



Shelling Peas

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Chapter 01 Miracles in the Morning

She was limping badly. I had asked if anyone in the audience with a stiff joint was prepared to come and see Ginnie and I for prayer, in front of everyone so that I could, as it were, put my money where my mouth was. I had been teaching a healing, restoring kingdom of grace to three hundred avid listeners for the past hour and now came the time for me to take the risk, to put my money where my mouth had been!

“We talk about the grace of Calvary, now let us show you!”

My wife Ginnie and I climbed down from the platform in order to avoid any misinterpretation of our actions which might indicate the slightest degree of showmanship, and stood to the left of the stage, still wearing a microphone and still within full view.

There was a silent pause in the proceedings and then, suddenly, I was aware of the lady who had quietly limped up in answer to my general invitation and was standing in front of us.

“I have a painful leg and back,” she told us, loudly enough for the whole auditorium to hear her through the microphone mounted on my left ear.

She went on to explain the circumstances of an accident in her home some twenty years earlier that had left her foot dangling from the end of her leg by only a thread of skin. The surgeons had stitched it back into place and reinforce the ankle by driving a steel rod up inside the leg bone and down through the ankle into the heel. So it had grown strong enough to hold her weight again, although the ankle was locked rigid by the steel insert. But at least she was walking again!

One hot summer, two years before we met at the end of that meeting that afternoon, she was having a tree cut down in her garden and a large part of it fell heavily across that same leg. It snapped the bone halfway between knee and calf muscle and bent the steel rod in the process.

The bone healed soon enough but now the foot was angled, the leg significantly bowed and a great deal of pain came to have its permanent

dwelling in her knee, hip and lower back due in the main to an appalling posture caused by the bent leg and the consequently twisted foot.

We had long ago learned that heaven responds to two main doors being opened in our souls, one labelled 'trust' and one labelled 'Thanksgiving', the latter being for the work of the cross. It is there, after all, that Jesus took all our pain and carried all our sickness and it's by his wounds that we're able to be healed.

The audience held their breath in total silence during the process of ministry until the lady went to sit down. As they watched her walking back to her seat the entire auditorium, who had heard every word of explanation and ministry, erupted in worshipful cheering and clapping.

I had not been at all aware, of course, that while we were standing with her and giving glory to the Father for the work of the Son, that the lady's leg, steel rod and bone together, had wobbled and shaken and straightened up. She had felt nothing of this divine intervention, but when she began to walk back through the hall she found she could swivel her ankle as well. There was, we discovered a while later, a full range of movement restored to her foot although, presumably, the rod was still in place?

Here is one of the most fascinating aspects of kingdom healing, the most unusual things often happen that defy all scientific explanation. And yet everyone had seen it. It put me in mind of someone else, a while back, who had come for kingdom ministry in a wheelchair with a badly leaking heart valve. She has since return to full-time employment, plays tennis regularly and often goes cycling, jogging, fun runs and half Marathons. She told me later that her surgeon was bewildered by all this activity as all his tests were proving that the valve was still leaking!

The following day the lady with the rod in her leg sought us out to thank us, although we had done precious little, to exclaim how good life had suddenly become for her, free of pain.

It had been an hour before this ministry time that the lights had burned, the music had died away and the conversations around the hall had hushed. Ginnie and I had stood holding hands, a little way back from the

edge of the platform, staring into the glare of the stage lighting, a row of brilliant suns arranged along a gantry the length of the stage and high above the heads of the front row. They were a glaring yellow, hot and dazzling, blotting into darkness most of those who sat expectantly before us in the auditorium.

We stood there holding hands and smiling, grinning at the unseen audience in front of us and grinning at each other. We were thrilled just to be there! It had taken ten months for us to step up onto this particular platform, ten months since the original invitation came, ten months since I wrote the fastest acceptance I had ever done. This was a speaking job I really wanted, but then I want all of them.

The priest who had been praying for us had jumped back down from our position and gone to take his place on the front row. We were on our own. I could feel all three hundred audience members watching us; I could feel their anticipation matching our own. We had arrived where we had wanted to stand for such a long time and felt very much at ease. We were about to do what we feel most comfortable doing. We were about to teach them the great news of Christ's intent for his church in this painful world, since Calvary, and his saving, healing grace, and they had come to listen. We knew that the dynamics of the kingdom of god were present to heal, they always are, and we were ready to give glory to our God for it.

Ginnie lifted up my right hand with a smooth and well practiced movement, placed it lightly on the edge of the lectern and left the platform to find a seat near the priest. Touching the podium rim is not a function of superstition, like a footballer only able to play when wearing a pair of his 'lucky' boots, spinning around three times and touching the end of his nose! It has become a natural, subconscious and discreet movement, developed with unrehearsed practice over many such occasions.

It may look very romantic, but that's what she holds my hand for on stage, to place it on lectern edges which then act as the needle on my directional compass. That side edge points me directly down the middle of the auditorium, and that's vital.

We had found ourselves before in churches with no moveable lectern and no platform edge and no way to hold the centre line. Without the ability to focus on the crowd, my naturally animated style of teaching can soon lead me to a situation of turning slightly sideways, bit by bit, without realising the movement and finishing up devoting all my attentions to someone sitting on the far outside of the first pew, right away to my right! I can so easily lose track of the centre line, as it were, and turn too far one way or the other. It's then that I can hear Ginnie's whispers pushing through my enthusiasm for the work at hand, "left a bit!"

One church recently had even supplied us with a brass music stand for this purpose, but it was a light and collapsible model with a revolving top and the inevitable results were nothing short of laughable.

But this time we had made sure. The organisers had installed a solid lectern right in the middle, pointing right down the centre aisle, and we were ready to go.

"Good morning!" I looked around, grinning at them.

"Good morning", came the reply, quiet, hesitant, half-hearted, insecure. These dear people seemed unsure of what they had let themselves in for. These healing conferences are, as they say, 'two-a-penny' in that neck of the woods but here they had come, nevertheless, attracted by something and they were not quite sure what it was, or what they were going to get.

In this part of the world, public speakers on healing ministry often come direct from jazzy TV shows, with tattoos or with white shoes, or with what often seems like thick jewellery and thin theologies, and audiences like this one have a running fear that they may be pushed over onto their backs by a bling coated star of stage, screen and television if they so much as approach the platform for help, and come within arm's length of the speaker! Either that, or they suspect they may be called upon to reach for their wallets. So they hold their breath. They wait. They let the speaker prove what sort of a showman speaker he is before they begin to ease themselves into the proceedings. So right away it was time to put my cards on the table and break down the barriers.

“Now,” I told them, “It seems that we might have a problem here. You see, I need you to react to me as I speak to you. OK?”

I could have cut the silence with a knife. What were they expecting? But I was smiling inside; this method of introducing myself has its practical advantages for sure, but it’s also a wonderfully effective ice breaker.

“So,” I went on, “I need you to shout out how you feel about what I have to say to you. Any time you feel like it! Shouts like ‘Alleluia!’ would be just fine. ‘Amen!’ is good and ‘Preach it to them, brother!’ is even better. Even the odd shout of ‘Heresy!’ will help things along here.”

Some of them sounded as if they were chuckling at that, a sure sign that they might be beginning to relax, so I thought it best to tell them why I needed them to respond to me in this way.

“I need you to respond, “ I was trying now to speak in smiling mock authority, “So that I know you are still here! You see, if you just sit there in complete silence for the next hour or so, how am I to know that you haven’t just all crept silently away and I’m standing here addressing an empty auditorium?”

This last statement was greeted with gales of laughter. Everyone in the room was relaxing now as they realised there would be no pretences on this platform, no acting, no pretending to be anything I am not. The barriers had all come tumbling down.

I had come to talk to them about the dynamics of the living and growing kingdom of god and that, I constantly remind myself , is no place to play around with audiences. Kingdom business is serious business.

I had already lost far too many nights of sleep, trying to hunt down an understanding why it might be that our beloved Christian Church has allowed such a decline in her healing ministry.

“It used to work marvellously,” I told them, “but now it doesn’t work nearly so well any more. What a shame! Everywhere I walk in life, home, the office, the street, holidays, work times, everywhere I walk is among the sick, the ill, the diseased and the dying. It’ll be the same for you if

you look about you! And we live in the so-called civilised western hemisphere!”

“We seem sometimes,” I told them, “to know almost nothing of kingdom dynamics after two thousand years. If we did, then we would all be workers of miracles like our spiritual forefathers. The proof is in the pudding, and allowing our healing ministry to go on drifting further and further away from the purity and dynamic effective nature of its original form is killing off our involvement in fruit production.”

Sadly, healing ministry doesn’t work nearly as well as it used to in the fruitful days of the early church and we have done very little about it, except pour more and more secular gifting and figments of our own imaginations and our own sciences into it ever since!

“For some reason we, as a church, seem determined that the cross needs to be added to but in fact,” I emphasised excitedly, “it doesn’t need us to add anything at all to it. If only we could take the risk and rely on the cross’ work, It works wonderfully as it is!”

“Think about it,” I asked them, “Would it not be marvellous if the local non-believers could say to each other, ‘Let’s go up to that church where people get healed!’”

It was crossing my mind to suggest, on that blindingly bright platform, that unbelievers probably care very little about what we believe in. Like a lot of the people listening to me I have been ‘nice’ at church outreach events but it doesn’t help that much. Nor does being a living example of wholesome standards in life stand out much. There are plenty of folk out there already, living like Ginnie and I do, and they are not necessarily all Christians, by a long way. Wholesome living is possibly not the witness we might like to think it is; birds of a feather tend to flock together, as they say.

“There are,” I reminded my audience, “many more good people outside the church’s walls than there are within its community!”

My experience of unbelievers tells me that practical power, not more religious theories, is the thing that they are looking for today, and they are not, in the main, listening to our attempts at preaching. They have plenty of problems and not enough solutions. They are sick. They are hooked on alcohol and drugs. Their relationships are tearing them apart. It’s a mess out there.”

I gently challenged the audience to consider how many people they knew over the age of forty who were not on any sort of medication. My

request, and the obvious in-built suggestion that goes alongside it, was greeted with knowing smiles and shrugging shoulders. Well, most people, when I ask that question, smile knowingly and shrug their shoulders. Most seem to write off this depressing thought while accepting it to be the price of our living longer, but I was suggesting to them that never before has the field been so ready for harvest, so ripe for the display of God's kingdom grace.

The enemy, whether I should call it the Fall or self or Satan's demonic hordes and influences, has turned the lives of unbelievers upside down to such an extent that many have no idea where to go, or what to do, to get their lives put back together again.

"I don't think, either," I went on, "that they really care very much at all if we Christians pray in tongues or dance up and down in the aisles or stand to attention with stiff military precision and sing out of a hymnal. But if only you and me, the people of God, had a ministry that could get their bodies healed and their lives straightened out, I feel pretty sure they would come to wherever we are. Not only that, but they would start to listen to what we have to say."

There were some encouraging murmurings of 'Amen' from around the room.

"I have been convinced for a while in the depths of my soul," I explained to my audience, by now somewhat taken aback by this forthright introduction, "that God wants his church to have the same reputation today that Jesus had during his earthly ministry. Come to think of it, perhaps he has always wanted that. I reckon he wants people to say the same sort of things about us that they must have said to each other about those first-generation disciples. They would have noticed that the power of God was at work in believers!"

I was pressing the point, now, into the quiet and dark abyss in front of me.

"All this means to the general public out there is that the gospel without power does not sound particularly like good news to them. You and I, the already-converted ones, know full well that it is, because it brings salvation, but it doesn't look like that to outsiders. To a huge number of them, love without power is only a pipe dream; love mixed with power is what justice is made up from.

And they want some justice. Given the seemingly random effects of the Fall, they have great needs in their minds and their bodies. When they get hurt it all seems so unfair to them. They want justice! If the only thing we Christians have to give folk is a nice new set of rules to live by and a

new set of standards to live up to, teaching them a mode of life without really changing their lives, what good have we done for them?" I demanded.

I was thinking that if we are not careful then we have merely bound them up with another set of 'shoulds' and 'should nots', another set of rules.

"And there is always a real danger," I added, feeling now that I had really caught their attention, "that we Christians might look like a little huddle of pious people, shutting our doors against the world, connoisseurs of liturgy, lost in prayer and praise, congratulating each other on the excellence of our Christian experience. But if only we were willing to take a risk and deal with the sick in the way that Jesus taught and practised, then we would be doing again an important part of what God sent us to do. And as people watch what we do, they would listen to what we have to say. Then it is possible they might begin to care about what we believe in."

But, I badly needed them to understand, all this would mean that we must get hold of a lively, active ministry which, more often than not, comes up with the goods! Our ministry has to do what it says on the tin. People today are not so excited by religious theories as we might have been a thousand years ago, or even a hundred years ago! Today's worldly general public are not overawed and duped by high ritual or by any practices at all that don't come up with significant and measurable results. We need to see a ministry with tangible consequences, as we can see only too easily in the earthly ministry of Jesus and the apostles.

"We need something that works and, it would appear to my rather simple childlike mind, the early guys had just that!"

Someone gave a lively shout of "Alleluia!" and someone else shouted, "Amen!" and we were on the way, Things were livening up around here. the conference had begun.

For almost nine years by then, I had been working on the Christ-taught kingdom healing and how to apply it in real and effective and reliable kingdom restoration, and was just beginning to understand what to say to a crowd like this about kingdom dynamics. Here in front of me were three hundred questing souls, every single one of them with a different understanding and hugely complicated questions about ministries which Jesus had been able to simply teach to fishermen and tax collectors. In other words, what was once simple has become frighteningly varied and complicated, through our search to improve it, but, if we can only get back to it, the simple original version works comparatively and

marvellously well! And here, as it is so often in so many places, ordinary people just wanted to hope in, and hang on to, something simple that works.

I stood in front of them, thrilled to be with them, thrilled at the knowledge of what I was going to say to them, thrilled at the prospect of seeing the kingdom about to be at work yet again and thrilled at the thought of their being able to 'do it' out there in the world for themselves.

And so off I went with the lecture. I don't have any notes to work from when I am speaking, blind people often don't use notes, but I hold five or six subject headings in my head and simply work from one heading to the next, relying on previous experiences and past 'trial and error' to carry me through an hour's talking.

It's a bit like driving a car, it is possible to concentrate on two different things at the same time. The main job when driving is to concentrate on navigation and steering, observation, braking and accelerating, but all that practical activity still allows for conversation between driver and passenger, or listening to a good play on the car radio.

Teaching is like that too, when the teacher is organised to manage without any notes. The basics are all in the mind and switching between what is being spoken and what is being thought about is as easy as switching from easy conversation to extra concentration as driving conditions demand it.

And so it was that I talked to them about the kingdom dynamics of today, the driving purposes of God's heart to restore all the damage of the fall, and his longing to restore the world to the blueprint conditions of Eden, seeing them fulfilled in the new city of Jerusalem coming from heaven.

And at the same time, like a car driver conversing with his passengers, I was asking myself the same old questions in my mind as I looked out over these folk who had come to hear the kingdom message of the cross.

But why were we, the church, letting them down so badly? When Jesus had told us not to fear because it is the father's good pleasure to give us

the kingdom, why then do we insist on putting blocks in people's way? Why were we sowing tares with the wheat? Why were we telling them that God doesn't want to heal everybody when Jesus had died to let it happen that way?

So, by the end of this first conference session, I had enjoyed myself enormously and was desperately hoping, without being able to see their faces and their body language, that the audience were climbing on board.

Ginnie had been jumping up from time to time to join me, reading out the scriptures that showed the apostles, the deacons and everyday, ordinary Christians like us, going about their daily business and healing the sick, witnessing to crowds and seeing thousands coming into the church when they saw the miraculous kingdom life.

She read about Jesus, always granting every request for healing, never refusing, never putting barriers in the way and then telling us that he only did the father's will. She read about power pouring out of Jesus, that there is great power for those of us who believe and that God doesn't change and left me to conclude that power is still pouring out of him today for all who come to him for it with a mustard seed of trust.

By the time the session was over I knew it was time to make straight a path for Jesus to show them his glory. That's what I did and that's what he did.

The lady with the bent rod in her painful leg was swiftly followed for prayer by two other late middle-aged ladies, friends who were both progressively losing their sight in their increasing age and who were both restored by Almighty God through his grace within minutes, according to their on-the-spot testimony. The audience gasped!

By now the church's ministry team were working hard and were all quite shocked and shaken to see so many gifts of grace being poured so freely into the wounded, of which there are always many. We were, of course, not surprised at all as we had come to know again, just as the early church did, that as we proclaim the good news of the character of Jesus and the outworking of the cross, then the Holy Spirit will come and

confirm what we say with signs and wonders. It's the way the divine system was originally designed to work, after all.

Soon Ginnie and I were called to help pray with a gentleman in a wheelchair whose source of anxiety lay with an aggressive tumour in his brain. He was undergoing the maximum dose of, by the sound of it, every known treatment in the cancer world, and that was only in the hope of preventing the evil thing from growing ever larger. His doctors were desperately working to prevent any further growth.

Again, there were no requests to heaven. Jesus never prayed any 'please' prayers for the sick and we don't either. Just worship, thanksgiving and praise, honest, heartfelt, trusting.

We heard nothing for three days until a phone call came in after the gentleman's next treatment appointment at the hospital. He was able to report that the tumour had reduced in size by seventy five percent! Two weeks later I heard from his wife that hospital tests couldn't find the tumour any more.

Having prayed with him, Ginnie and I sat down on the edge of the platform to catch our breath and to look around for our hosts. Then it came. The one question I always dread because, try as I might, there seems no answer that will satisfy. Even after the evidence of all the scripture and the exciting evidence of the breathtaking works that had exploded through grace right in front of them all, someone from the depths of the darkened audience still asked the old question, threw the old spear. Here it was again.

"If what you say is true, then why hasn't god healed you?"

I took a deep breath, climbed back onto the stage, and reached into my pocket to switch the microphone back on.

Chapter 02 Rock racing

There must be a hundred different ways of answering that question, I wish there weren't. Sometimes it seems that every time I speak in public I get asked the same old thing.

Two things always bother me about finding the right answer; one of them is that I am very aware that being blind doesn't look like the greatest witness in the world to the healing God that I preach and the other is that the question of what is, and what isn't abundance is a very personal one.

So, on the only too frequent occasions when the question is asked, I find myself thrown immediately into a battle inside. On the one hand is the irritation of the incursion through private boundaries, which is easy for a sinner to resent, and on the other hand is the need to overcome the dollop of doubt which assails so many through my blindness. In the middle of this momentary fight I begin to weigh up a hundred different answers, all true, but all laying different emphasis.

So I stood there for a moment and quickly sorted through the options in my mind. one of which is the 'Twenty-five year rule'.

I have a theory that I am comfortable with, when a person has possessed something, pain free, that others might consider they would like to be healed of, and they have had it for more than twenty-five years, that aspect of their lives has by then melted into them, it becomes part of their personality. I have gone around that clock twice now and blindness has become part of me and part of who I am.

I quite like being who I am and, if it doesn't sound too pompous, I have no wish to change things. Life works very abundantly for me and it works well. I do all the things I want to do and I don't have to do any of the things I do not particularly want to do and life is abundant.

Put another way, there is a great difference between being blind and going blind. If I had lost my sight in some accident a matter of only a short time ago, then I would doubtless be forcing my way to the front of

the ministry queue and perish the thought, pushing everyone out of the way in the process! I would certainly be that keen to receive my sight. But it has been this way a long, long time and it is me.

Going blind has been a gradual affair. It has not been the result of some accident or injury, but the creeping disease known as retinitis pigmentosa, known in the eyesight business as RP. The effect of this degenerative complaint is to kill off, usually very slowly, the millions of nerve ends that go together to make up the retina- the light sensitive part at the back of the eye. The disease is medically incurable, starting at any time in life and working its way relentlessly onwards, until total blindness becomes an inevitable fact of life.

It would be easy for anyone to imagine that such a disability would take life over completely, allowing the recipient to be re- allocated by society, if not by himself, as one of life's casualties. Indeed, sympathetic comments made to Ginnie, as well as audience reactions like this one facing me, can often clearly demonstrate my being labelled by others as one of life's casualties. But the opposite seems to be true.

Somehow, I have been given a place of victory to live in- a place of peace and love; a place of truly abundant kingdom life, in which to live and have my being. How did that happen?

Looking back over life so far is to look back over a switchback road, full of ups and downs, joys and tears and recognising, believe it or not, that the worst times have been the times of greatest blessing.

