questions – maybe I didn't listen enough! I don't know if you have found that? You go to church for years and years and come away none the wiser. I had no real needs or problems and thought I was quite a good person. I believed there was a God of creation, but there was no sense of any real closeness or understanding of who this God was.

I also had some friends with whom I discussed my two questions, but they came up with the phrase that Jesus said about the farmer in the parable, that is, life is what you make it and so don't think about life after death – just 'eat, drink and be merry'. That was it. That was what life was all about!

It was when I left home at 18 that things began to change. For a start, I had to stand on my own two feet and look after myself. I became more aware of personal responsibility and making my own choices – not just relying on the choices of my parents, made for me when I was at home.

I had moved to London on my own to take up a career which I believed would set me up for life. It seemed the perfect job for those who want to earn a lot of money and travel around the world at the same time. I went to work in the head office of a Middle East Bank with the intention of working abroad. It was the mid-70s and the oil boom had taken off in the middle east, although Britain was facing half-day weeks and the coal strikes which are still very much remembered in our villages here in Ansley and Arley.

My new life in London was heady days for me, with everything being new and exciting. However, things were to change quite dramatically after about a year. Guess what? – I met Frances! We met at a carol service and we stood next to each other, sharing a carol sheet! From then on, life began to take a different turn. God began to speak to me in 5 ways which I can summarise:

1. God had His hand upon me through people that I 'coincidentally' met. Do you find that there are people who miraculously come your way who are like signposts to God? Frances and I started to go out together. She suggested I come with her to the church she was attending in central London. This was only down the road for both of us. As mentioned earlier, my experience of church was rather dull, boring, serious, unemotional, possibly irrelevant, to be endured with solemnity and keeping up appearances (sounds like good television!) But, because I wanted to go with someone I liked, I would be prepared to go and put up with it! However, it was a great culture shock. The church was All Souls Langham Place, next to the BBC. The atmosphere, surroundings and ministry were completely exhilarating – and it was CofE! The congregation was around 2,000 people. Gradually, my understanding about God and Jesus began to change. I was becoming aware that true Christianity was not about religion but about relationships.

2. God had His hand upon me through what appeared to be ordinary circumstances of life. What seemed to be ‘coincidences’, and pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, was in fact God leading me to a crossroads and a major moment of decision that I couldn’t put off in my life. I was now wrestling within myself about the claims of who Jesus is and whether He could be alive today.
3. God also had His hand upon me through my ‘conscience’. I thought I was a reasonably good person. I hadn’t broken the 10 commandments, was very morally minded and so on, but that was my own pride. I was just like most ordinary people – selfish, proud, self-cantered, living for myself, materialistic and my own ambitions centred around myself. The Beatitudes would be a really good description of what I really wasn’t! The attitude that was in my heart was not what it should be. I was wrestling with God about another two questions: What is sin all about? What is it got to do with judgement and eternal life?  
  
Either I could stop, take notice and do something about it, or ignore it and pass by, but continue to be lost in all the chaos, confusion and darkness in a world that is in rebellion against God (hence the Winston Churchill quote at the beginning).
4. God had His hand upon me through His word, the Bible and other Christian literature. I was discovering answers to all my questions and that God’s ways are different from man’s ways. There were two particular verses that kept coming to mind:  
‘What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul (Luke chapter 12v12)  
‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, for your sake became poor, so that through His poverty you might become rich’ (2 Corinthians chapter 8 v 9)
5. Finally, God had His hand upon me through His Holy Spirit touching my mind and heart. Psalm 139 also had a profound impact on me which includes the words, ‘Where can I flee from Your Spirit? If I go down to the depths You are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea even there You are’.

After a period of these gradual and progressive revelations about God, life, death, sin, judgment and eternal life, I got down on my knees by my bed and poured out my heart to the Lord, asking for forgiveness for my sin, cleansing through Jesus’ shed blood and being filled with the Holy Spirit.

All my questions were answered, all my fears were gone and as the hymn says, ‘Because He lives, I can face tomorrow’. Someone once said, ‘It’s only when we get to grips with death that we can truly start to live’

I am just an ordinary person like anyone else – but like you, I’m special to God.

Since then much water has flowed under the bridge and this part of my story will have to end.

Can I just say that everyone of us has our own journey of faith that is unique, but sometimes experiences can be similar and we can identify with them. They help us realise that we are all passing through this world to somewhere else. The crucial matter is that we discover where we are meant to be going and, on the way, find a personal relationship with God as our heavenly Father, His son Jesus as our Saviour and the Holy Spirit as our inner strength.

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