It has been in the troughs that I have been able to get close to God, rather than on the peaks. It has been in the lowest places that my healing has come. Peering back into some of the harder times is far from painful nowadays, because many of those pits are now filled with the healing grace which is Jesus Christ, and that vision is a joyful one.

Of course it gets depressing sometimes, but again and again God's promise comes back- His promise to be there when I need Him. He assures me that, whenever I pass through the waters, He will be with me; and through the rivers- they will not overwhelm me. When I am forced to walk through fire, I will not be burned; and the flame will not

consume me. This is all because He is the Lord my God, the Holy One of Israel, my Saviour.

However, as I write and speak about these things, I am only too well aware that there are many who are 'worse off' than myself, and who suffer greatly. There are also some who are quite surprised to discover my blindness, as they measure themselves to be better off than I am, after all. There are some whose pain is temporary, and some who seem to suffer continually. Some are in physical pain and some not, but where the rubber hits the road, the real problem lies at the centre. If we strugglers can find what lies there, and it is usually our sufferings, then God will have a chance to heal us with His grace.

RP had no effect at all on my early years. For a boy, I had almost the perfect childhood. My father, a professional naval officer of considerable standing and ability, had remained in the Navy for many years after the Second World War. Thus it was that I spent my school summer holidays in Malta, a sort of temporary family home, where my mother might see the most of him.

Memories of those days are filled with beach picnics with my mother and sister, learning to roller skate on disused tennis courts, and children's parties on ships moored in the harbour. There were warm and clear blue bays to swim in, under piercing azure skies; and harmless jellyfish, which provided an endless source of fun-fight missiles, to assail family and friends with.

My first twelve summers meant commuting between London and Malta, from school to paradise, from spoiling grandparents to spoiling summer holidays. Could anyone have wanted for more?

My parents had always kept a house in Hampshire, rented out during our travels, and it was to there that I reluctantly returned at the end of our Mediterranean chapter. I use the word 'reluctantly' with care, as our English home really was home to me; it contained the security and stability that lies so comfortingly in childhood memories.

After a spell based back in Hampshire, when our father served at Portsmouth, we moved to a tiny village on the south Devon coast, to be

within easy reach of Plymouth, where he was newly based. School holiday times- especially the summer ones- were filled with sailing and canoeing, yacht clubs, parties, and so on.

Life travelled on into my early teenage years, in blissful ignorance of what was to come.

To try to recall now what it was like to see properly is to allow these fondest memories to drift up to the surface. They are brightly coloured pictures of rows of beached sailing boats along the sea- weedy yacht club shore line, with stays slapping gently against angled masts in the breeze. There are full- colour pictures of rolling green and wooded hillsides, sloping down to blue estuaries, and the tiny harbour, with vessels of all shapes, sizes and colours, resting at anchor.

Even now in my memory, I can count the trees along the shoreline and see the wing tips of the swans as they beat the water: a long line astern of dazzling white bodies, lifting and taking off in the evening light. They would come slapping down the river towards the sea, rippling pools spreading from their wing tips, like the oars of a university rowing club, as the tips of their wings touched the still evening water.

There was the rowing boat tied up at the bottom of the estuary steps. Mother had dipped deep into her Post Office account for that boat. My elder sister (Carolyn) and I remember living in that boat more than we lived indoors. The pleasure it brought us was immeasurable.

Then there came the moments of high excitement, too. Sitting on the cliff edge, in the early dawn light, feet dangling into space, we would search the horizon for that big old, grey naval cruiser- the one bringing our father, returning from a year's absence at sea. Then there were the two of us, flying down the cliff path to home, our feet skimming the rough path, and then the tarmac lane to the cottage. We had seen the ship. Father was on his way, and mother would have to know that he was here!

These were wonderful times: close to nature, and full of promise. Just around the corner, where the estuary poured into the sea, lay our beach- at least we always thought of it as being ours, somehow. This strip of

half- sand, half- rock, was only twenty minutes' walk from the cottage, and much used by family and friends at every opportunity.

At each end of the sandy strip lay multitudes of tumbled rocks, crowded in together and raised up at crazy angles, smooth and sharp; high ridges and deep pools- the family race track. Carolyn and I would start at one end and race each other headlong across the tops of the boulders, an incredible feat of sharp eye and dancing foot co- ordination. Somehow, we never fell, never broke a bone, nor grazed a knee past easy mending.

Rock racing was surely the sport of kings! One of the first things on my list of

exciting things which will just have to be done when I get to heaven (after worship) is to go rock racing with my sister Carolyn again. What sport we shall have!

It was not until I reached the age of fifteen or so that I began to notice any effect of the disease which by then had just begun to take hold. The earliest wondering came when stumbling over my words whilst reading aloud in the classroom. Bits of words began to go missing, much as they do when one is very tired. But it was enough to trouble me, largely because of classmates' guffaws which washed, drowningly, over a small boy covered in embarrassment without knowing why....

However, I managed to pass all the requisite examinations- except one. The subject of divinity, as Religious education was called in those days, was far beyond me. I had absolutely no interest in the subject at all! Church life at home and chapel life at school were just there because they were there; they were compulsory school and family activities, lessons- never fought against, merely endured.

By then I was living with an almost permanently bruised nose. The poor thing was being regularly and unceremoniously shoved into school notice boards by so- called 'chums', who drew great delight from pushing the back of my head whenever they saw me peering too closely at some school notice or other. They must all have thought this act of teasing to

be hilarious but each amusing shove still lingers in my memory; not as a piece of unforgiveness, but as a hurt pain from long ago.

I had given up shooting, too. This had been a well of endless pleasure- not killing animals, I should add, but punching little holes in targets a thousand yards away. The school rifle club had a reasonably competitive reputation on the circuit, and I had loved being part of that; it was something at which I was pretty good. But it had to go. Things were getting out of focus, and sometimes I was even hitting the wrong target. Graceful withdrawal, albeit fairly devastating, was the honourable thing to do, before I started letting the team down.

And after school, what to do? Believing that I could be a surveyor- a land agent, as my uncles had been- I set off to London to grab some professional qualifications, and from there to seek my fortune in the world. At what seems now to be the very tender age of seventeen, and with a parental support promise of ten pounds per week, I packed my bags and set off for the London city lights.

Little by little, every year after that became harder. I had found and married Ginnie who became a great friend and a stable rock to me, but our life together grew under increasing threat from a financial support viewpoint. It became a greater and greater struggle.

The years rolled by and my sight deteriorated still further, and the more I tried to apply my brain to the search for some other future that would be physically possible, the deeper I slipped into a pit of hopelessness. Eventually it felt as though I was a lemming running over a cliff, and there was absolutely nothing to be done about it.

Around that time, a friend told a joke about a parachutist whose canopy failed to open, and I remember missing the punch line entirely; I had such an affinity with the poor man. Somehow, though, there lay the feeling that there would be a safety net at the bottom. I longed to turn to the Scriptures for help, but only the vaguest of feelings and memories of these things were aroused: vague, but there nonetheless.

It seemed that a lifebelt from the Psalms had been thrown towards me, and I longed to grasp it firmly, but my insufficient faith prevented it:

“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.”

Psalm 40: 2 [NIV]

How this help would arrive I had no idea, but the falling had gone on long enough. Now was the time to check that the lifesaver was there, ready and waiting to catch me. Having reached the point of bewildered despair, the events of the following twenty- four hours were to prove the truth of this text in the most practical and unexpected of ways.

“There is no- one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

Deut 33: 26- 27a [NIV]

Encroaching blindness was leading me straight into the everlasting arms. One Sunday morning the week before Christmas, so many years ago that I lose track, we went to worship in a local church (not our own) and the sermon lives on as one of the key turning points in my life. The vicar who later became a dear friend to me, said this at the end of his sermon:

"Just as Jesus was born at Christmas all those centuries ago, so it is my prayer that one of you be born again this Christmastide."

Why was he talking at me? I could not see the pulpit, let alone the preacher, so for all I know he could have been addressing some other individual altogether or, most likely, the congregation as a whole. Anyway, I took the comment as if he had thrown a spear from his lofty place and it had landed in my chest. How personal! How ridiculous! The

remark would never have been for me; I did not even know the man. And what, I asked myself, was all that stuff about being born again?

As Christmas Eve Midnight Mass began a few days later, so I had started to pray. My prayer lasted for most of the service, beginning with the offering of such thoughts as, 'Look, I've managed and organised my life pretty well, up until now. Nice house, nice car, nice kids, nice wife. I've got on well at work too; no one gets as far as I have without being able to see properly. '

The self-congratulation stuff went on for a while, but then it really hit me again that I had reached the blocked end of the street. Without someone else's help- someone who can control and manage things better than myself- I could just be running off the edge of a cliff without noticing the impending disaster, until it was too late. If I lost my career then I might just lose all the rest!

Something had to change. Something was going to give at any moment. By now, the begging accelerator foot was flat on the floor, and the prayer engine was revving uncontrollably. I begged and begged the God Almighty to take the management load from my shoulders- the responsibility for my own life- and to change things to fit His planning, and not mine any more.

The more I knew in the bottom of my heart that I would not be able to cope in the future, that things could only get worse, the more desperate the prayer became. The need to have someone else come and take over was going off in my chest like a nuclear chain reaction.

God answered in a way which changed everything for me- literally everything. The time for going up to the altar rail to receive the Eucharist had come so, to my annoyance, I had to break away from prayer and march up the aisle in a haze of boozy fumes coming from the man in front of me.

I had almost lost the mood completely by the time I got there. The new sanctuary lights were quite blinding, just as a rabbit is blinded by the glare of car headlights. So the struggle not to bump into anyone, coupled

with the smell from Mr Best Bitter in front took away from me the prayer spirit I had been in.

The moment seemed to have passed by. The bread came by, and the wine. Then it was time to start back down through the dazzling glare of the sanctuary searchlights.

In the moment I began to push up with my hands on the altar rail, a man came and stood in front of me, threw his arms around my upper arms and back and lifted me about three inches off the ground- or so I remember it. Before he took hold of me I did not have to open my eyes to know that he was there. I could feel him there. This is not quite as strange a sensation as it may seem because, even by then, I was learning to feel the presence of lamp posts and walls in the street before I smacked into them, most of the time. It's a blind person's personal echo location system. Using that sense, I simply did not have to open my eyes to know that he was there. At any rate, people do not hug other people without their knowing it!

Eventually he lowered me to the floor again and I immediately got my eyes open, but there was no- one around! The priests were down at the other end, ministering to the long line of flock, and it could not have been one of them anyway, because they were too far away and they had their hands full with the administration of the sacrament.

Back in the pews, the next hymn had started. Ginnie turned to me.

"What's the matter, darling?" I shook my head to indicate that everything was OK, but a dam had broken inside. The tears that rolled down my face- the reason for her question- did not stop for the next seven days. God had come to take things over. The relief was overwhelming. The knowledge that God had come for me was certain and unmistakable. I had been given a new start in life. I had been born again.

Within what seems like no time at all I had a dream one night which, without so much as a 'by your leave', set the scene for the rest of my life.

I saw myself walking barefoot, along a stony path, which lay across the face of a rolling, heather- strewn mountain. I could even hear a curlew

call on the distant hillside, giving up a mournful cry which so well reflected the loneliness of my journey to that point.

The heather was in flower; the blueberries were bright blue, and the bees were busy in the sunshine with the clover. Not a single cloud whitened the deep blue above me, and a soft breeze was ruffling my hair.

At right angles to my path, ahead of me, swung another track, coming down from the hilltop to my left, towards the valley floor; and there, on his way down, came, slowly walking, the lonesome figure of Jesus himself.

He was dressed in a long white smock, as one would expect, but his bare feet were cut to ribbons by the jagged edges of the ground he walked on. When I glanced down, so were mine. The soles were bruised, scratched and grazed, aching with tiredness, and the ankles were puffed up, like potatoes. Straightaway, we had something in common: feet which were cut and bruised from walking through the world. He had endured the effects of human life and so had I.

'This is wonderful, ' I thought. 'Here, at last, is someone to talk to, someone who would really understand; someone with all the time in the world to listen. '

A nearby spreading thorn tree, just below where the two paths met, cast a shadow large enough to sit under, and to provide shelter from the heat of the day. There he soon sat, beckoning for me to join him.

There were no words that passed between us: I just sat beside him, a little to his right and a little behind, so that, beyond the back of his head, I could see what he was seeing. I remember being so thankful that bad eyesight never prevents people from looking with spiritual eyes, or feeling atmospheres with spiritual senses.

I wanted to comment on the fact that we shared bruised feet, in the hope that he might heal the soreness, but no words came. I wanted to ask him to touch my eyes with his finger, but suddenly it just did not seem important any more. Jesus seemed lost in his own thoughts; not

concerned with my affairs, but with those of others in the valley villages below, and on the opposite hillsides. This was not the time to talk.

My bleeding bare feet lay pointing up to the sky, about six inches from his right hand. He would only have to stretch a little forward, and my struggling walk through life would be so much easier. I willed and ached for him to do it, but he would not move. Then again, his feet were damaged, too, and I was not about to offer to heal them for him, either! Perhaps damaged feet were a gift to me, so that I could share just a little in his pain? Perhaps not.

When I began to see what he was looking at, I discovered with quite a shock that my feet, and their little difficulties, had gone out of focus. Try as I might, I couldn't concentrate on them. They did not seem important any more to me, either.

As his gaze moved slowly back and forth along the line of blue and grey hills, my eyes followed the movement of his head, and all I could see was pain.

Standing, staring up at us, were grieving widows, failing husbands and wounded children; and there were so many people whose illnesses were the real kings of their lives, ruling over everything and destroying the peace in their souls. There was anger and frustration, depression and unhappiness. There was anxiety and unfulfilment, and hearts with little vacuums in them, which longed to be filled with something permanent- but were searching, fruitlessly, for whatever might make life more bearable and take away the pain. There was arthritis and cancer and bent and broken bones, sufferers of diseases of all kinds longing for help. I suppose there must have been happy people as well- it is just that I did not notice them. The broken ones were much easier to see, for some reason. They stood out from the crowd, and were in the majority.

If I could have seen Jesus' face at that moment, I am sure I would have seen him crying. I looked, again, towards the valley towns, with the vision of an eagle, and saw the worst thing of all- mothers holding dead babies in their arms, so shocked in their own pain that they could not find

the emotion to respond to the horror of their situations. Whether or not Jesus was crying, I will never know, but I certainly did.

Such a sight of horror was too much to bear. These were the words that sprang to mind, as the centre of my concentration lifted from my aching feet to the aching world. The words were

the sounds from the lips of those fathers and mothers and children below me, who had raised their faces towards our hillside position, had caught sight of Jesus and were encouraging each other

“Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”

Isaiah 51:6(NIV)

"Send me down to the valley, Lord," I whispered into his ear, "and let me help them."

Whatever happened that day was yet to be revealed, but the dream was closing with a warm glow.

Into my life they began to come- one after another, in a steady stream. Beautiful people who should be flowering for Christ, and yet were flattened by sickness and injury and by the aftermath of miscarriages, abortions, stillborn children, cot deaths and teenage suicide. Of course, there were still many others, with other sorts of dragchutes on their lives. God has been so gracious to all who have been willing and been able to receive His love, but these ones from the dream were the ones to really steal my heart away.

It was then that I lost sight of my own 'torn feet', my blindness. God was doing something for me by replacing my sorrows with his sorrows; the pain I felt for me, with His pain for them. He was exchanging their hurts for His healing love; their deaths for His salvation; their sorrows for His

joys, their griefs for His peace. His healing grace releases all these things, and what joy it is, through the misty eyes of Christ's tears, to watch the flowers of his Kingdom grow and blossom, to his glory.

But I didn't tell my waiting audience any of this, not then. Instead I told them a very similar story about the twenty-three year old girl who had come to a meeting, stumbling and dragging one foot along the floor, face and body misshapen by a birth defect. Others from the team had ministered to her and exclaimed,

"You are so beautiful!" as God set about the business of finishing off his creation properly.

As she stepped across the threshold and into the Car Park that evening, as she saw her car and realised she was now driving home, she lost the healing. In a matter of seconds she had returned to what she had always been.

I sent everyone else back indoors and, when we were alone, I asked her what had happened. There was a long pause for thought while she determined how to describe what she was feeling. She took a deep breath and grinned with happiness.

"You see," she told me, "Six months ago I married the most perfect and wonderful man in the whole wide world. Forgive me," she added, "But I can't afford to go home any different."

Whether or not I would agree with her is immaterial. Prying into her business was none of mine. She knew what was, and what was not, an abundant life for her and I had no right to question her judgement with my own thoughts and ideas. Only she could determine her own abundance. So I blessed her and let her go.

I stopped at the end of the story and looked in the direction of the questioner and raised my eyebrows as if to enquire about the sufficiency of my response. There was silence. No answer I have is ever good enough to satisfy.

I pushed on quickly to other things. There were more people queuing for ministry and there was kingdom work to do.

“Thank you, Lord, that you use such strange circumstances to work your purposes,” I prayed, as I stepped down and back into the ministry melee. “Thank you that you have brought me to this place and thank you for all the struggles along the way that have led us to this most joyful and miraculous point.” And there have been quite a few of those!

One of them was the start of my search for my own security in the face of the increasing threat of job redundancy. I had a huge bucket of worries but I had another plan!

Chapter 03 DEMOLITION

By this time I had eventually reached the point where the dreaded fortieth birthday was looming on the horizon- the imaginary halfway point, when some men's minds so often drift longingly into the unreal realms of alternative career moves- I dreamed of becoming a clergyman. Was this what is known as a mid- life crisis?

I could readily see myself in a dog collar, receiving all the love and respect due to that position and, most importantly, being valued for my cerebral strengths rather than being doubted for my physical weaknesses. All the organizational and management skills which I had picked up over the intervening years in the Car Industry would serve me well, and by this time my theology felt pretty sound. Well, it felt as sound as anyone else's. Little did I know!

Had I known then how the gracious Lord was going to turn my life upside down, change most if not all of my thinking, reverse most of my outlooks, and then pour blessings into my existence with such abundance, I would never have had the nerve to do what I did. There would have been no need.

I applied for training for ordination in the Anglican Church. The family were more than supportive. The whole matter seemed a very safe option. I could carry on working for my living at the factory and have priesthood as a hobby on the side; such a disgraceful thought now, but I was starting to be dragged down by life's quicksands. It would have been a wonderful qualification for alternative employment, should I ever fall foul of the ever present and overshadowing threat of losing my position with the company because of growing blindness.

The thought of becoming a priest began to open up over this falling person, like an all too welcome parachute. The redundancy threat was starting to loom and gather, too, like darkening storm clouds on life's horizon. One of those periods of economic recession, with all its accompanying evils, was catching up on us at my place of work. A

company that once prided itself on the security it offered its staff was now in the position of having redundancy programmes for them. This would be a good time to put in a backstop. Security could just be on the way.

My own vicar was thrilled. He set about smoothing the path ahead with church committees, whose approval would have to be sought, as a first step. This done, the application went forward to the diocese, for the Bishop's approval, and I waited anxiously for the call to interview.

In no time at all, I was marching around the park at the rear of the Bishop's house, rehearsing the answers to the most likely questions. 'Why do you want to be ordained?' and, 'What do you feel you can offer the Church?' - these were the obvious ones. I wanted the replies to be unhesitatingly smooth and professional.

I guessed that the worst question would be, 'How will you manage church services with insufficient sight?' Hoping that the subject would not be raised, I resolved to say something to the effect that God would find a way if He wanted to. After an hour of kicking down brown, crinkled leaves, along dark, grey tarmac paths, around the rainy park, the appointed time arrived. And in I went.

To my horror, the Interview room was crowded. A large table almost filled the space from door to window. At the head of it, sat the imposing figure of the then Bishop. Along either side were ranged no fewer than eight good men and true, some clergy and some lay, with one empty chair - presumably left for me. I sat down in it, looking around as best I could, praying there were no wet leaves still sticking to my shoes!

Happily, the Bishop, in all his scarlet, was well out of focus at the other end of the table, so his presence at the head of the grand table would not worry me. As for the rest, I had no idea who they were; as all their faces were blurred, I would never have recognised them, anyway.

The main worry now would be guessing which one was asking the questions. I would have to be looking fairly accurately in that direction when answering, so that it might appear much less obvious that I did not have a clue who was speaking! Without being able to see lip

movements, nor even which particular face was turned towards me, it was becoming so important to pinpoint sound source direction. In this way I could pretend to look straight back at the right speaker, a technique I was still trying to master, knowing all the while that if I mis-guessed the direction, I would be answering the wrong person. Would that not look as though something were really wrong? To answer without looking into the face of the questioner seems so rude; it would not take them long to see the size of the problem.

These were the uncertainties that dogged my interview technique. All the pre- interview planning flew out of the window behind me. All that remained was sheer fear. The first enquiry came down the table like a naval broadside, despite all the preparation in the park.

"Could you please tell us all why you wish to be ordained?" Suddenly, I lost sight of them all. The vision which lay before me was that of a flock of vultures, crowding around a dying animal in the bush. This image quickly faded, only to be replaced by a vision of standing on the edge of a lake full of crocodiles, just waiting for me to jump!

I will never know how I came through that forty minutes of third degree grilling. Surely their hearts were all in the right place, but what is received always outweighs what is given.

I know I got home somehow, faintly outraged at this being the kind of interview process- lots of imposing people bearing down on one single individual- which had been discarded by industry years before, as it never really got the best results. We had long ago opted for a more friendly and informal approach, to get the best out of interviewees.

So what a lovely surprise it was, a fortnight later, to receive a letter, saying that the Bishop and his team had accepted, and would support, my application. Even if my motives were a bit doubtful, it seemed to me that God wanted this thing to happen anyway, so I looked forward with eagerness to the final hurdle: the National Board- three days of interview in my nearest theological college.

This was going to be tougher. Here, the questions were going to be more searching; more thorough. Two areas needed my attention- both to

do with eyesight. It was not so much that I only had the little sight that I had at that time, but also the matter of losing the rest. How could I cope with the job from a practical viewpoint, and how could I tell people that there was indeed a good God up there somewhere while I was going blind?

This was, undeniably, the first time I began to seriously question the latter. Never before had it even dawned on me that God and a suffering world had anything to do with each other. God, after all, was a fairly remote sort of character to me in those days before the tipping point of Midnight Mass that came a year later. Salvation was something that might happen at death if we are lucky, managing to catch God on a good day!

Surely, the national interviewers would want to examine me more closely on these things. So I enlisted the help of a friend to search the Scriptures on the question of eyesight. The very first thing that he came up with was quite earth- shattering, and a lesson I have never forgotten. It read:

“The LORD said to him [Moses], "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"

Exodus 4: 11 [NIV]

'Some friend', I thought! I did not want to know this at all; this was devastating. Here was a God to walk away from, not one to carry into the world. Here was a God who was directly connected with suffering and, what was more, apparently the author of it- or, at least, my bit! How could I say to people that there is a good God? He did not seem very good to me and, to make things far worse, it was not other people's suffering He might have caused; it was mine.

Was it really God who had made me like this? If they ask me how I feel about bad vision, can I say that God does things like that? If they

thought that I might go charging off into people's homes portraying Him in that fashion, they might think that everyone would leave the church! They would not tolerate that, and I would be out on my ear!

Suddenly, this all became a bit too personal and complicated. I resolved to bury my wondering as deeply as possible, just hoping it might never come to the surface again- not in the interviews, anyway.

It had been over a year later, after so many trials and so many falls, that God had to drive me down to my knees in front of Him, before He could begin to get through and to impose His sovereign will on me, my eyes, and the life that went with them.

The second area which needed my attention rose up and took over, almost as an anaesthetic to the first. I had, long before this, lost the ability to read anything but the largest print, so the Bible was a mass of greyish dots to me. The prayer book in common use looked to be the same unintelligible nonsense, so how was I to take a church service? I supposed the answer would be to learn it all off by heart. That solution would have to suffice for the interviews. Walking down the street without sighted assistance or without a dog was still a relatively safe occupation in those days, but there was no way to read the house numbers on gateways or doorposts, so visiting was going to be tough.

Various visits to partially sighted and blind clergy, around the country, did very little to boost my confidence, but it did present some reassurances that I could give the Board of Interview. If others could find a way, then surely I could. At least, I could show that I had tried to be practical. The following summer, I packed a bag and set off, in fear and trembling, for the third and final grilling.

A two- year process was coming to an end; I was really getting on the way. After supper, on that first evening at the national interviews, I met for coffee with three of the ten candidates, vowing to keep as quiet as possible. I wanted to see which way the flow was going to go, before being public with any views or thoughts about anything. There was going to be no slipping up at the last hurdle!

The first one said, "I'm a travelling salesman, in ladies garments. I don't really care whether they accept me or not, because I still have my old job which I enjoy. I'm going to be pretty laid back about all this."

The second one said, "I want to save people from hell fire and damnation, but only those earning less than fifty thousand a year. The others will all be lost, anyway."

The third one said, "I've come because I speak the Welsh language and my Bishop says he needs more of us in the Church in Wales."

Suddenly, my own motives did not seem quite so awful after all. In fact I began to feel that I would be far more acceptable to any sensible interviewer than these three. The longer I thought about it, the safer I felt. Self-righteousness produces a great sense of false security. I could almost hear myself thinking, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers- or even like this tax collector. Or, more precisely, this travelling salesman. '

The leaders called for volunteers to read at the church services. I hid at the back, my mouth firmly closed, trying not to be too noticeable. Demonstrating my inability to read in public would be a black mark against me, I imagined.

The remainder of those three days have become an unhappy and blurred memory of ineptitude, inadequate answering, and interview questioning which was often worse than the answers. They asked me to chair a meeting consisting of all the other candidates- as a test of chairmanship, presumably. The subject they asked me to introduce and discuss was 'litter'.

I was appalled. I sat there, seething! What about the need to spread the gospel? What about the pastoral care needs of a parish? At a push, I could even have accepted a discussion on fund-raising for the church; but litter? I could not believe it!

"Oh well," I remarked to Ginnie, as she drove me home, "I suppose the end justifies the means." I was completely sure of things to come. I knew I would pass the test; I knew I would be ordained, and that the next few

years were organized. For the first time in many a year, I felt secure. Life would be a winning streak after all. There would be a set of buffers up along the track somewhere, but for now I was safe from crashing. Now there would be a sidetrack, and escape route, should it be needed, in the nick of time.

As my sight continued to deteriorate, so grew the certainty that the company would have to let me go - sometime in the future, something that was coming closer every day. Here was my get- out. All that was needed now was a list of instructions on the theological training course, and the new life would begin.

Excitement filled the house. For a week we waited: the lull before the storm. The bomb dropped out of a clear blue sky, destroying everything. The rejection letter hit the doormat, and my soul went through the floor.

Everything had been planned on this one being a success. 'Devastation' is not a powerful enough word: 'demolition' is nearer. I just went numb. Total, black misery swamped me. I had done the best I could. I had applied every skill and bit of knowledge I had. Best behaviour had oozed from every pore and I had done my utmost to sound reasonably intelligent. All that was left was to sit on the back doorstep and cry.

Days and weeks and months drifted by while, in the depths of emotional unrest and hopelessness, I drove round and around the roundabout of possibilities, discovering that each and every exit in turn was a cul- de- sac. There was no way out, and it hurt.

Self- pity came in like a tidal wave. What was wrong with me? Was I being punished for something? If I were being punished, then had I not struggled enough? Was there going to be no end; was there no plan I could make that would secure life for me?

Moving from being fully sighted to being blind when, as in my case, the process takes many years, is not anything particularly life- threatening. I was well used to the decline. In itself, it would not be the end of the world. The cliff edge of life that had formed in front of me was one of insecurity- and insecurity of gigantic proportions, falling hundreds of feet to the jagged rocks of financial ruin below. Without failing sight, my

future would carry on, just like anyone else's; but with it I knew that I would fall off the end of the road into a dark pit of financial loss, of lack of self worth, and I might just drag the three people I loved and lived with down as well. How could I secure a home for Ginnie? The expense of running Forge House and a car, let alone a family, was beyond her teacher's salary on its own. With the best will in the world, she would not cope financially without some input from my own gainful employment.

Our sons James and Robert would need help once they left school, and they wanted university education. Everything a man should stand for was being tugged away from me, by events over which I had no control. The mists of uncertainty swirled around, building up pressures behind the eyes and bursting out in fits of tears, bad humour and intolerance.

Autumn continued into winter. The days shortened. The longer the darkness outside, the longer the darkness inside, too. I felt that a trap had been set for me by fate, and the gate had slammed shut. Plonked down on the path, among Ginnie's garden tubs- that was the only place to be. They had been so full of summer promise and now, as autumn came to an end, the plants were wilting and dying back, losing all their glory; dry twigs in the dripping rain. I felt quite at home with them.

We had much in common with one another. Rejection came up in unrelenting waves, and I was just getting nowhere. In fact, I was right back again at the beginning, with nowhere to go. Thirty years or so it had taken, but here I was, right back at the start line again.

"God, where are you, for heaven's sake?" That was my only prayer.

Chapter 04 Into the well

A young and attractive couple stood on the vicarage doorstep, politely requesting that they be given a guided tour around the ancient and picturesque Norman church across the road. My friend, the priest in charge, duly complied.

One set of their grandparents, it appeared, had been married there three quarters of a century earlier, and the couple were in the area, checking up on their family roots. At the end of their guided tour, punctuated by many gasps of delighted surprise and wide-eyed amazement at the beauty and antiquity of the structure, furnishings and contents alike, they asked,

“How many years ago did they last have a Sunday morning church service in here?”

Their words had wrapped around him and enveloped him like a great grey rain cloud. A tidal wave of depression flooded over my clergy friend as the realization dawned. His visitors (perhaps like many others) were innocently assuming that his church was a religious museum, his guided tour a glimpse into a bygone age of an outdated spirituality, and he himself no more than the curator of a fine and ancient example of English architecture.

Eventually, the visiting couple left, nonchalantly tossing a few coins onto a brass plate by the door, thanking my friend profusely for his time, commending him for his obvious caring for the old place.

Closing the heavy doors behind his visitors, as hand in hand they skipped and chattered their way down the sunlit path to the churchyard gate and the main road, my friend returned to his altar. There he prostrated himself on the ground before it, crying out for forgiveness, direction and grace.

Was he, he wondered in prayer, over-reacting or had he caught the faintest glimpse of something very painful and disturbing to Christ himself?

Returning home, he exchanged his clerical collar for an open-neck casual shirt, and wandered down to, and around, the nearby shopping centre for almost an hour, occasionally asking the busy passers-by for directions to his own church. No one could help him. No one knew where it was.

Sometimes his question provoked a, “Oh my God!” or, “God help us!” or, “Jesus Christ!” But he recognized these outbursts for what they were, poor, shrivelled and crippled ends of prayer, lost behind the blasphemies of those who seemed to know nothing of the reality of God. Interestingly for some reason, he had thought, they still appeared to find a need to speak of God, even if it was only through their clenched teeth. They certainly did not know how to find his church.

This gloomy picture began to feel even worse to him with the freshening realization, and a sharpening sense of responsibility to those around him, that God still wants to use his body, the church, to offer to the world a perfect moral and spiritual model. Throughout all the many upheavals and changes of the past twenty centuries, his revelation of good news in Jesus Christ has been and still is the cause and source of passionate self-giving love.

I bumped into him among the crowding and disinterested shoppers, and he turned to greet me. But as he caught sight of me what was inside him burst out all over me instead of the greeting I would normally have expected from him.

“So, are we, the church, only a museum —or are we holding something which is very precious: the gospel of Jesus’ love?”

We retreated somewhat swiftly to a Coffee Shop to talk. We agreed with one another that this love, the true light offered to the world, had been seen in action in every age, and throughout the whole world; it could have again a major impact on every nation, and in the middle of every

political situation, as well as on all age groups, temperaments and conditions of people.

We reminded each other that the three years of our Saviour's ministry on earth did more to regenerate and soften the hearts of mankind than all the philosophical discourses and all the exhortations of our secular moralists put together!

Had all that love and power retreated? Can we still expect to find it at work even among our congregations?

That crowded afternoon in the shopping centre, my clergy colleague and I reached a sort of Slough of Despond. A depressing weight had squeezed out of him all his enthusiasm for what he was suddenly recognising in his work as a sort of Old Testament priestly conducting of ritual.

From that day on, we knew that things had to change. There had to be more: there had to be a way for us to move on. There had to be a place outside the walls of the church building where God would be recognised for who he is. There had to be for him, somewhere, a place where theory would break through into reality, and what many saw as just ecclesiastical rhetoric would become received, simple truth.

Going back out of the Coffee Shop and standing among the milling shoppers, slightly bewildered, our hearts ached and cried out to move on from his religious place of only holding worship services for God but seeing few or no miracles, to a situation of working with God, who actually does miracles to prove the truth of the message of his Son's cross.

Gone was the desire to merely speak about a God who wants to change his parishioners' lives; now we longed to see those changes occur and needy souls helped.

Together we yearned for the cross of Christ to be recognised in these streets for what it surely is: not only the central symbol of Christian faith, but the powerful message of the working power of God. To hold out the healing light of Jesus Christ would mean reaching out.

We knew that the commonly accepted flow of church life around us would probably be in the opposite direction —after all, the tendency of all religions is to care more for religion than for humanity. Jesus, though, cared more for humanity than he did for religion; his compassion for the needs of ordinary people seems to have been much more important to him than the customs and habits of the professionally religious people.

Standing in the swirling crowd, between the larger department stores, without recognising any of the shoppers, we went on talking. We became aware in our conversation that the natural instinct of contemporary Christianity, for a myriad of reasons, is to find ways to soften Jesus' radical teaching and let his compassionate vision for all these passing folk drift out of focus. If Christians lose sight of these things—and my friend was wondering if he were not in that exact place himself—the amazing message of Jesus would have very little impact on either our own lives or the lives of those we want to reach.

Then, for no obvious reason that I could tell, my friend's heart began to lift.

“We ought to know, against the flow of the world view,” he was reminding both of us, “that it is in Christ that the whole universal structure of things—including everything that goes on in the lives of all these people side-stepping around us in the street—holds together. Actually, a large proportion of those who walk past us every day have lives that are falling apart, or have fallen apart, and it seems to so many of them that there is nothing for them to do but live with it, without knowing the divine longing to piece them back together again.”

He flicked a small Bible out of his pocket and began to read to me.

“For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Colossians 1:16–17

Around us is so much that is in need of new life, and my friend was feeling at that moment, with a new and almost bold frustration, that the kingdom of God is full of the power that raised Jesus from the dead. Those of us who have begun to live in this kingdom dynamic know, as a direct consequence, that we are living in our Father's house; that it is a big and healing house —and that perhaps we have begun to explore only a tiny part of it.

As long as we keep the word and its author as our foundation and base camp, there is a long way to go from wherever we are. With him as our guide there is much exploring to do. This house has wide and distant horizons towards which we must travel, and some of them are still unfamiliar. But it is his house, all of it.

Around this time there were three of us together in a small prayer group, meeting once a week and praying for any sick that we knew, but this story of the young couples assumptions jerked us out of any complacency we might have had, and projected us rapidly towards a cross-roads of reality. How could we break out of remote prayer, and into ministry? This became a huge issue with the three of us, but our church was not one readily open to the idea that lay people could have anything but very rude theology, with no ecclesiastical authority to minister, and there was no reason to trust us.

As a prayer group, we had been relegated to the dampness and freezing misted up windows of the tiny room at the rear of the church hall, which had been serving as a junk room for many years and a happy hunting ground for the local mice and woodworm. Little did anyone else know how that awful dank room glowed with the Light of Christ, as we prayed with him.

Holy frustration at such restricting circumstances and lack of acceptance built and built. Requests for God to use us more openly and freely crept into every prayer evening. By the onset of our last winter in the little room at the back of the church hall, nothing seemed to be growing and we were miserable! What could we do about space?

One local parish vicar took pity, offering us the use of his church hall for two evenings a week, for a small financial retainer. We enjoyed the increased space to move in. There were plenty of chairs to sit on, and no carpet to be stained with oil spots. But there were two mighty disadvantages to our new home.

The facilities were abominable. There were no kitchen arrangements- just a power point for a kettle. The single outside lavatory would not have been out of place in a museum of nineteenth century social history! The building was situated quite close to the nearby canal, now largely disused, and the village river rats took it upon themselves to nest under the floorboards. Hopefully, there was enough worship going on to cover their scratching, but the quiet moments were a different kettle of fish altogether.

There were many times when startled 'clients' had to be quickly reassured that the noises were only birds building their nests in the eaves!

In the end, we had to leave the rural life, and retreat to the rooms adjoining the local Methodist church, which the minister had graciously allowed us to borrow- but only for a short while. Here we met Postman Pat.

This colourful chap was a large transfer, stuck on the window of the church children's playroom- the room we used for healing services. The heat of the summer sun, pouring through the glass, had melted his face, collapsing the whole of the front of his head down onto neck and chest. Hardly a picture of Christian healing! We cunningly arranged the chairs for healing services, so that everyone had their backs to poor Postman Pat, who, we hoped, would not suffer too much from the rejection in his hour of need! But at least there were no rats.

Cross- denominational conjugal living is never easy. We began to hunt seriously for a place of our own. Those were happy times, though. We were roughing it for the Lord, and we really did not mind one bit. To look back at our two homes, one shared with the canal rats and the other with Postman Pat, is to see those days through rose- tinted spectacles; the

rose colouring being provided by the answers to prayer, that filled life to the 'overflow pipe'.

Suddenly, one, two and then three local clergy began to take interest in our tiny group's prayer life, in a way that was so new and reassuring. Through the things they commented on, it seemed that they actually thought we were an OK bunch of folks after all!

One of these clergymen came to our home, and was nothing short of thrilled by my stories of the outworking of God's grace, and how much we were becoming dedicated to prayer, and the idea of ministry to others.

During this conversation, I plucked up the courage to say, "One day, we could have our own place, a place dedicated to Jesus; just a place for him to do what he wants to do- anything he likes, as long as it improves life for people who know that they need him."

"That'll take five years at least to get going," came the reply from this short and stocky Vicar, lost in the pile of cushions on Ginnie's sofa. "But don't give up; just keep praying for it, and if God wants to give it to you, he will."

When he left the house, I got down to a bit of serious talking to God who, after all, owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Someone had once said to me, "If you roll up your sleeves with God, he will roll them up with you." That was what I wanted to do.

"There's a place in your heart for us somewhere! You know where it is, and if you want us to have it, then please start preparing it."

I talked to him about this 'five years' business but, in his grace, I felt him telling me that it would take three, and I had no reason to doubt him. This is the God who outstrips our expectations over so many things; why not over this issue?

I typed out this promise on a card, stapling it to the rim of the pocket inside the lid of my briefcase, so that I would be reminded of it every day. Every morning as I sat at my office desk in the factory and opened the

lid, there it was, his promise to me, and I could begin each day by giving thanks for it.

The card read, 'I covenant with the Lord God Almighty that I will serve him and worship him in a dedicated healing centre in three years.'

In the bottom right-hand corner, I wrote the date: March 1st 1990.

As the dreadful storm clouds of redundancy then threatened yet again, for the third time in three years, I reached the end of the trail. Ginnie was in full agreement. She had watched me slipping and sliding down the slope of despair, desperately hanging onto my job with a growing tenacity, increasingly swamped by the fear of an impending disaster as my sight went downhill and I could not cope with the work any longer. Surely, I would have to walk away from the factory life that had sustained me and our home for all those years. My career and I would soon part company, either because I had been made redundant or because my health would drive me out. Ginnie encouraged and supported me, on and on, until the Lord finally showed His hand.

Towards the end of our time at the Methodist church, a young local lad came to one of our open evenings, and mentioned that an old chapel in the town had a 'For Sale' sign over the door. It had been empty for a number of years, and was nearly derelict, but he thought it might make a good healing centre.

We went, we saw; and we lost courage, at the state of it. But God seemed to have left it there just for us, so we set about the legal wrangling to acquire it.

My heart was not exactly leaping for joy at this point. We were about to exchange scratching rats and dripping postmen for spiders and rotten floorboards. Would all this ever come right? But at least the old chapel had all the potential we needed. A large main room would do well enough for conferences and healing services, and the side rooms were sufficient to provide two quiet ministry rooms, and an office for administration.

Across the back of the building, the facilities were to be found: there were gents' and ladies' loos, a boiler room large enough to double as a storeroom and a kitchen which, given a lot of work, could be made large enough to eat in. Above all, it would be all ours. We could be free to come and go as we pleased: able to arrange for people to come by appointment, and no longer in competition with any other activity. It was filthy, but it was wonderful!

The card stapled into the briefcase lid had kept me going for those three years, it was bent and torn and grubby and, in the nick of time, a place had at last been found. My lovely heavenly Father was true to His word and I walked out of the factory gates for the last time.

On March 1st, 1993, exactly three years to the day, just as he had promised, we opened the doors of the Well Centre and, at forty eight years old, I left the factory behind for ever.

A lady friend of Ginnie's presented me with a paperweight, as a sort of housewarming gift, to sit on my new desk in my new office. On the top of it is inscribed:

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”

John 15: 16 [NIV]

The great day had come. The Well Centre opened. I suppose we could have had a band, lots of flags and a press launch, but I could not remember Jesus' ministry beginning like that, so we didn't try. If this was to be the ministry of availability, then we would just sit, and pray, and wait.

My last few weeks in the factory had been largely absorbed in financial planning- and there was no way that we as a family were going to make it! I pored over the figures, with a strong magnifying glass, until the tears

came to my sore eyes, but I couldn't make any reasonable sense of them.

Everywhere I looked, the red outweighed the black. We had promised, and committed, resources which we simply would not have.

I have never felt so downright irresponsible and vulnerable in my whole life. Waiting at home was an overbearing mortgage, that seemed to have a voracious appetite; gas and electricity bills, and- perhaps even worse- there were two young sons straining at the leash to get through university, which would be impossible without parental financial aid. Perhaps I was going crazy.

There were no guarantees here at all. I was committed to the Well, with no gainful employment, and consequently with no understanding of my income.

One thought kept pounding away in my head, drowning out the doubts and fears. Something good was going to happen- tomorrow. How that goodness would show itself, I did not appreciate at the time. I imagined that it was something very healing: some vague understanding- vague, but real enough- that God was going to assure me of something very much better than I had ever had before.

But it was not just the financial argument which had to be surrendered. The frustration, the anxiety and the creeping sense of insecurity- all had to be offered up. At the peak of the emotional battle, God's words were quite clear:

"I want you to give up working for me, and start working with me."

Since those frightening days, I have discovered Hebrews 11: 13, which illuminates, for me, this balance between the agony of indecision I was facing, and the knowledge that there was so much to come. The writer of Hebrews had been talking about all those patriarchs who had gone forward into the unknown, for no other reason than that they knew by faith that they had to. He writes that all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them, and welcomed them from a distance. They admitted that they

were aliens and strangers on earth. That particular extract from Hebrews goes on to discuss Moses in this light. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ (analogous, in my case, to holding the title 'disabled') as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

It was through his faith that he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger. He persevered, because he saw him who is invisible.

This sort of person seemed to me to have had a transfigured perspective on life. All things seem to have been just a part of their walk with God, towards some unseen and greater goal. Their eyes were up, and over the horizon.

The whole basis of my insecurity had been failing sight. Now I had reached the point of no return- when decisions were being made so fast, and there was no way back. I learned a whole new meaning of the psalm which says:

“I lift up my eyes to the hills- where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Psalm 121: 1- 2 [NIV]

The idea that 'lifting up' and 'offering' might just be the same thing, led me, for the first time, to the principle that I should offer my eyes- the source of all my conflicts- to God; and that he would, somehow, be able to use them. In the end, this was the only thing left for me to do. God was teaching me to trust him, the hard way.

The place we had named the Well was a mess, too. Maris, one of the trustees, had chosen the name, as she wanted the place to be like the well at which Jesus sat and spoke to the woman who needed so badly to meet him. She came to the well to slake her thirst, but it was there that, as Jesus spoke to her, the wonderful offer of everlasting water was given by him- for all.

Even with this encouraging truth in mind, it was difficult to view the state of the building we had walked into with anything but astonishment. Yet hard work and prayer would eventually see our hopes fulfilled, as God blessed the work.

We started with rotten floorboards, peeling paintwork; broken windows, an antiquated Central Heating system that hardly worked and no telephone. There were no curtains at the windows, and the kitchen should have been put out of bounds, on health grounds.

The lavatories were old, cracked and rusty, and the roof tiles were slipped, broken and sometimes missing altogether. If the building looked like anything at all, in those early days, it certainly did not look like a peaceful place of healing!

All the money we had was given to solicitors to clear the legalities out of the way. If the building was to be made habitable, then the work would have to be done by us. There were days and days of hard work ahead. We were dirty, and broke!

"Oh Lord," I prayed, while digging out a floorboard, which dry rot had almost disintegrated, "we came here to work with you, not to scrub floors and paintwork! What will we do after all this hard work, if no- one comes near the place?"

The essential renovation and repairs were eventually completed. Happily, our plans for the various rooms came to fruition. What started as an office has since been re- born, and is now a private prayer and ministry room. All the leaky holes in the roof were patched up, and the crumbling, falling, rain- drenched ceiling plaster renewed.

Praise God the generosity of those who come to us now enables upkeep of the building to be carried out by professionals, instead of our willing, sore and amateurish hands.

There are times when God's encouragement for the work that any of us are engaged in seems to descend on us by the bucketful.... A whole dollop was on its way, just when it was badly needed.

Sitting at home one evening, cleaned up from yet another day's scraping and painting shortly after the opening of the Well, the phone rang. It was a friend, from the West Country, who had not been in touch for some months.

It was good to hear her voice again. After the pleasantries, she said, "Mike, I'm not sure what's happening to you these days, but I have a bit of Scripture for you. May I read it over the phone?" It was from Isaiah, and it was just for me:

“And if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun- scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well- watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age- old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”

Isaiah 58: 9- 12 [NIV]

God was listening to my every thought, and accepting my every offering. He was going to change us- or at least me, as the scripture was for me- from a place of struggling disability, into a 'well- watered garden', which I later understood to be the Well.

What was more, my 'night', by which I assumed he meant my lack of vision, was to be made into a noonday, through what was going on. Amazing! I was over the moon!

And the lovely folk who had opened the Centre with me- Ann, Maris, Sheila and Jean, who had joined us the year before, would become known as rebuilders and restorers. That is healing and wholeness! The whole Well Centre plan was going to work!

"Now," my caller went on, before I had time to relate the story of the opening of the Well. "Here is something else for you, as well. I don't know, but I think the Lord really wants you to have this gift- for yourself, and for you alone." She read from Proverbs, that a generous man would prosper, and that he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. That was the moment when all the strain of the private family financial worries flew out of the window, snuffed out by the sheer power of the Word of God. Not just them: all the hesitations over the money supply, to feed the Centre, vanished in the same breath.

More importantly- much more importantly- the people began to come. At first, they came into the Well in very small numbers, but the flow gradually increased, and there seemed no end to God's favour towards them. As people began to respond, I was reminded of the wonderful invitation:

"Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."

Revelation 22: 17 [NIV].

There were many miracles to watch, and much to give thanks for. It was not that we saw hundreds of people getting up out of wheelchairs in those earliest days of ministry, or throwing off medically incurable diseases; we saw our small share of such things, but the real miracles came in the strengthening, the rebuilding, the refurbishing, the mending of broken lives to make whole people again- or as whole as we can be in a fallen world.

Although our eyes had been opened wide by all the teachings we had received over the years, it was God's grace which made things happen. Solicitors, doctors and drug addicts, airline pilots and single mothers, clergy and housewives; God does not mind who they are, or where they come from. And what were they bringing into the well with them? Just about anything that it is possible to imagine: from abuse to M. E.; from sexual difficulties of all kinds to physical ailments; from mental illness to marriage strains. God was touching all of them.

As the Well became a more accepted part of church life in this part of the world, so the longing began to deepen in me that we should be, somehow, under properly authorised church leadership. But how could this be?

Chapter 05 Celebrations

Two or three years after opening the Well, The time had come around again for my regular trip to see the Bishop. I had fallen, by then, into the more than pleasant habit of turning up on his doorstep every six months or so, to keep him informed and, hopefully, to drink a cup of his coffee.

This particular occasion found me sitting in the rocking chair in his office, my guide dog, Yates, lying at my feet and keeping a watchful eye on the coffee table because of the plate of biscuits that, in his view, dominated it!

We talked a while. The Bishop spoke of Jesus, with a love that was obvious—a real tonic. He encouraged me, as he always does, assuring me that I was, indeed, going the right way.

I sipped my coffee and waited for the conversation to open up an opportunity for me. I wanted to enlist his help in the search for a clergy person to head up the team and the ministry. It looked a very sensible option, to secure our credibility and a daily working oversight of our burgeoning healing theology.

We had been trying to face up to a difficult decision. The Well Centre was thriving, but it was a stand-alone operation. It was not, formally, an outreach project of the Church; it was not an activity going on in the local church hall. It was not demonstrably under the authority that it should have been.

In one sense, I felt secure in the knowledge that Christ is the head of the Body, and we were a

part of it. In another sense, I felt a little uneasy because we were unable to demonstrate to other Christians that we were not ‘unguided missiles’, shooting off at a tangent.

We were determined to find a clergyman to head up the team. The Trustees could not afford to offer a salary, but then we had taken

financial risks before. We could not have found him or her a house to live in either, but the Lord would, we hoped, provide.

With the approval of the Trustees behind me, I began to look around. I made lists of retired pastors, but they had all retired! I made lists of the ones with no money, but they were too poor to come. We advertised in the church press, but to no avail.

What, I wondered, was God doing? I could only conclude that he was making me wait for the right person to become available. Then, one late summer evening, walking home from The Well, I knocked again on the gates of heaven:

“Lord, show me the man! Help me to see the one you’ve chosen for us!”

I knew immediately I prayed, in the deep reaches of my being, that a provision had been made; a clergyman would be provided. It was probably just my lack of vision that prevented me from coming across God’s choice. What had I missed? Where else was there to look?

Towards the end of our time together, I was on the point of broaching the subject when the Bishop shook me rigid with the question,

“Would you like me to ordain you? ”

My mind went into a spin. Where did that come from? I remember feeling so grateful that his rocking chair had arms, because without them I would have fallen off!

“You can’t just do that! ”I stumbled.

“There may be a way.”

“But, I’m too old! ”

“I know how old you are.”

“I can’t see well enough to study, I’m blind! ”

“True.”

“I don’t want to leave my work and go to theological college for three years.” I fought on.

“I don’t want you to.” I was beginning to lose the battle. All my arguments were being shot down as fast as I could raise them.

In a final attempt to conclude the conversation, I played my trump card, “But I don’t want to go through that selection process. I did it years ago and got rejected. It was awful!” He had his answer to that one, too.

“I’ve just selected you.”

He finished our talk by adding, “Ordination won’t open many doors for you, but it will certainly oil the hinges! ”

I bumbled out into the sunshine, leaving behind some vague remark about needing to pray about it. Perhaps we could meet again soon and discuss it further.

It had not dawned on any of us that God’s answer lay, as it so often does, right under our

noses. This would take some thinking about.

I went home to tell Ginnie what the Bishop had said. She sat me down on the garden seat outside the back door with another mug of coffee, and then left me to start thinking it all through. d

Now was the time to reflect upon what ordination might mean. I hadn’t seriously considered these things before as I had previously offered myself for selection for other and far more dubious motives. These verses came straight into my mind:

“. . . now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living Stone —rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him —you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices

acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 2:3 –5(NIV)

So, I pondered, we are not only to be ‘holy people ’but a ‘holy priesthood ’. In this expression, we move from what we are to what we do . Are our clergy intended to be merely decorative? I could not stand being that! Reading that scripture again, it seemed to me the idea of a ‘royal priesthood ’ was not addressed just to the leaders of the congregations, but to the congregations themselves.

Should not Christian priesthood be a function of the faith community as a whole? I could not find anywhere in the New Testament where any individual Christian is described as a ‘priest ’. Jesus Christ himself is the great High Priest; and nowhere is the term ‘priesthood ’applied to a special group within the Church.

The whole community of saints seemed to me to be ‘priestly ’in character, by virtue of the relationship of Jesus to his body, his people. This notion of priesthood has always been basic

to my understanding of the Church, and I take it to be true to the teaching of the New Testament.

I had often heard this doctrine referred to as ‘the priesthood of all believers ’, but perhaps that term fails to encompass the New Testament concept adequately. Some people seem to associate the idea with their right to vote at church meetings. In some denominations, it would appear that the idea was lost altogether in the setting up of a special professional group in the Church.

Did my Bishop want me to join some special elite group, to whose hands alone was entrusted the power of God? Surely not. For the New Testament speaks of Christians —not just leaders; not only the ordained ministers, but all those for whom Jesus, the Lamb of God, was slain —in these terms:

“You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

Revelation 5:10(NIV)

It seemed to me that the understanding of ‘priesthood ’ clearly conveyed by the New Testament is not that every person can be his or her own ‘priest ’, nor is it even that each Christian must be a ‘priest ’to his or her fellow Christians, though the requirement for mutual service and self-giving love in the body

of Christ has a bearing on the matter.

I gradually began to understand more clearly that each believer somehow shares in the priesthood which is the characteristic of the Church as a whole. Looking at this from a different point of view altogether, I remembered that Bishops or ‘overseers ’were a vital element of the structure of the

early church, and the office of elder, presbyter or church leader evolved into the ‘clergy ’of later periods.

As all these reflections, prompted by the Bishop ’s words, went on in my mind, another jigsaw piece was struggling to drop into my outstretched hands.

It occurred to me that in this matter of ordination, individualism may be foreign to the spirit of the

Bible. Certainly, we do not need a human priest to act as an intermediary between us and Christ for our salvation, nor for our continuing growth in the Christian faith and life. Christ is our

mediator, and we have access to his throne of grace and mercy.

When I came to Christ as an individual, I felt incorporated into his body —not as an isolated unit, but as one of a group of ‘living stones ’. The stress ought to be on our interdependence, not our independence.

The Well had to become an integral part of the Body, part of this royal priesthood. We wanted to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

But, I wondered, what does this holy Christian priesthood—all of us together in the Church, that is—actually do? What are these sacrifices that Peter tells us that we should be offering through Jesus Christ? In Revelation 8:3, I discovered, the saints—the

‘holy ones’—are offering up their prayers: Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the

altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne.

The sacrificial prayers of Christians are heard in heaven and make a difference!

With such sacrifices of praise, God is well pleased. In ancient Israel, the sacrificial system, given by God under the old covenant, prefigured the new covenant, under which Jesus himself was the one, full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for sin. Offering our sacrifice of praise includes giving him all that we are and everything we do, in love and obedience.

These somewhat convoluted thought patterns were to serve me later in teaching about the corporate holiness of the Church; understanding the reality of it was another important piece of

the jigsaw. Above all, it became clear to me that it is the whole body that Christ is calling to shine, not just its leaders.

So, was I being called to be a clergyman? Not if it just meant being licensed to bury the dead and take church services! I wanted to be in my jeans, on my knees before the throne of grace, up to my eyeballs with ministering to people who were in pain. That was where I felt at home. That was my

calling.

By now, I had discovered that, although the gifts of the Holy Spirit are wonderful, and are such a vibrant witness to the presence of the living God, the greatest gift I could ever have

would be that of bringing others into the divine presence. After that, what happens is between God and the sufferer. If that is priesthood I could be prepared to receive it!

By the time my six-monthly trip to the Bishop's house came around again, I had studied, mentally fought over, argued about, and tried to rationally discuss, many aspects of ordination in the Anglican Church. Above all, it would give the team at The Well the one thing we had wanted and felt was appropriate: it would place us under proper authority.

As a small piece of my preparation for that day, I contacted a number of clergymen around the country asking them the same question:

“What does Ordination mean to you? ”

The answers were various, and this variety did not really help at all. On the one hand I was told,

“Just go out and have a few beers the night before. Enjoy it! ”

From the other end of the spectrum came one statement which startled me:

“Ordination will make you holy! ”

Did this mean something would change? Hurriedly, I asked the gentleman,

“How do you define holiness? ”

“A holy person is someone who is set aside for God.”

That could mean anything. Putting down the phone, I sighed, collapsing back into my chair.

I could say, then, that ordination simply makes me a full-time church official. Was that all it would be? There had to be more. I did not know it then, but that conversation was to switch

on a new light, an enormous desire to seek the true meaning of the word 'holy' and to search for it for myself. In the end, the search for holiness was to become everything for me; without

holiness, nobody would see the Lord. We had searched for an authorised leader, and God was going to give us one.

Eventually the long awaited day arrived. The day originally chosen for my ordination

was the same date as that set for the first ordinations of women in Wales to the priesthood, so I had opted out and persuaded the Bishop to delay a week. That particular day was their day, their

special time, and I felt that it should be left to them.

A week later, with all the arrangements made, the great day was upon us. My tummy wobbled and my knees shook.

Notwithstanding all my thoughts about the corporate character of ministerial ordination, something in me wanted a private affair, just family and friends, but it was not to be.

I stumbled out of the vestry at the back of a long procession of choristers, hanging on to the elbow of the local parish priest (in the absence of my guide dog) and felt quite overcome by

what I found. There were hundreds of people in the church!

I always imagined a few friends and family might come, but not all this lot! By the time the procession reached its destination the worship had nearly lifted off the roof. The joy that rolled around that church was immeasurable. I cried all the way through. The service was over in a flash, or so it seemed at the time, and soon afterwards we were back at The Well Centre, to entertain those who had come.

Funnily enough, my most abiding memory of that reception is of something which occurred afterwards. One of our sons had driven home quickly to fetch my guide dog, Yates. Rushing into The Well, Yates caught sight of me across the room. Suddenly this huge black Labrador crashed into my chest, and wrapped his front legs around my neck, his tail going round like a set of helicopter propeller blades. He said it all!

Before another six months had gone by there were two noticeable changes at The Well. For some unknown reason, the word had spread remarkably rapidly. More and more people made the trip

to south Wales. Was this the oil on the hinges?

It was not just that we were becoming busier receiving travellers from further afield, the atmosphere in The Well was changing, too. It was not only me and the team that felt it — remarks about the atmosphere being somehow 'different' became commonplace, even amongst those visitors who did not profess Christianity.

This change was to play on my mind for months, teasing me into an eventual recognition of its spiritual content.

Slowly, very slowly, I was beginning to wonder, beginning to think the unthinkable. I had met so many different types of people exercising healing ministry in all sorts of different ways, supposedly according to their individual calling, but it all seemed such hard work compared with the way it used to be in my reading of the new Testament. Whatever version of the ministry I had learned, or tried to turn my hand to, I was faced with frustration at the slowness, the apparent hesitation of God to help his people. I would spend as much of my time alone as I could, pondering the question of God's apparent reluctance and the possible reasons for it, but nothing came easily to mind.

I needed to get away and think.

Chapter 06 Off to Bardsey

My pilgrimage to Bardsey Island has become for me a joyfully anticipated annual event. The root of the name 'Bardsey' is traced back to the period of Viking raids. This peaceful island, Ynys Enlli in the native Welsh tongue, nestles in the swell of the Irish Sea, a few miles off the northwest tip of Wales.

When the Christians first arrived and took over the island, St Cadfan and his companions built a Monastery there in AD 546, which fell into ruins a long time ago.

The original pattern of the monks' life on the island would have been somewhat different from the one that today's mainland monks and nuns enjoy. There would always have been a church at Bardsey's heart, but the monks themselves would for the most part have lived alone around the island in individual circular huts, which would have looked a bit like old-fashioned beehives.

Their life would have been very strict as well as physically and spiritually demanding. Despite these hardships, people were attracted to the solitude and peace of the island, and many thousands have lived and died here down the years.

In the seventh century, Ethelfrid's pagan army conquered Chester and destroyed the monastery at Bangor, not far away in north Wales, killing over a thousand monks in the process. Bardsey offered refuge to those who managed to flee from these outrages; its remoteness, and the treacherous waters that separate it from the mainland, made it an ideal refuge.

Eventually, the form of monasticism with which we are more familiar today was introduced to the island, and the Augustinian Abbey of St Mary was built in the twelfth century. It is all in ruins now, but Bardsey goes on and on being a place of peaceful pilgrimage. And my experience of Bardsey has been that it is much easier to take time to be aware of the presence of God when I am in such a remote place.

Over the centuries since the monks lived there in numbers, Bardsey became a kind of Iona in Wales. About half a mile wide and three times as long, the island has always been recognised as a healthy place.

Gerald de Barri, born of mixed Welsh and Norman blood, chaplain to King Henry II of England, was a Great twelfth century cleric, traveller and writer and, under the name of Giraldus Cambrensis, the ancient Welsh traveller and historian observed, having been there, that no one on the island of Bardsey died of anything other than old age. That would be quite an interesting claim in the twenty-first century, but an earth shattering claim during his long ago lifetime!

In those days, people died of everything that was going: childbirth, children's illnesses, untreated Wounds from the generally high level of social and military violence, and all manner of unknown and untreatable sickness that brought death much earlier than it usually comes to us today. But, apparently, not on Bardsey Island!

For someone in those far off times to have suggested that people on Bardsey were only dying from old age would have been quite a statement. This happy state he attributed to prayer. Certainly, many pilgrims have prayed there, and have enjoyed all that island has to offer.

For quite a few centuries, Bardsey Island has been a haven for both nature lovers and anyone else looking for solitude. It is now a national nature reserve, and many folk make the boat journey across the water to the island each summer to spend time with Manx shearwaters, cormorants, shags and oystercatchers, and the grey seals that come to sing and to swim off the mostly rocky shore —and some visitors, like myself, go to spend time in prayer.

Hurling out across the white tops of the waves towards Bardsey, spray flying, is an exciting time for the modern day pilgrim. It is a very different journey than it must have been in the days of coracles and other basic medieval craft! The boatman opens the throttle and the engines roar. The stern sits down in the water and the bow lifts enthusiastically for the island. This pilgrim heart leaps over the waves, too. In front of me are days and days of sea breezes and sunshine and early mornings,

birdsong and afternoon naps, corporate worship — both in the chapel and in the farmhouse kitchen after the evening meal.

On top of that, there are hours alone in awareness of God's presence, to think and to ponder and to wonder at him. It is hardly surprising that the island HAS BECOME a magnet to me; it draws me, Every year I can get there — to rest; to sit on the rocky edges while the sea rolls in and washes the beaches around my feet; to let the gentle, salt-laden breeze bite deep into my skin; and to listen to the call of the pregnant and mother seals, and to talk with God.

Before I set foot on Bardsey for the first time, and felt wrapped anew in the love of God that seems to come unfurling itself over the jetty as the boat makes landfall at high tide — before I first stumbled along that jetty and up the main track away from modern civilisation, with the feeling of falling into God's arms — I had a mental picture in those days of what life would be like for me, a first timer on the island whose experience of travel had hitherto been limited to four star hotels!

I had a mental picture of something PRETTY GAHSTLY, SOMETHING I had felt I really wasn't going to cope with at all. I nearly didn't go.

For weeks beforehand I found it most difficult to imagine being on Bardsey island without electricity. Bottled gas that drove cooker and fridge, yes, but no electricity! How could I imagine doing everything by candlelight? And how did the islanders heat water for baths? With candles? How was I going to wash my hair? The whole thing sounded very risky for civilised man.

Even worse I had heard, correctly as it turned out, that there was no running water. Well, a good trickle needing boiling and filtering drifted down a pipe from a well on the mountain side to the cottages on the lower slopes but that, together with a tank of rainwater, was it. So, no running water means no daily shower and no flush toilet. Horror upon horror! Can anyone survive like that?

So it was that I DEVELOPED a mental picture of island life, a mental model of discomfort and hardship, which very nearly stopped me from going on pilgrimage that first time. By the end of my first week on

Bardsey, that original and uncivilised mental model of island life had been almost entirely replaced by another one, a mental model of idyllic peace and closeness to the Almighty I never even dreamed of.

But once there, the mental model of island life that I had begun with stayed a while, trying to affect my behaviour. It had been formed out of two main sources: what I had been told and what I had already experienced.

I had been told to expect privation, not of food but certainly of facilities! I had been told that food and drink and a bed would be provided but nothing else. I had been warned that too much time alone with oneself, if a person is not accustomed to it, can eventually create enormous anxieties which make one most uncomfortable, if not distressed. To this list of bad news I quickly added my young memories of camping, of being vulnerable to the elements, to attending to one's personal toiletry in the woods and to mass produced food, and green custard that gave us all stomach cramps, and all of it stinking of campfire smoke!

If I had attended to that original model, developed from what I had been told and experienced for myself, I might never have gone to Bardsey. Now that I know the second mental model, built out of my actual experience of island pilgrimage, I have difficulty staying away. Interestingly,

This, I discovered, means that our mental models, the way in which we perceive truth, can be dramatically changed by our experiences, and our behaviour is governed accordingly.

Unhappily, many questions about the healing aspects of kingdom life, and the King at its heart, do not see the light of day. They don't finish up turning into meaningful answers, let alone strategic actions by the church, because these ideas are often too different from the mental models of Jesus which might be prevailing in a particular branch of God's family.

I have since recognised that old and well-established mental models of Jesus can be very powerful in acting as a brake on our ability to consider new insights, let alone to take them on board. They are deeply ingrained

images that leaders of any church organisation, probably as well as any secular organisation, tend to hold onto quite subconsciously, often failing to re-focus, even when presented with clear scriptural evidence to the contrary.

They can be shaped by our upbringing, our churchmanship, and by our experience as praying Christians. The trouble with experience is that it gets in the way and attacks childlike trust.

The general mental model of Christ I had found in the church, someone a little reluctant if not generally unenthusiastic about helping his followers out of trouble, did not for me compare with the New Testament account of Christ who, in his compassion, readily offered healing to all who asked him.

And how can we honestly say that we trust Jesus when we have absolutely no idea of what he will do in answer to prayer? This is a terribly important question for any would-be miracle worker to answer, as insufficient trust means few miracles, and the scarcity of miracles we see in the church today is probably the result of insufficient trust!

“Once I was asked to pray,” one imitator of Jesus’ ministry reported to me around that time, “for five little boys, all aged about six years old, who had cancer of the blood. Four died soon afterwards and the fifth went into remission for a year and then went on to glory.”

To a greater or a lesser extent, this is a heartbreaking experience commonly encountered by many a praying Christian.

“I received five large blows to my trust in God to restore life, as each one died in turn” he continued. “I listened eagerly to what seemed like good reasons for God’s mysterious and apparent failure to save these children.”

Much second-guessing about God’s intentions in this sort of thing has been drip fed to us over many years by friends and family, but the end result is always the same: our image of Jesus, our mental model of him, is tarnished. We cannot help this – we are human beings, after all.

We begin to know from our experience that persuading God to restore anything is not easy, and we start to think our compassionate God rarely responds in the way we think he should. We build our own personal theologies accordingly.

“But now I know in my heart,” said the same disciple, “that the real Christ, the Jesus revealed in the pages of the Gospels rather than the image of him that I had built out of my own experiences, never failed to bring quick and complete restoration to all who came and asked him with as little as a mustard seed of expectancy that he would do it.”

Changing my own mental model of Jesus, and of his ministry, took perhaps three pilgrimages to Bardsey before it reached anywhere near the point of being straightened out in my mind. But after that time a Christian couple came to visit, bringing with them their daughter Hannah who, by her own confession, was not a Christian.

Hannah’s knees had both been smashed in a car accident some months earlier. She was still hobbling along slowly with the aid of two crutches but her wedding day was fast approaching. The three of them agreed that they could not even begin to imagine Hannah walking elegantly up the aisle on crutches on her wedding day!

The mother asked for prayer for Hannah. Hannah immediately felt it necessary to point out that she wasn’t a Christian, assuming therefore that she was disqualified from receiving healing. Mistake number one! Here was the first wrong mental model of Jesus: that he would only do business with his own, with the already converted. There is no mention of conversion being a prerequisite to healing in the New Testament

Dad then joined the conversation. “I don’t know if you’ll have any luck,” he offered, “Hannah still has some forgiveness issues from her schooldays that she hasn’t sorted out yet.”

“Don’t worry,” I was then able to reply, “Jesus never suggested we would have to get our own spiritual lives sorted out first before he could heal us. That’s just as well,” I added, “or we’d all be in a pickle!”

Dad, cemented hard into his own mental model of a Jesus who would always demand spiritual improvement before giving gifts of grace, battled on.

“What about the man lowered down through the roof? Jesus had to forgive him before he could heal him!” he announced triumphantly. But he had missed the point of the story altogether and there was little time to start a lengthy discussion on it.

Suffice to say I managed to throw out a quick explanation, that Luke and Mark both tell the story of yet another miracle, the healing of the paralytic, which does not prove we have to be forgiven before we can be healed, it shows that Jesus’ authority extends even to the forgiveness of sins. That is a different view of the story altogether.

The entire event is witnessed by the religious Jewish folk, the Pharisees and the scribes, who between them make an instant assessment of the situation. They agree that Jesus is making unique claims in that house that would have been blasphemous if they were untrue.

Interestingly, later Judaism would be teaching that God does not help liars or sinners, so if Jesus was not who he was claiming to be, then this poor man would definitely not, according to their theology, have walked away from his mat. Jesus would not have been able to heal him. The fact that he did meant that some type of magnificent and godly power was manifestly operating through Jesus.

So this miracle was not recorded to prove that we have to be forgiven of our sins before we can get healed but that Jesus does indeed have the Father’s power flowing through him, both to forgive and to heal.

But there was no time for some great discussion on such issues as I did not need Hannah to start getting filled up with any more doubt than she already had.

“Just come with me,” I offered to all three of them, “come and sit in my office and we’ll have a pray.”

And so I began to worship God in thanksgiving for Jesus, for all he taught us and for all he had won for us on the cross. “Thank you,

Father,” I repeated, “that Jesus has taken all our pains and carried all our diseases. and by his wounds we are healed!” In this way of worship and thanksgiving I was deliberately lifting Hannah’s expectancy of the cross while at the same time defeating a few of Dad’s doubts and, hopefully, giving glory to the Father through Jesus.

In twenty minutes Hannah was up and jogging happily around our conference room. No crutches. It had been quite hard work but we had moved that little family sufficiently away from bad mental models of Jesus towards one in which they could receive what was already waiting for them in the kingdom of God.

One mental model had within it an image of Jesus as being demanding and unpredictable, and the other had an image of him as being reliable and consistent. Two different images of Christ: the one we can learn to trust, with the other that might be a lot more difficult!

And it had been on one of those atmospheric mornings on the island when I began to stumble across one of the keys to the world of miraculous Christianity. It was going to be something very exciting and very new to me.

Of course I had by then crossed paths with hundreds of faithful Christians who confessed a miraculous faith experience, but on closer examination so much of what they had witnessed simply did not seem to be fulfilling the New Testament promise of a dynamic kingdom that changed lives in droves whenever it came near. Things happen here and there, in ones and twos, but rarely in New Testament proportions.

Sure enough there were many fellow disciples along the way who had episodes to relate of people receiving miraculous healing, or other life-changing experiences, but they only had one or two stories at best. Many of the episodes being related were from other people’s prayer experiences rather than their own.

The uncomfortable truth I had taken to Bardsey that first year, deep in the secret recesses of my mind, was that we ordinary people in the church are simply not experiencing miracles in New Testament proportions, and that has probably been the case for many centuries.

God revealed how Christians are to be involved in healing the sick in Jesus' name, but our practice seems to have dropped down into first gear. Our healing — and our evangelism — seemed to me to be very short of breath!

There was an enormous amount of hard work going on in and around church life in these areas, but really that was my problem: I was having difficulty with the words 'hard work'. My reading of the New Testament was suggesting to me that these things were in those days a lot easier and far more common. There have been numerous times in recent history when God's foot appears to be tweaking the accelerator but the car seemed, on the whole, to be stuck in first gear. God often gives me hints and nudges about things to explore and investigate. One particular morning on Bardsey, a big one was on the way.

I was leaning on my elbows on the old drystone wall outside the front door of one of the island's old farmhouses, hot coffee mug in hand, when it arrived. My feet were planted firmly on a gravel path which ran across the front of the house and away to my right, towards the old farm buildings, that had served for many years as a hermitage, with a high walled farmyard. To my left the path led to the cottage garden swinging gate, and through to the garden with its high flowering hedges, and its well-trodden path across the lawn to the ty-bach, the 'little house' at the bottom of the garden.

The sea breeze had calmed itself as the sun came up, and the fresh morning air was filled with the comforting sound of buzzing bees, punctuated by the intermittent bleating of sheep.

Beyond the chest-high cottage wall on which I was leaning, topped with flat stones that were warming up nicely in the sunshine, the ground sloped gently upwards across the field away from me. Through the old gate, and beyond the rough, rutted tractor track that serves as the island's main road, it rose sharply to form the gorse and bracken covered mountain that forms most of the eastern shoreline and reaches up to scrape the scurrying clouds in the sky above its shoulders.

Slightly over to the right, as I raised my eyes and ears in the direction of the mountain, the sun warmed my face and gladdened my heart. I relaxed, deeply aware that God was in heaven, and that all was well.

This peaceful Bardsey morning, as every morning in summer, there was birdsong. The sound of a combustion engine on the island is limited to the farmer's daily tractor trip up the lane, and no telephone ever rings within earshot. No car ever comes speeding past, shaking and vibrating to deafening bass notes from the speakers of its sound system. This is the quiet and peaceful rural life, led as it would have been a hundred and fifty years ago.

Among the sounds which would have been unfamiliar to urban ears on this particular day, two skylarks were talking to each other across the field in front of me. At least I supposed that was what they were up to, and I was privileged to be sandwiched between them, listening in on their conversation.

I leaned forward, forearms resting on the flat stones that levelled the top of the wall, sipping my coffee and listening to them.

It took ten minutes or so for me to quite realise it but I slowly became aware that one was calling and the other was repeating his call. The originator was somewhere ahead of me, up across the rugged path, in the bracken and bushes of the lower slopes of the mountain. The bird copying was very close, sitting in the hedge along the ty-bach path that ran away through the garden gate to my left.

Each bird's stock of notes amounted to only five or six individually distinct sounds, which were being sung in varied order, with varying gaps in between. Like ringing the changes of church bells, the combinations seemed endless.

After every slightly differing call instigated by my new-found friend ahead of me at the foot of the mountain, there followed a pause for what I guessed was the collecting of bird thoughts. Then the skylark in the hedge along the path to my left would repeat the call, note for note, exactly as it had been sung a quarter of a mile away to my front. Then the call would change again, and then again be faultlessly repeated.

I remained still, hearing every note in the peaceful air and marvelling at the exchange. Twenty minutes passed and still they were calling to each other — the same mountainside bird originating each different call, and the same garden bird repeating it, note for note, in the clear, still air. Eventually, slowly at first as I was so engrossed in the musical conversation of the occasion, I thought I was beginning to see what God could be saying to me.

It seemed that his intention was that we should become something like an echo. As the bird which was beside me echoed exactly the bird in front of me, across the rising slope of the hayfield, so we should attempt to be echoes of Christ's message and ministry. Might the miraculous life be restored in the church if we all set out to copy Christ's healing ministry? At first I shrugged off the thought of being a 'Jesus echo'. It sounded almost as if it was going to be the same old, tired, simplistic Sunday school message we had been laying on mainland church people for as long as the island had been in Christian use. It began to seem an insignificant idea, as many more learned people had said it more often to more people in more pews and from higher pulpits than I could. But then the more I listened, the more sense it made. In fact, this message had a simple substance to it that felt very different and needed understanding at a deeper level altogether. This was not the same old and rather vaguely encouraging message that we should be Christlike in the community by being nice to people (valuable though that is), this was a different and deeper thought entirely. This was a calling to copy —not to copy what the modern church was teaching us about healing ministry with all its variety and different possibilities, but to copy Jesus himself in his ministry.

But wasn't I doing that anyway? Surely I had been taught properly over the years and had built up quite a body of experience. I could see only one thing wrong with the way we do healing ministry: it doesn't work very well! It is indeed pretty hard work. We may have varied theological understandings and techniques, but compared to the disciples' experiences recorded in the New Testament, we really do not see enough miracles! Like everyone else around me, I could recognise this

position easily enough but, if we were not in complete denial about it, we were taking it as a spur to continue the search for yet more complexities.

The healing ministry has come a long way since Jesus, and I began to wonder: was the church now teaching itself by listening to itself and not to the scriptures? Was it developing by drawing in advances in secular skills and practices rather than through a deeper reverence for the truth of the original New Testament ways?

Here lies the danger of pilgrimage! It can open one up to all sorts of ideas one would not have dreamed of in the hustle and bustle of daily life back home.

But the skylarks went on calling, and the message to me that morning was insistent, unsteady, if not troubling. 'Go back! Start again and be an echo of Christ's ministry. Imitate Jesus!' Well, that would be quite an adventure!

It felt like a call to disrobe, to fling off so much which books and helpful friends had taught; to strip away the outer garments that innumerable lecturers and healing theologians had taught, and to start all over again.

I was gaining a real sense that I would have to discard the old and comparatively ineffective clothes of modern healing ministry, and return to Christ's teaching before we could see miraculous Christianity at work again in New Testament proportions.

The thought of such an adventure was most unsettling! I had been working full-time in the healing ministry, involved in practices taught me by the well-known and the most experienced. My ministry was unthreatening and quite acceptable. No one, to use the vernacular, was giving me any 'aggro'. To get better I could simply learn more secular counselling skills, Christianise them with prayer and a few proof texts, and then absorb them into my way of doing things. Was there a problem with this approach?

My inbuilt and quite natural defence mechanisms clicked in immediately, reassuring me that all I was doing in ministry was already Christ-centred anyway, so why was there a need to change?

There was initially just that one reason that I kept thinking about again: that, by and large, healing ministry today does not work very well. Although I would tell of the magnificent true accounts of lives made whole, the awful truth was that I never told the stories about those who weren't healed. Quite honestly, I knew a great deal more of the latter than the former. I also knew that I shared that knowledge with many other Christians who minister for healing.

It can be hard to admit to such 'failures', as to do so is sometimes taken as being critical and judgemental toward the church, and many consider such disloyal thinking to be a cardinal sin, if not downright heretical! So we don't go there. But, here on pilgrimage, I was definitely, if tentatively, sticking a toe in the water!

Leaving the buzzing bees in the garden, and my empty coffee mug in the empty kitchen, I climbed the stairs and sat down on the side of my bed, kicking off my shoes and searching for comprehension. I felt on the verge of something that would look to most like a shallow and insignificant pavement edge, but it was feeling like a cliff top. How could I discover the width of the leap ahead? Did I have the childlike courage to explore? Can I switch off all my years of having steadily gained experience and kingdom knowledge, and be prepared to start again? Not to put a finer point on it, would I have to throw away my ministry?

Chapter 07 Shirley

One of our founding team members reported to us one day that his wife, Shirley, had lung cancer. The news about her had been very bad. When Shirley developed the illness, everyone around her was devastated. But, being married to a founder member of our young ministry team, we had ready access to her and would come across her often in prayerful situations.

It had taken her a little over a year to die. Leaving on one side for a moment the agony of her husband and her son, the rest of us – hundreds of us, willingly, hopefully and lovingly – applied our shoulders to the wheel. We were determined that this disease would not happen. Prayer chains were formed; vigils were volunteered; sacraments became a regular part of her daily life. Bishops anointed her with oil, candles were lit in far-flung churches, intercessors heard from heaven that she would live, and prophets heard, apparently from the same source, that she would not.

As the months rolled on, a number of her close friends, including myself when I could, lovingly and prayerfully threw at her everything we knew about the healing ministry. We trawled back through all the hours and hours of teaching we had received to find the clue. We went to new lectures on root causes and pored over and over the tapes of old ones, praying and hoping for just one give-away

sentence, one spark in the darkness that might reveal whatever might be the block that was preventing Shirley's healing, and release that restoration in her.

When we could not find the key to turn in her particular lock we fell into that deep trough of dark and commonly believed error that supposes there must be some unconfessed sin lurking from the past

that God cannot work around. Failing that, we were even tempted at one point to reach for the blunt instrument of deliverance ministry, often the

weapon of last resort for those who feel a sense of ministerial responsibility but are lost in its inadequacies.

“O Jesus, answer us! ” we pleaded. But there was no response; no one answered. And we retreated into sacramental ministries and pseudo-prophetic guesswork of every kind.

There was not a technique we missed. What were we doing wrong? We wondered: ‘Why could we not

get God to get rid of this thing? Should we be shouting louder? Should we be making bigger prayer chains? Should we have them all praying in waves?

Surely he is Almighty God! Perhaps he is deep in thought or busy? ’ Perhaps he is sleeping, like Jesus in the storm-shaken boat, and has to be woken up somehow?

All we could do was pray more firmly, more strongly, more fiercely, more emotionally, but nothing we could see was stirring in heaven. Almighty God –our own God of grace and power and healing –appeared to have deserted her. Did he have a plan? Perhaps he had a secret script for all this, in which her dying played a vital and irreplaceable role? Could he not tell us what it was? What, I wondered, was the point of saving the world if he was only going to devise plans for us, beyond our understanding, necessitating our pain?

All our efforts were to no avail ; her funeral was the break point, a pivotal moment for the whole of my ministry.

Now came the time, in the middle of all the bursting pain of emptiness and agonising loss, standing in that funeral church at the centre of so much celebration of her life. Now came the time to climb down from this modern Christian pride box, which sustains all those who stand on it with all there is to know about healing theology.

There, at Shirley’s funeral, I was getting angry. What had happened to the kingdom of god? Jesus was continually talking about ‘the kingdom of heaven’; the gospel was originally known as the gospel of the kingdom, and the first disciples went everywhere preaching it. It is the only subject

on which Jesus taught systematically. Yet, these days, kingdom dynamics are an almost forgotten subject: not taught, not understood, and seldom, if at all, mentioned.

We have not, at least in the European church, been going on down our appointed path of teaching and preaching the restoring kingdom and the powerful healing message of the cross. Unhappily instead, we have been busy for centuries justifying ourselves in reducing our own original high purposes to the somewhat lower levels of civilizing the world, acquiring wealth, developing imposing rituals, erecting and maintaining magnificent buildings, invoking God's blessing on opposing armies in times of war, and dividing what started out as a brotherhood and sisterhood into two distinct classes: 'clergy' and 'laity'.

Looking around me at the sadness and the bewilderment in that church, having reached this different place, the church was moving yet again in what, in this day and age, looks rather like an atmosphere of antiquity. Most of what goes on inside gives the appearance of a period drama. There can be no doubt that this approach makes for great dignity, and there can also be no doubt that there are times when it makes for complete irrelevance.

Religion is failing when it cannot speak to people where they are in real life. A ministry of healing is worthless unless it affects men and women where they hurt. If I have arthritis and Jesus heals today, then I need to invite the kingdom into my arthritic body. The congregation around me were singing songs of praise and saying prayers of thankfulness and I was asking myself, "Why is healing so difficult for such a loving, powerful god? "

But for me this was not a time to work it out any more; this was a time for recognising reality,

abasement —and anguished confession.

"Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah? "I yelled under my breath during that funeral service. Elijah had seen the fire of God come down with comparative ease and burn up his offering on Mount Carmel; where was he now?

Elisha's heartfelt cry was an easy one to echo. Standing there in the middle of Shirley's funeral service, something about the Christian healing ministry dawned on me, not

gently growing like some hard-sought revelation but with the brightness and crash of lightning. In quite a shocking contrast to my own ministry (and the ministry of the church as a whole, with only a few dazzling exceptions), Jesus had found it relatively easy to heal the sick in his day. Had this been because he was also God? Well, the apostles found it comparatively easy as well and so did the elders and the early deacons and, it would seem, almost every Christian in the early church as well!

In those far off days it would have been possible to recognise a Christian by the apparent ease with which the sick around them were healed. People could tell an apostle by the signs and wonders that he did! The disciples of Jesus were known to lay their hands on the sick, who then became well again.

But by the end of the service I was racked with the feeling that this was no longer true for me! Come to think of it, this was no longer true for most other Christians I knew, either! The Spirit of Christ worked at will in the early church, and since then there had been some miracles —but now, I wondered, where was the love and the fairness in singling out a few?

Has God ceased to heal? Maybe so, after all. At the very least, what has happened to make him so reluctant to help his followers? Had all that teaching I had received over the years been wasted? Had I missed some important issue here? Was there something badly wrong in me, or in our beloved sister Shirley, that God found it impossible to work through?

But I thought I had inherited at Calvary, like every other Christian, a robe of righteousness to cover my filthiness; so why can God not work through me? If not through me, then why could he not have worked through some tiny window of holiness in all the hundreds of people and their tons of prayer that had boomed upwards, all the tears, all the compassion, all the weight in a hundred hearts?

There must have been a chink of the righteousness of Christ in all that somewhere. If he had

really wanted to heal Shirley's cancer, I felt certain he could have found a way. .

Such was the boiling feeling in my raging heart—at least during Shirley's funeral service. Nothing of this could be spoken out; times like these are too full of other people's pain and deep need of God.

It seemed best if this angry soul on the end of a packed church pew were to keep his own counsel. But those same outraged feelings, in content though not in depth, never left me.

"Dear God, "I begged over my sandwiches one busy conference lunchtime later that summer, "the way we do it in the church just simply doesn't seem to work very well at all. I have learned so much over my years of working with you and yet I seem to know nothing. When the chips are down, there is absolutely nothing the church can do about it but deliver a lot of platitudes, and sound very

spiritual in the process. I have seen your glorious hand in healing many a spiritual or emotional problem, but the need for you to get involved again in physical illness is nothing short of staggering! The ministry of healing has become only a ministry of praying for people, if truth be known, but you actually healed them! The world is brimming over with sickness of every kind imaginable; we are crying out for you to be like you used to be. You used to do it, less and less as the years have rolled on since Jesus, but now it is all so rare! Now all we can do is wonder: Why not? Now we spend all our time trying to work out theological and philosophical sounding excuses for failure. Of course we cannot call it your failure because you are omnipotent and omniscient and therefore you cannot fail. But it seems as though you failed Shirley and thousands like her—and the hundreds of us who begged you to move. The church has also taught us that you never change, yet you surely seem to. There was a day when you healed everyone who asked Jesus and now you do not. They tell us that you are unconditional love, and yet you heal one or two and not the majority. Is that love? You say that your yoke is light, but

you seem to let us down all the time The one simple, sought after gift that Jesus gave away so readily now causes more pain and doubt and argument about you than anything else I know. So show me your glory! The question I have for you is this: as the church does not know how to do it like you did it, how did you do it, and how did you teach it so effectively? What did you teach them who followed you? What, for the sake of the glory of Christ, have we lost? ”

For half an hour I ranted and raved like this and beat on the gates of heaven. By the end of that lunch break, my healing ministry as I knew it had died. Deep down in the bottom of things, too deep even to admit it fully even to myself, it died. No one even suspected it except me and God and a few chosen friends, but everything I had learned from the church over ten years of full time healing ministry

slipped, silently, into the grave.

I gave it up because it didn't work. I threw away a ministry that had become so complicated that no one could understand it any more. The people didn't understand what was going on and the church leaders didn't understand much of it, either. What seems to have started out as a 'Yes, come here!' sort of ministry has been turned by the church into a mystery. Now we no longer know how it works or why it doesn't. It builds up hopes and dashes them with disappointment.

But in the same way that a new seed lies on the ground, encased in the rotting remains of a once glorious fruit, it was then, amazingly and beyond comprehension, that the light of Christ began to flood the darkness. I did not have long to wait. .

The results of that small but possibly outrageous prayer turned out to be something so huge and so different that they have been increasingly shaking those who pray for the sick ever since with disease-shattering simplicity. My ministry and my life were about to turn upside down. We were about to be launched on a whole new voyage, a new journey across uncharted seas with many battles to fight and many more victories to win. But, prompted by Shirley's bewildering death, we started out on the road that afternoon.

It had not been many minutes before the seed of those outrageous prayers had begun to germinate. In a second teaching session that very afternoon, after the sandwiches and my prayer of ministry surrender, we were pleasantly surprised to find every seat taken for the afternoon session. The room had been peppered with empty seats at the morning session but now they were all taken. Yet more expectant folk came in with smiling, happily chatting faces and filled all the available seats, then they sat on the floor along the aisles and across the back of the platform behind me. The place

was humming with anticipation and it was packed and I didn't know why. There must have been half as many again present as would fit the official seating capacity of the room.

It was great to see them all but I could not help thinking 'What is going on, here?' It sounded to me as if I was standing in the middle of a summer swarm of bees, the optimistic conversation seemed unstoppable. But somehow I had to quieten them and start the meeting.

The guitar player had not, as promised, turned up to lead us in singing, so we said one psalm together as a gathering act of worship and then, with nothing to lose and with all my courage ebbing away and out through the toes of my boots, I took a deep breath and asked the simple question of the audience,

“Jesus gave gifts of healing to everyone who asked him, and God is love and god doesn't change. So who needs a miracle in their life this afternoon?”

There came a surprised pause. I was expecting doubtful hesitation more than anything else. I was expecting the three ubiquitous ladies with sick relatives in new Zealand to step forward but the room seemed suddenly filled with waving hands, windblown barley stalks in a field white for harvest.

At first I still felt the boldness of the challenge I had thrown out to them, but soon became very scared. I wanted to panic. I checked with myself that I knew exactly where the door was in case I needed to make a fast exit. If God did not turn up at this point, my ministry would be well and

truly ruined! Well, that would not be much of a loss, I managed to smile to myself, it does not work very well, anyway. . Hadn't I just been trying to give it back to god, anyway?

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, I thought! I began to preach the good news of the nature of Jesus Christ by reminding them that he healed everyone who asked him —everyone, that is, with a modicum of expectant faith, and he repeatedly told us that he could only do what the Father was doing. The only people I could find in the New Testament who did not receive healing were those who did not ask Jesus for it.

I drew the simple conclusion from these facts that God's will must be to see healed all who come to Jesus for restoration.

“That might not be your experience, ” I told them, “but it's the Biblical truth! So either the bible is wrong or your experiences are not valid. Take your pick! ”

And then it was God himself who took the opportunity to demonstrate his grace at that point, I had no more to say to them and little to do with what followed. There was an agonising silence for what seemed like another hour, but it was probably only the audience surprise that lasted a few seconds. It was almost as if they had never been spoken to like that before. They probably hadn't.

Then, to coin a phrase, all heaven was let loose. Skin complaints began to clear up, chronic stomach and chest pain disappeared, a fused spine became flexible, pain free and pliable. One lady stood without sticks for the first time in twenty years. Another lady with a muscle wasting disease stopped

shaking; one case of toothache died away and one man's damaged knee ligaments were completely restored so that he was able to return to work the following Monday morning after spending three months on sick leave.

One person walking past the conference room outside the building received healing for a bad back, without any prayer at all, and two ladies

were freed from the pain of arthritic knees quite spontaneously while sitting next to each other watching it all from the back of the room.

That was the first time we saw what we came to know as 'shadow healing', a feature of the kingdom which bears a further mention.

Fearful? Frightening? To be avoided at all cost? Did the people in that room think so? They were being healed. If we truly have the Spirit of Christ within, how can we do anything but rejoice with them?

Why should this sort of thing be happening? It would take months and years of study, of meditational prayer, of discussion and experience before we were to see the fullness of what God has to offer the world.

Well, mankind is as nothing compared with God. But with him, working in tandem with him, we can be like pearls of great value; we can reflect something of Jesus; we are heirs of eternal life and beneficiaries of his will. We were made to rise above death forever, and before then to live this life in wholeness until we arrive in heaven!

Standing on the lecture platform that afternoon, I saw all this in quantities that are rarely seen, with joy rarely experienced. For the very first time we had begun to see a new Testament ministry in New Testament proportions. The river of grace was in spate!

The journey home from that conference should normally take about an hour and a half by road. It felt as though it took five minutes; we flew. What had happened? Why, after all these years of hard, dead-horse-flogging, theorising and excuse making, sacrificial, heart breaking praying for the sick, had it suddenly become comparatively easy? What had we done? If God does not change

then we must have done. But how?

On the trip home that evening we made long lists in the car of everyone we had prayed for and those of them who had seen a noticeable improvement before the afternoon was out. Somewhere

in excess of a third of all those waving hands had recognised improvement in their various conditions. Added to those, of course,

would be the illnesses that cannot be measured without medical intervention and those that were to take a while longer to mend.

We were elated. This sort of level of answered prayer had not been seen for a number of years as far as we were aware, if at all since the early church times, and here it was again. The whole thing was a miracle made out of miracles.

Since then there have been hundreds of healing services and numerous teaching schools and conferences around the world, and it goes on. The number of the sick and the injured able to receive relief and restoration has increased considerably since then. Everywhere the good news of Jesus is fully preached, the miracles confirm it.

And as for Shirley's husband? I suggested to him, not long after he had watched and ministered at that first fruitful conference talk, that he might be angry in his humanity that all this had not happened eighteen months earlier.

He must be thinking, I suggested to him, that had we fallen into this miraculous life of miracle working a year earlier than we did there might have been a chance that Shirley might still be alive. But, so full of wisdom as he always is, he gently explained to me that he sees God's desire to heal to be rather like penicillin.

It has existed since the beginning of time but we have only recently discovered it. There is no future in remorse for the millions that could have been saved by it before its discovery —we simply rejoice that we have found it at last!

Nine years and thousands of healing miracles later, we know what happened that day. We were prepared to throw away all our concepts about a healing God and take a giant step of trust into

the relatively unknown.

As for 'shadow' healing that we first saw that day, this must surely be one of the greatest delights we have yet found in this kingdom ministry. This particular type of miracle has gained its name from the record of Peter walking to the Temple one day. People were bringing the sick into

the streets on beds and mats and laying them on the pavements, so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. They were all healed.

There was no prayer recorded here, and Jesus had ascended to heaven a while earlier. Yet they were all healed.

So –as we find frequently occurring these days during the preaching of the good news of Jesus –many are healed quite spontaneously without any prayer being said for them. It is not unusual to see damaged neck vertebrae restored, bent and battered fingers straightened, arthritic hands renewed, asthma disappearing, withered hands rebuilt, hearing given and skin complaints vanishing away without any recourse to ministry. No one prays, the hearers are simply washed with the truth about Jesus in his kingdom, the living word of God.

Why should this shadow healing be one of the greatest delights of healing ministry today? Because when spontaneous healing breaks out there cannot be any doubt at all in anyone's mind as to who is doing the work. And God himself is making sure that no one doubts it!

But for the time being I felt that all, despite the glories of that sudden tidal wave of healing, was still in confusion. Shirley's dying had confused me; the myriad of ministry methodology in the church had confused me; the Biblical truth that god doesn't change, compared with his obvious reluctance to heal today, confused me.

And yet we had fallen into something very different. What was it?

I began to find my answers down in Devon, on the side of that estuary on which I had spent so many happy days, so many years before.

Chapter 08 Taking risks

I suppose that confusion over this kingdom business is hardly surprising. Jesus teaches us that we will only be able to see the kingdom if we approach it in a child-like manner. There must be a simplicity of spirit.

That is where my estuary vision comes in. It can help us to see the difference between, on the one hand, the historical ministry of the church in the area of healing and, on the other, the

wonderful gift of simple kingdom living and its consequences!

I remember the vision as if it were given yesterday. If I lean back and shut my eyes, I am standing knee-deep in the cool waters of an estuary, some three feet from the bank, roasting in the afternoon heat on my back and the reflecting rays of the sun coming off the surface of the water onto my arms and face. I am fighting a sense of sinking in my heart as I allow my gaze to drift up and down the river bank in front of me; all away to my left and down to my right there are plants wilting and dying in the direct glare of the sun, the parched heat and the dry soil. So near and yet so far —rows and rows of plants only a few inches from the water's edge and yet drying out and dying out in the heat of the day. And so it is to have compassion for the sick and injured among us. I must minister to them in the only way I know how. I bend down, scooping my cupped hands up from between my knees and splashing the nearest plants with the healing, cooling water they need in order to survive. I seem to do this a hundred, if not a thousand times, while my back seems as if it is breaking and I am simply not satisfied with the results.

When my salty, stinging tears of exasperation eventually begin to flow down from my sore eyes and mix themselves with the handfuls of water, the nearest plants develop darker brown earth around them and in time, some – not many – seem to recover slightly. .

I stand up to stretch my muscles, my back aching from the work, and wipe my sleeve across my streaming forehead. I glance up and down

the bank again at the acres of suffering plants, and return to my labours. .

Retrieving my watch from my pocket, I look at it quickly. Another two hours or so and I can go home, secure in the knowledge that I will have done my best for another day. I swallow down the thought that I will most likely have failed many more plants than I will be able to rescue, but then how can I be expected to do everything around here? After all, I am only one among many. I cannot see, from my spot in the river, any other colleagues in ministry but I am sure they must be around somewhere!

As far as I can see, I am doing the job aright. I am metaphorically standing in the river of God's saving grace and doing my little bit to pastor, through that grace, the ones nearest to me. This is all a man can do. Anyway, I am taught to be humble —I must not assume in any way that the success of the kingdom or its ministry depends on me!

In a little while I straighten up again, stretching my shoulders backwards and arching my spine to ease the muscle stiffness in them. But who comes here? From away to my right through the heat haze emerges a rider, a shimmering white horse clopping along the riverside path towards me. I will use his coming to wait and rest on the off chance of some conversation.

Hoof beat by hoof beat he slowly approaches, and then, as he reaches me, he reins in his horse and leans slowly forward, face turned towards me and forearms resting on the pommel. The broad brim of his hat obscures much of his face in shadow.

“Good afternoon, sir,” I offer. .

“May I ask what you are doing?” he enquires of me. .

“I was walking along here this morning,” I told him, “and caught sight of all these lovely plants and flowers up and down the river bank. They were doing very badly in the heat of the day. They were suffering and dying, and yet all they were doing was just being here! I wanted to help so I climbed into the river and began to scoop water. I have no bucket or hose, only my hands. I suppose that's alright because it's the water that

does the refreshing, not me! But now my back is getting the better of me so I shall stop soon and go home for a rest!”

Without taking his eyes off me for a moment, he raises himself upright again in the saddle and says, “Follow me!”

“Who are you? ”I ask him in turn. I am tired and hot and dirty and I want to go home. If I am going to follow someone at this end point of such a dusty and exhausting day, heaven only knows where, I would need to know what I am going to let myself in for. So I hesitate.

The rider waves a hand along the far estuary bank, all the way along in one direction and back along the near bank.

“All this is mine.” He is smiling fondly at the whole vista of browns and greens and blues in

front of him when he says this.

“The river is mine and the ground to either side is mine. Where the estuary comes from is mine and where it flows into the sea is mine. The air above it is mine and the plants are mine. Follow me and I will show you something.”

So I do. It seems uncomfortable to be carried along like this; I was right to do what I had been doing, I was right to be where I was and now it is right to go home. But I take a step of faith. This is against my better judgement but I take the step, nevertheless. His words seem to want to direct my path.

I climb and slip unsteadily back up the bank and roll down my trouser legs. I slip my socks and shoes on again as he applies his heels and the white horse sets off at a steady walking pace, the rider never looking back to see if I am following, but I am.

And so we go on for a little while, no one speaking. I am finding strength and support in the sweltering heat by pacing my footsteps in the rhythm of the horses’ hooves. Straight on we go for over a mile, turning to the right as we follow the line of the river around a wide bend to a place where it

widens out even further, between the wooded hillsides that hold a boathouse at their feet.

“There,” he points out to me, “in that boathouse is a gift for you. You have worked hard on my river and you have worked well with my flowers, but now I have a reward for you. Enjoy it and you will learn something.”

Intrigued, I climb down the wooded slope until I reach the boat shed door, left unlocked and slightly ajar in its own welcome. Inside is a sight that takes my breath away. Lying there quietly, waiting for me, is the sleekest and most beautiful speedboat I have ever seen. It has two mighty motors mounted on its stern, and the painter is cast loose in readiness for me. I turn to wave my thanks to the rider, but of course he is gone. .

The main boat shed doors are lying open onto the water. Both engines roar and leap into life at my touch. The bow lifts to the wooded banks on the other side, and the stern sinks as the propeller

blades bite deep.

Managing to stay upright under the forces of acceleration, I throw the tiller to one side and we are away up river, white water boiling behind me, wind playing with my hair and keeping my face cool as the sharp evening sun burns down.

We roar very quickly up river until it seems right to turn the boat around. The engines soften and the bow turns, only to rise again towards the sky as I let the engines have their

freedom. Soon we are racing past the boat shed again on our way downstream, and all thoughts of strain and stress are gone. Anxiety has left me, and my aching shoulders are beginning to recover strength after the day's toil.

All is well. I open the throttles as far as they will go — this is the stuff that any child's adventure is made of! As the way ahead appears empty, safe and clear for a moment, I turn around to look behind, and thrill with the sight that meets my eyes. The blue- white waves, one issuing from either

side of the stern, broaden and widen out behind me as I go, until, a long way behind me they reach the bank. This wall of water is quite high enough to fling itself far up the dry earth bank —and the deluge completely swamps every plant, every struggling and suffering flower and weed alike, almost up as high as the rider's footpath, and certainly for the entire length of the river. To complete my joy for them all, the other wave soaks and nearly drowns the opposite bank to exactly the same extent.

And how much effort have I put in now to saving the plants? None at all. All I have done is enjoy myself in taking the fullest advantage of the gift of the boat and access to the river. So then it begins to dawn on me — effective ministry will never be a function of how hard I work or how cleverly I work, it will be the fallout of my living in, and enjoying to the full, the kingdom. The realisation of this truth

is stunning — I have never even heard a whisper of it before. .

I cut the engines and we glide gently to a halt in the quiet of the river. There is no sign of the rider anywhere along either bank, but I can only fall to my knees in the bottom of the boat and thank him

for this revelation.

I would never have imagined that I could have watered the banks in that dramatically effective way. He has shown me the gift of his cross and given me access to, and authority in, the kingdom. He has taught me that all I need to do is to thank him and praise him, and enjoy my kingdom living in the shadow of the cross, and the plants around me will in their turn receive in my wake.

“But all this is too easy!” I shout towards the wooded river bank in the hope that he might hear me, but there is no answer. His silence seems like the deep and contented acceptance of heaven.

The lesson of the estuary vision is clear – the regular and consistent healing of the sick is not best achieved through one particular ministry method or another, nor by choice of ritual, nor by deeds and actions, nor even necessarily by petition prayer. It will not have escaped the reader's

attention that consistent results by any of these modern or traditional means is nothing short of grinding hard work, if indeed such a successful ministry is possible at all! And I have been shown something that I

badly needed to know before any healing ministry could really work through me to any sizeable and reliable degree. I have just been shown that divine healing is not a ministry after all, it is the natural outworking of an everyday disciple.

It is the natural kingdom dynamic that results from the bold and full preaching of the good news of the cross. If anything, we should be starting to think of it not as a subject in its own right

but as part of the ministry of the word! Putting it another way, messing about in the river up to my knees is a picture of a minister trying his best to disseminate grace. Driving up and down in the speedboat is a picture of a disciple enjoying his true kingdom role, that of proclamation of the cross at the heart of that kingdom.

And, as a result, I was now looking forward to enjoying praising and giving thanks for all that Jesus has done and showed us, and living in the kingdom to the utmost —and people would be able to receive healing in his wake.

I began to find the revealed secret of this kingdom living interlaced throughout the structure of the New Testament. It is neither exclusively mine nor my colleagues' or anyone else's; it belongs to each one of us who is called to partake of it.

So, through the estuary vision, the scene was being set. The beginning of my understanding about the kingdom, and most importantly my trust relationship with it, had arrived.

I have heard it said sometimes that even if there were no rights or wrongs assumed about the way we

do any kind of ministry, the church, created by Jesus to further the work of the kingdom of God, could always be judged by the extent to which we are successful in advancing that kingdom.

But I could now see that this idea comes from a misunderstanding of what is meant by the 'kingdom of God'. The kingdom itself is not something to be 'furthered' or 'built on' by our efforts, as I had been struggling to do through all the techniques of healing ministry that the church had been teaching me. It is something which we are asked to realise as being here already, in the life and work of Jesus. It is something that we who believe in Christ should not be actively trying to grow and stretch and give away, as I had been trying to do in the river up to my knees. It is something to inherit and enter into. The role of the church, in these matters, is not to persuade the world how it might be a better place than it is at present, but to draw a curtain aside from it, to reveal something that is already here. . .

And so my understanding of the healing ministry completely changed. I had begun to realise that if I drew back the curtain, as it were, by proclaiming glory to God for the cross, then the Holy spirit would back me up by flooding the situation with a wake of healing grace. And so it turned out to be.

Chewing over joyful slices of my youth, I recall tidal estuaries and dark green wooded hillsides, whose dark overhanging frowns reflect in the water along the river banks; it is such a pleasing thing to revisit

those scenes when time allows. I go back to that place where the estuary vision was given –not only the memory, but the actual place of memory –as often as I can.

Along the edge of the estuary, as it used to be, there is a narrow, twisting lane, a wall a few feet from my left elbow beyond which is a sheer drop to the water. If I step to the right along that lane and reach out my hand I touch the front wall of a row of quiet, blossom covered, pretty terraced thatched cottages, all fair dwellings for flocks of swifts and swallows –holiday homes these days for the housemartins and the well-heeled from the city.

I have always marvelled at my old guide dog. He always marched steadfastly along, watching to left and right, at the same time as looking

ahead in case of any obstacle along the way. He is on his best guiding form at moments like this, a feat deserving particular mention and high praise as the magnetic smell of the river must invade every nerve. Is he particularly alert because of the tricky terrain or does he search every possibility for an escape passage down to the river?

The tarmac lane suddenly slopes alarmingly downwards and comes to an abrupt end. At low tide I would expect the asphalt to peter out on the mud and gravel foreshore further down, but the last time we were there the evening high tide was full, and my dog had stopped at the water's softly slapping edge.

I dropped the harness handle onto his back to signal the end of his time of duty and he took three steps forward to the extent of his lead, till the water reached his stomach and chest. There he stopped, sideways on and staring straight at me, eyebrows raised in an unspoken question. As easily as one senses someone else's eyes boring into one's back, I had learned over the years of working with him to sense the flickering of his eyebrows in my soul.

We stood there for a while, staring at each other and realising mountains of differing feelings. This was hard for him, so hard! All his natural Labrador nature, generations of breeding and genes passing down the line, all his upbringing, screamed at him to let go, to throw himself into play, to charge off into the watery waiting adventure, full of silver spray and deep dark green river.

But he could not move. He was locked where he was. He was still wearing his guiding harness and he was more than fully aware of it. All his nature was shouting at him to go, and all his training was telling him he should stay put, in control —watchful, commanding, mature, sensible, full

of self-confidence and authority.

His questioning eyebrows were demanding a decision from me. If I slipped his harness he would be in the middle of the estuary before I could blink. If I called him he would be at my side even quicker.

He was wrestling inside. His mind must have been full of turmoil but he stood his ground.

Was it much the same sensation, I found myself wondering, for those poor priests who, under Joshua's command, stood looking at the Jordan in full spate and possibly doubting their own sanity? God had already told them that he had given Jericho on the other side into their hands; he had already made his intentions quite clear. They approached the flooding river with the Ark on their backs, containing the Ten Commandments, the piece of manna and the rod of Aaron that had budded; everything they knew about God was carried on their backs. Everything my guide dog knows about guiding, his harness and how to handle it, lives on his back.

I wondered if, in the same way that the dog was fighting himself at that moment, so too did those priests fight themselves inside. One wrong move on their part, one careless slip, and everything they stood for, everything they knew and believed about God, would be lost.

They would not be able to control the situation; it would be a total, foot-slipping disaster, carried away by the flood.

But they knew what to do. They knew how to overcome. They had heard God. One step forward from the first priest and the waters would apparently part for them. Dry land and Jericho and the promised land lay ahead, because one giant step of faith would be behind them.

In the natural world of human common sense, they must have been thinking this one simple

move to be indescribably foolish, but hindsight and memory of that event would give glory to God. One could almost say that Jericho was taken because one unnamed priest took his courage, his convictions and his god in his hands and stepped into a flooding, racing world of risk. They crossed into the middle of the river Jordan on dry ground.

It was still just beginning to dawn on me that this is exactly my experience. To become a kingdom walker, to walk naturally up and down in the promised land, to see the rightful beneficiaries inherit the

promises, to see regular and consistent miraculous wall tumbling, all this requires

just one step, a dangerous step, an apparently foolish step, but a step of obedience that changes everything.

This is how we can begin to become walkers in the kingdom of God. We honestly take stock of our prayer experiences with God. We recognise that persuading him to heal the sick and the injured supernaturally bears no resemblance to the atmosphere of released freedom depicted in that surfing speedboat on the river, nor the flow of ministry seen in the early church.

Anything more than passing intercession for the sick is much more like the picture of standing knee deep in the river, shovelling the badly needed water, a handful at a time, onto the nearest plants.

It is hard work, if it is to be faithful and consistent, and it achieves, if truth be recognised, remarkably little.

People would often say to me in those days of initial discovery,

“But how do you know what effect our ministry has? How do you know people are not getting healed?” to which I can only reply,

“If they were getting healed like they used to get healed then the whole world would know about it!”

Of course we would find it difficult admitting to that, being Christians. Because we know that God is love and God is good we have to stay in forgetful denial about all those helpless and hopeless

times of prayer, those half-hearted prayers thrown heavenward which may help, or may just help things not to get any worse!

If we spiritually stood still long enough to survey realistically the whole scene of sickness and injury around us, we might soon find ourselves tumbling into depression at the sight of such volumes of suffering.

At the end of any prayer time we look at our watch and go home, believing maybe that we have done our bit. Prayer, we tell ourselves, is all we can do about anything, really. The death of the remaining

plants, the unresolved suffering of the sick, we wash away from our minds, a clever piece of social denial, so that we can get on with life. But we know deep down in the bottoms of our souls that this is a bad place to be!

There was a great restlessness about all this in the depths of my spirit, too. Somehow I instinctively knew that this was not how it should be.

Back at the real estuary's edge, I moved on. I stood a moment longer beside the quietly lapping evening water with my guide dog, wondering what the rich man at his banqueting table in the Bible story must have thought of the poor beggar, sitting with his sores at the gate, waiting and hoping

for bread. I guess he must have only thought of this sick beggar as part of the landscape, really, if he saw him at all. He must have gone virtually unnoticed most of the time, as the rich man went in and out of his house.

I could scarcely bear to think what afterlife of hell must be like for the rich man in Jesus' story. How can a Christian like me possibly allow the sick to remain part of the landscape or ignored, as the rich man did to Lazarus?

If I had, as I like to believe, received the Spirit of Christ, then that Spirit must be the agent that burns away and changes my being so that I can begin to gain the mind of Christ.

I knew from my Gospel reading that Jesus had compassion for the sick and longed to see the kingdom revealed to their sickness. If only the complacent rich man had the advantage of the Spirit of Christ!

Even so, I had certainly been finding that praying for people is hard work. Most often we ask,

we beg, we cajole, we promise, we make deals with God, and we sometimes even cry out before we give up. When we do give up we quieten our conscience with such human imaginings as God having other plans for the sick person, or that death is the great healer anyway, or that pain is God's way of purifying the soul. If such excuses do not come naturally to our theologies, then we shrug our shoulders over the next sick person and say to ourselves something like: 'Perhaps he really didn't want to be healed after all', or 'Perhaps, like being long term in prison, he takes some comfort in his illness. If it isn't this that is killing him, then perhaps he has some great unrepented sin that God cannot forgive him for and therefore cannot heal because of its blocking effect.'

We could of course say only one prayer, tell ourselves that the responsibility is God's now, and move on and away to other things.

When it is time to give up the hard work of healing prayer, we silently blame the awfulness of life, and take our aching prayer knees home. We have a God who we know hears our prayers and loves us but in the matter of healing the sick, I suppose I had always doubted whether he was as consistent and reliable as he used to be. As a Christian I couldn't ever admit to this aloud but

that is sometimes what our experience seems to tell us, and questions and doubts come:

I knew that God was no preferer of persons, but he sometimes heals my neighbour and not me! God, we say, is in control, and then a prayed for friend dies in a traffic accident. Why so? What sort of a deity would heal one stroke victim and not another? What sort of loving God could not afford an angel to protect a motor car?

I had been avoiding all these nagging doubts and questions, slipping into the easy spiritual denial of calling it all 'mystery'.

But wait! What happens if I pick up all my experiences of God and take the risk of actually stepping out into the river of man's doubting? Whatever happened to the original Jesus? The Jesus of Matthew, Mark,

Luke and John never behaved in that way. He may not have healed everybody, but he most certainly did heal everyone who came to him and asked him. He never said 'No.' He never told anyone to wait. No sick person was ever commanded to sort their own lives out first before they could receive healing. He never gave up half way through. He never discerned the Father's will in matters of healing to be anything other than 'Yes' and 'Amen'. He said that he only did and said what he saw the Father doing in heaven, and Jesus is, after all, the only perfect image of the invisible God.

So what would happen if I started to pray, minister and behave as if the Gospel stories of Jesus were actually true? That would mean hoisting the written word of god onto my shoulders and stepping into the raging waters of my own philosophies. Not just mine but everyone else around me as well.

Take a deep breath, I told myself, and let's go!

Chapter 09 The Woman and the Dragon

And then the lady had screamed. I had been invited to speak at the magnificent Methodist Central hall, Westminster, London, and stood for almost a whole day on exactly the same spot, apparently, on which Ghandi had stood to make his passionate plea, I think to the League of Nations, to set India free. Only I was blissfully unaware of it! Instead I had been joyfully absorbed in talking to the inquisitive folk who had gathered there, sharing all we had discovered so far of the miracle-working ministry of the early church and encouraging them to join in.

As we were about to break hungrily for lunch, one of the team sidled up to me.

“Mike,” she whispered, loudly enough for all to hear so that it became a fait accompli. “It’s time to show them. We have to allow God to do his thing!”

So we did. After a general invitation of quiet encouragement, someone came slowly and nervously down the sloping central aisle and stood in front of me.

Her story was a painful one, just to listen to. My radio microphone broadcast her story throughout the hall, but she’d quite agreed to that before we spoke together.

Her pelvic girdle had been crushed in a long ago car accident, she explained, her voice a little shaky with a mixture of nervousness and the emotions of the traumatic memory. This was, she excused herself rather unnecessarily, before the days of compulsory seat belts, and her bone structure had never quite returned to its original shape, leaving her walking slightly lopsided with all the attendant aches and pains of bad posture.

We stood in the place where the central aisle opens up towards the main platform, where they say that Ghandi had stood, and I took hold of her

hands. Together we began to thank God that Jesus had taken all our pains and carried all our diseases.....

I could hear the bones on the move. They seemed to grind a bit and squeak a bit as they came into proper shape and, thankfully, the lady concerned felt nothing.

“How does that feel?” I asked her after a while when the movement of the bone appeared to have quietened down and stopped.

She twisted her back and bent herself from one side to the other. She bent forwards and she bent backwards and exclaimed, “That’s wonderful! It all feels so loose and free! Thank you, Jesus!”

I felt quite elated. These things, as far as my experience stretched in those days, usually happened in other countries and only then, as far as I knew, on television and at the hands of especially anointed people, and yet here it was again and again, happening to me, an ordinary Christian just like everyone else. But God’s intervention in sickness in miraculous ways was not once in a blue moon as one would have expected, it was happening every time we stood up to speak.

And that, as we were to discover, was the clue. Our roles had changed, and this was so exciting, every other Christian role could change too. We had moved from either the invocation of the Holy Spirit or masses of ‘please’ prayers to a totally and unrecognisably different prayer position. We were simply proclaiming the good news of the cross.

God, who is always with us, was then healing the sick to prove we were right in what we were saying. We weren’t praying, we were proclaiming! That, I discovered from Scripture, is not extraordinary at all. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Philip, Stephen, all these guys were actually doing it that way! They were taught by Jesus, or by the original apostles, and we were just copying what they had been taught!

Then I heard the scream. It came from high up at the back of the auditorium and filled me with trembling and trepidation. I thought,

‘Is this remote deliverance ministry? How scary! How can I control something awful happening so far away from me? Have I lost my

audience altogether? Are they having their own party up there on their own? Shall we close this whole thing down quickly and go for lunch?’

I need not have worried. Everything was fine. It was just more of god’s shadow healing going on. Over lunch the lady who screamed sought me out to let me know what had happened.

”Oh, Mike,” she introduced herself to me, apologetically. “I’m the lady responsible for the screaming just a few minutes before lunch! Well actually it wasn’t me, it was Jesus. You see,” she went on, “I was born with a trigger finger. In those days you didn’t operate but these days I suppose they always would. I was born with this finger bent over like this.”

She lifted her right hand to show me, with her index finger bent right over so that it touched the ball of her thumb. “That’s how it was when I was born. Forty years ago! My parents always said it can’t be straightened, it’s just like it is!”

“So what happened?” I asked her.

“I was watching and listening while you were down the front, praying with that lady from the car accident. As I was listening to you I was moved, I guess by the Lord, to hold out my right hand in front of my face so that I couldn’t see you and what you were doing. As I held it up the finger just straightened up. Of its own accord. Just like this!”

She straightened her finger, using it to point to the ceiling. “That’s impossible! God has healed me! I’m sorry about the noise,” she explained, “It wasn’t me screaming, it was my prayer group. They came with me for the day and they actually saw it happen. They were thrilled. Me, too! How exciting!”

By this time on our adventure down the road to effective kingdom healing we had been getting used to the idea of ‘shadow healing’. Jesus did it and Peter did it, and if Peter did it then I reckoned we don’t need to be the son of god to do it. What is it? How does spontaneous healing happen? How did Peter do it just by walking to church in the sunshine, and all the sick on the pavement stood up and went home?

If I remember correctly, the explanation went into the lecture that followed after my trip to the convent a month later. If the episode of the trigger finger was not extraordinary enough, there was more, much more, to come. Although it is a kingdom joy that it happens quite regularly, two particular occurrences of shadow healing lie uppermost in my mind as I remember those days of early growth and how exciting they were. The first of these was sister Mary's hand.

We had been teaching all morning in a convent, sharing how we see the dynamics of the kingdom working today, expressed originally through the words and works of Jesus, with the residents and a group of their families and friends. We had spoken only of Jesus from the New Testament, how he saw things, what he did in terms of healing the sick and the injured and why he would have done these things.

Pausing for a light lunch in a private side room, we were introduced by Mother Superior to sister Mary as that lady came in to join us and pulled up a chair to the table.

"Sister, would you like to tell our guests what's happened?" she had been asked. And she did. With a completely straight face displaying no emotion she related,

"I was born with what the bible would doubtless refer to as a withered hand. It wasn't right at all. I have always worn a glove, not because I was ashamed of it but to save the embarrassed stares of anyone catching sight of it." She turned to face me.

"While you were speaking about the Lord this morning, I felt a tickling in the palm of my hand inside the glove and bent back my wrist to take a peek. The hand is now in all respects exactly like the other."

We were stunned. There was a moment when we sat around that heavy refectory table in front of our sandwiches and convent coffee in an atmosphere that was so elating that it was verging on disbelief. This was the real stuff. This was straight out of the gospel stories. This was a bombshell, a blockbuster! This was a gentle lady with a withered hand who, through her leading the religious life, would have known the power

of the message of the cross. She had been restored, one hand just like the other.

I couldn't contain myself any longer and threw my arms aloft towards heaven. "Alleluia! How wonderful! God is great! That's just fantastic!"

Sister Mary slowly raised her head from looking at her new ungloved hand, and continued to stare at me stone faced.

"Why are you so surprised, Michael?" she asked me in a fiercely severe tone, as if she was a Head Teacher and I was a schoolboy who had done something wrong and she had discovered me in the act. "You should not at all be surprised," she had paused for a couple of heartbeats to measure my reaction. "After all, you have been preaching the living Word of God!"

I felt very small. She was right! We should expect these things. I sat there shamed into silence while my heart was still rattling and shaking with the thrill of the occasion. I had been taught a powerful lesson - it's the preaching of the Word of God as a practical, veritable, living, breathing thing that raises expectation and trust and opens the doors for the kingdom to move in.

It's our trust that draws his reality into ours and that is exactly how shadow healing happens. Faith expectancy is a vital component of kingdom dynamics and faith comes by hearing. Corporate expectancy is raised, praise and thanksgiving begins to take place and God begins to show us his salvation.

And the second fondest memory of shadow healing, out of many occasions since, was Lisa.

Fifty per cent paralysed from a stroke fifteen years earlier, Lisa had joined one of our Kingdom Healing Courses in the Welsh hill country, in the very reasonable expectation of developing a simple, consistent and reliable ministry in her local church. Over dinner on the first evening that our guests arrived, a member of staff had asked her if she had ever been prayed for over the question of her paralysis.

“Oh, no!” she had emphatically replied. “My church says I will never be healed because I used to be a Buddhist!”

But God, to everyone’s delight, had other plans in mind. Coffee time the following morning found Lisa and I sitting together in the lounge, with a medical doctor and a nursing Sister who had joined the course with Lisa the day before.

“How do you cut your fingernails?” I had asked her for the sake of making light, coffee-break conversation. Her left elbow was bent and fixed through ninety degrees and her fist was tightly and rigidly clenched.

“Well,” she explained to us, “It takes two physiotherapist to do the job! One has to use all her strength to prise open my fingers while the other snips away as quick as she can before they let go again! I am bruised for a couple of weeks after they’ve finished!”

When she had left the room before the next lecture the medics quickly explained the situation to me.

“Mike, after fifteen years those joints have set like reinforced concrete. Nothing on this earth will shift them now. That’s why cutting finger nails is such hard work for her. You wouldn’t have seen it, but her left leg is permanently bent at the knee and the foot is turned inwards. She walks on the side of it. That’s a brain injury,” they went on, “there’s nothing wrong with the foot itself, The brain just tells it that it’s bent over.”

As if that wasn’t enough, they went on to suggest that Lisa might well have had some sort of heart condition as her lips had a blue tinge to them, and her cheeks were pallid. Her complexion was an ashen grey.

I thought no more of it, having instead to concentrate on the content of lecture after lecture as the course continued on through its lively curriculum.

But twenty-four hours later the penny had dropped for her. Twenty-four hours later it had dawned on Lisa that Jesus had never turned anyone away. He never said ‘No’. He never refused anyone on any grounds at all. He never asked about their religious history as if it might get in the way. He said ‘Yes’ to everyone who asked him and god doesn’t change.

The nature of grace was beginning to dawn on her as she sat listening to the talks about the kingdom. The spirit inside was proclaiming the good news of Jesus to her soul! And then it happened.

The doctor sitting close to me whispered, "I don't believe it!" and went on to explain, in the hushed silence, that Lisa had begun, of her own accord, to move her arm. She was quietly rotating the elbow around and around, slowly at first and then more confidently in ever increasing circles, and saying to no one in particular in a tiny, squeaky voice, "I've found a new physiotherapist!"

That evening we prayed with her. We never asked god for anything for Lisa, as Jesus has done a complete work of salvation on the cross. It would be more accurate to say that we spent a while with her in praise and thanksgiving for all that Jesus had been to us and all that he had done for us. That, too, is proclamation.

As we did so, the left shoulder came completely free and the elbow below it straightened, becoming flexible to the point where her hand was hanging easily by her side. The left knee straightened and the left foot straightened and she set off around the room on tiptoe, watched by a silently stunned audience, revolving her shoulder and elbow like a windmill to show it off!

On her return to us in the centre of the room the doctor whispered again in my ear.

"I would think that the heart condition is being healed as we watch. Her lips are losing all the blue and she has pink cheeks!"

When Lisa eventually sat down again in the conference room, the lady sitting next to her proclaimed, "Gosh, it's so hot in here! Can we have the radiators turned off for a while? My back's burning!"

Someone looked behind her for a radiator to switch off and couldn't find one. She was sitting in front of the window with her back to a sheet of cold glass. Ten years of Osteoporosis had been instantly healed. This is shadow healing. This is god's restoring grace without prayer. This is the work of god, commonplace when the kingdom is being proclaimed.

There are so many other cases of shadow healing that I forget most of them. I don't mind forgetting them as they are signs and wonders of the kingdom and no one remembers a road sign as they drive past it - they just have to make the right turn so that they finish up in the right place!

I do, however, remember the surgeon who came to a healing service at The Well and approached me for ministry at the end of our time together.

"I have, " she informed me precisely and more medically than I could relate her story, "had a vertebra missing in my neck. All my life. This means that my neck has always been rigid. Never been able to nod or shake my head! At my time of life I find it more and more difficult, bending over bodies all day long like I have to. By the time I get home each evening my neck is aching like billy-o and I really need a stiff gin and tonic!"

But, to my puzzlement, when I offered to pray with her about it she declined. I looked at her and raised my eyebrows at her as if to ask for some explanation. Why had she come all this way to tell us about the problem and then decline our prayers?

"Well you see, I just wanted to tell you that it was healed in the car coming here this evening!" She followed up this staggering statement by wagging and shaking her head vigorously and gleefully from side to side.

Then there was the lady who could only hear through one ear. The other one had been smacked by a hockey stick when she was fifteen and a perforated ear drum had swiftly led to deafness in that ear. And now she had come to a healing service on her eighty-fifth birthday!

When the time for ministry arrived, she got up from her seat, walked half way down the centre aisle, stopped, turned smartly on her heel and returned to her seat. Afterwards she was thrilled to report that her hearing was granted back to her, clearly and completely, half way down towards us.

I so delight in all these stories as they so clearly demonstrate who is 'doing the business'!

It was towards the end of that particular and blessed time together when Lisa received her healing that I was asked by a course delegate,

“I rejoice that you have the anointing to heal the sick. I want that anointing, too! Please will you pray for me and give me the anointing?”

“No,” I told him, “you already have it! You should understand this. Only one person has the anointing and that’s the Anointed One! But you have it already, as much as any human being in Christ does, because the whole church was anointed to heal the sick at Pentecost! It works like this, it’s teamwork - you proclaim the kingdom and God does the kingdom business to prove the truth of what you say. You don’t heal, you proclaim the kingdom! That’s how Jesus taught his disciples to do it and that’s how I’m teaching you. You can do it too. You don’t need to worry about the healing ministry, you need to know how to proclaim! Hold out Jesus to them!”

Then one day my cousin came to call. She is a great lady of prayer and always worth listening to, except, on this occasion, I did not, and there was to be nothing I could do about it if I had done.

She told me, “I have a piece of Scripture for you. I was praying for you and this just popped into my mind. It’s pretty unusual, not the sort of thing at all that would readily come to mind when you’re praying for someone but here it is.”

She read Revelation 12:1 – 9 to me.

“A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.

She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.

Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten

horns and seven crowns on his heads.

His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.

But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.”

She was right! That’s not the sort of encouraging scripture extract that’s readily thrown around at prayer meetings! She said,

“Mike, I know this is for you. I don’t know what it means. As far as I can find out I don’t think anyone really knows what it means. Perhaps that’s because it’s all in the future? Anyway, the child in the vision must be Jesus, because the writer identifies it as a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, an iron sceptre. But as for the rest of it?” She shrugged.

“It seems to be a warning, as far as I can tell. I think you are in the process of giving birth to something which is of Jesus and the enemy is going to try and snatch it from you?”

Well, he certainly did! Within six months I had endured a massive heart attack and was rushed by ambulance into hospital with Ginnie in hot pursuit.

Scans showed that a significant segment of heart muscle had died in the attack and further examination showed that the arteries supplying blood to the heart were well and truly jammed up with all sorts of undesirable goo.

“Now,” the surgeon informed me, “You are a very lucky man! About fifty percent of people having attacks the size that you did don’t make it to the hospital. Someone has snatched you out of the jaws of death! Now joking aside,” he went on, “we can do something about the tubes, that’s easy, it’s called by-pass surgery. But the muscle……?”

He shrugged his shoulders as well. I had the prognosis a few days later, I would have to carry around a dead lump of meat on my heart for the rest of my life. That, I thought, would be truly incapacitating.

And one man in particular came to pray with me, for which I was both relieved and grateful. It was the late Shirley’s husband, who had joined us so early on this road to the miraculous kingdom life after his wife had died of cancer and had so largely contributed to our being on the journey at all. He would be the one who would know about expectancy, about persistence and about the humility of prayer, about our kingdom authority, itself so dependent on our sonship. He knew what we’d been learning and what we’d been teaching. He had seen people healed in their thousands through this ministry and he had come to sit on the end of my hospital bed.

We rejoiced together in the cross and its victory over sickness and disease and death itself. Further tests some months later showed that all the dead heart muscle had come back to life. The tubes were still blocked but at least I would never have that weight clinging to the side of my heart for the rest of my life.

Since then one question plagued me while I waited for surgery, but I soon realised the answer. Why, I asked myself, did God heal the heart muscle and not the tubes? Well, that answer wasn’t difficult to find.

Romans 12:3 says that we only have a measure of faith. The measure is a gift of the Spirit and is needed to open doors to heaven’s healing grace. Thinking about it later, the doctors had told me that they could easily sort out the tube problem but not the dead muscle. So I had put my faith in God for the dead tissue and in the doctors for the bit they could do. Nothing wrong in that, medical science is a great gift of God, after all.

Well, they cut my heart out and snipped the tubes. They took pieces of me from other pieces of me and stitched it all back together again. It felt as though I'd been hit by a truck.

For most of us, thankfully, that's normally the end of the story. But whatever it was that was having a go at me didn't stop there. Having developed one of those hard-to-shift hospital based infections I rapidly finished up back in the same hospital ward with a pump hanging out of my chest which worked non-stop, day and night for three weeks before the job was done.

But then, as if the dragon's persistence might in the end overwhelm me, the wound refused to heal. It kept on and on producing undesirable tissue which necessitated a third stay in hospital and a third operation.

One thing I learned, bed ridden for those hospital weeks and idle months at home. One truth came burning through all the fond memories of exciting ministry times. I was learning that, perhaps surprisingly, it should not be my primary aim and object as a Christian to serve the poor, or the sick, or the disadvantaged. Neither should it be my direct aim to convert the world through evangelism or to hasten world peace in some way, through protest or through hard labour.

For any of us, it is not even our direct objective to portray Christ in the world or to manage buildings or to care pastorally for the flock, to attend church regularly or to deepen our theological understanding.

But it Most certainly is our commanded duty to throw all our energies into coming closer, to deepen our personal communion with God. Only then, lost in the oneness afforded by Calvary, can we freely allow God to do any or all of these other things through us, and of his own accord.

I was already very busy with at least one of these holy activities but I was in danger of falling into the trap of confusing a gifting for any of these activities with the calling to do it. To exercise a divine gift successfully does not make that gift into a calling - the latter only exists as a reality when it comes as a by-product of our personal communion with the Almighty.

It was a hard time for all of us, very hard. Community nurses came and attacked what was wrong in my chest wound every week for months afterwards until one day the Christian senior nurse decided it had all gone too far.

She pointed determinedly at my bare chest one morning in the kitchen and said firmly,

“That’s it! I’ve had quite enough of you! Now, do as you’re told and get healed!”

The following morning there was no sign. After all those months the wound had completely healed over in the night and it was never to trouble me again. The dragon had left.

That episode really made the nurse stop and think and, before long, she was on one of our Kingdom Healing Courses to discover the nature of kingdom dynamics today. She was the nurse who had stood by the doctor and myself and watched with joy as Lisa left her paralysis behind!

Chapter 10 South Africa

The night flight to Johannesburg was endless, uncomfortable, sleepless, dirty, exhausting, bumpy, noisy and eating was like sucking polystyrene. Looking back at the first flight to the southern hemisphere I cannot find one pleasant adjective with which to describe it. I hated it!

I certainly wanted to be there and I had only wished that it could have been done by throwing a switch! The only thing that made me submit myself to that journey was a burgeoning sense of anticipation that great things would come of it. And, praise God, they did. Why had I supposed that would happen?

Almost a year earlier we had picked up a very unusual phone call in the office at the Well.

“I’m a Methodist Minister from South Africa,” the caller introduced himself. “I am here in UK on a short break, visiting my son who is teaching here. He cannot be with me next week so I am at a loose end and thought I’d give you a ring to see if anything’s going on that I can join in?”

“Well,” we had told him, “As it happens, we are running a training Course in Kingdom Healing next week in Llangasty, a retreat house up in the Welsh hills. Would you like to come?”

“Kingdom Healing,” I explained to him in answer to his brief enquiry, “Is not just another method of ministry, another style. God knows there are enough of them! No, Kingdom Healing is so called as it’s modelled on the ministry that Jesus brought with him from heaven, the one he taught his apostles and disciples and the one which they have been trying to impart to us all down the ages through Scripture. It’s the original way of doing things. And because it doesn’t contain any of the thrills and spills, or boredoms or open boundaries, or the vulnerabilities to abuse that lie in most modern ministry styles, it is significantly more effective than any of them. Why don’t you come and see?”

He readily agreed and we made all the necessary arrangements there and then to get him there and back

The Llangasty Retreat House stands by a lake in the heart of the Brecon Beacons, a restored and developed old stone country Rectory nestling in the peace of their foothills at the side of Llangorse Lake. It is miles from anywhere, has peaceful views that stretch for miles across the water and its bird life, the hills beyond and precious few motor cars to trouble those who stride the country lanes round about. It is idyllic.

Sometimes the only sounds are the breeze in the lakeside trees, or the birds by day and owls by night. Beyond the house, at the very end of the lane that leads down to the lake, is a tiny and much loved church whose doors never close. Opportunities abound at Llangasty to spend hours and hours alone with God.

And we run our courses there. It was not unusual to have someone at Llangasty with us from overseas on that occasion; we often see delegates from the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Middle East and it is such a joy to see the message of kingdom healing and evangelism spreading together across the world.

This particular course had run exactly to plan, the audience being interested and attentive, up until I began to speak of the kingdom today and the context of the cross within it. In truth it is this context which is the background backcloth to all effective and transformational kingdom ministry.

By the time that particular course had come around, I had got well into the habit of a mental activity I had begun to think of as 'Pure Thinking'. This type of exercise, I remain convinced, will do more to educate us spiritually than any other activity we can engage in. It means letting loose some imaginative thought, in a way that is sympathetic to the gospels, and start to string together what otherwise might be only a bundle of abstract ideas, letting one idea give birth to another, and that one to another, until the mind is teeming with them like a lake brimming over with jumping fish; comparing one idea with other ones, weighing, considering, evaluating, approving, respecting, correcting, refining;

joining strings of thoughts together like an architect till a whole edifice has been created inside the mind; travelling back in our imagination to the beginning of Creation and then leaping swiftly forward to the end of time; jumping upwards through limitless space and across the universe, and downwards into an atom's nucleus And all this is done without so much as moving from our favourite armchair or opening our eyes to look around – to do this is to soar above everything I think of as the lower creation and come near to God's angels.

Here we may really see behind the great curtain that divides heaven and earth, watch the progress of open secrets and learn to prophesy them into the world that might otherwise be ignorant of them.

“The context in which we find ourselves is this.....” I told them one morning after coffee.

”In the beginning God created the world, and that story is in the Book of Genesis. Now, I don't want to start any trains of thought about whether or not that story is scientifically accurate, I want you to understand that the picture of Eden is like a blueprint. It's God's original idea. It was very good. It's how he wanted it. In his view it's the best. It's how we should be living.”

I went on to describe it, both in its known contents and in what is not there in the story picture.

“There is,” I filled in the scene, “no war, no hatred, no relationships going wrong, no all sorts of nasty things and certainly no sickness and no tears! There are no such things in the kingdom of God. Despite what some Christians will tell you, God cannot give you sickness. Sickness is not in the kingdom for him to give!”

Then I talked to them again about the character of Jesus, his refusal to turn anyone away from receiving grace at his hands. He preached the kingdom and healed the sick, and up until his trial that's pretty well all he did. And that's what he taught his disciples, to preach the kingdom and heal the sick.

He did nothing he did not see the Father doing and he was demonstrating the Father's will by healing everyone who came to him. He never said 'no'. He never said 'wait', he never laid down any conditions or checked up on the wholeness of their spiritual lives first. He gave the kingdom without finding fault. He was bringing in the kingdom. Why? The answer is too simple. He was laying out the divine plan to restore the Eden condition that we so badly damaged for ourselves at the Fall.

Here we can glimpse the great purposes of God, the Creation being restored after the mess we have made of it. Here we can see the new Jerusalem eventually coming down, when the kingdom is finally restored, and what do we find there? No more sickness and no more tears, just the same as the Eden condition!

And the cross? What part does it play in all this? It was on the cross that Jesus has finally taken away all that comes between us and the love of God. It is through his wounds we get healed because, at the moment of his sacrifice, the curtain in the Temple was torn in half from top to bottom and the glassy sea of grace before the heavenly throne burst its banks. That's when God took his hand off the tap. That's when it began to flow down the middle of the golden street in heaven, underneath the tree with the leaves for the healing of the nations, back through the torn curtain, the hole in his side, and into the world, into this place, into these rooms in which we sit and all over us. And the flow is constant. It never ceases.

At this point I had to stop, as the heaviness of God's presence in the room became obvious to all who sat there. Strangely enough, it wasn't just a heaviness but a lightness as well, at one and the same time. There seemed to be a heavy thickness in the room and yet there was a light thin atmosphere, as if the weight of glory had descended and heaven was very close. It is, I now have come to recognise, the nearness of the kingdom. He was present to heal, present to demonstrate the truth of what I'd been telling them. There was a hushed silence around the room.

"Jesus came to bring the kingdom and it is the Father's good pleasure that we should have it."

One course delegate stood up quietly and began to walk towards me. Half way there and there was a crack sounding in the room, going off like a rifle shot.

"Praise God," spoke up the man who then returned to his seat.

His shoulder had been weakened some years before through an accident and had never since stayed in place for long. It was as though it was almost permanently dislocated.

But God knew and God was present to confirm the words I had spoken to them. The

shoulder jumped back into place with no assistance from anyone else and, to his delight, has stayed there ever since!

Then straightaway a lady stood and came to hold my hands in front of the lectern.

"I cannot kneel anymore because of my knees," She said.

"Yes you can," I told her. Standing under the weight of God's presence there was nothing else I could say. She knelt down on the carpet in front of me, easily, and got quickly to her feet again without experiencing any stiffness at all.

Our South African visitor was, in his words, gob smacked. Joyful but stunned. For the first time in his whole ministry life he had actually been present to see the cross at work in the world today. He had spent his entire ministry life preaching about the cross and its saving graces and our love for the one who went through it for us but he had never been so struck by the reality of the presence of God through its mercies. He was overwhelmed and, he would be the first to thank God for it, he has never been the same since.

It was his kind suggestion that had led to that exhausting plane journey which was to change so much for so many people.

"If I could get my colleagues to agree, would you come to South Africa?"

Once there, and after a whole day's recovery from the journey, I met Diana. At the end of our first talk in that country, and there have been many since, she shakily approached the platform and asked me to pray with her. She had acquired some sort of virus attack in her lower legs at the tender age of eighteen months, which killed all the nerve ends from her knees to the tips of her toes. Her foot muscles had contracted so that she was walking on her heels with elevated toes but the surgeons had operated on her Achilles tendons, shortening them to flatten her feet on the floor. So she walked towards me like an Australian Duckbill Platypus. She was a slender and attractive twenty-five year old, bent and buckled and struggling to make the best of life.

We gave glory to God the Father for Jesus. #we thanked and praised him for the cross and all that it meant to us. Then she said quietly and with a surprised and delighted tone of voice,

“I've got pins and needles in my toes!”

We were doing the holy teamwork. We had begun to give thanks and worship and praise for the cross and the Holy spirit was beginning to prove it with signs and wonders of the very kingdom we were bringing close.

She thanked us and left. By now a queue had built up so we were on to the next supplicant. It seemed important to me that we should keep down the length of that queue, as I have always thought that thinking only one man can do the business at a meeting is not honouring to God, and not honouring to the other members of the ministry team, either.

So we had posted a 'bouncer'. His job was to indicate to the assembled supplicants which ministry team was now free to see them.

“No thank you!” a lady forcefully exclaimed, standing in the queue about four people back from me. But I was too busy to get involved, I had a middle aged couple in front of me, in great pain.

“Can we pray for our daughter,” they asked. “She was involved in a car crash and has been in a coma for a month now. They say her brains are

scrambled and she will never move or communicate again.” They were fighting back the tears.

Meanwhile our bouncer, Mark, had invited the noisy lady to go to another pair of ministers and she was, rather emphatically and rather noisily, flatly refusing.

“You see,” she condescendingly pointed out to Mark, “It’s important that I see Mike. I am clergy and he is clergy and we shall understand each other!”

The lady had a fused spine. Two bones in the nape of her neck had been fused many years earlier and the fusion had begun to break down.

Mark said, “Then would you like me to fetch you a chair while you’re waiting?”

She thought for a while and declined his offer. “You see,” she told him, “If I sit down then I might lose my place in the queue and it’s important that I see Mike for prayer!”

Mark promised to keep her place for her and so he brought over two chairs, one for her and one for himself.

“While we’re sitting here, “ he suggested gently to her, “Can I pray for you while we’re waiting for Mike?” She could hardly refuse.

And so Mark prayed. He had done the course at Llangasty and he knew the kingdom healing approach and he took it. In no time at all she was flexing her neck back and forth, enjoying a pain free freedom that she had only glimpsed through the dosage of morphine.

What fun kingdom healing can be! In the morning I had two visitors before lunch. The first was the clergy lady with the fused neck vertebrae who came to apologise. She sensed that she had raised one person on a pedestal but that one person should have been Jesus. Mark’s praise and thanksgiving prayers had reversed that situation for her and she felt fine.

The second lady to visit was Diana. She had made an appointment to drop in and see her doctor that very morning after she had been prayed with in kingdom ways the night before. A full sense of feeling had

returned to her lower legs and feet, the foot muscles had livened and returned to their proper shape and the Achilles tendons had returned, despite the original surgery, to the correct length. She was walking beautifully, and, I am assured, most elegantly, as befits a young lady of her age.

And, that evening, the middle aged couple with the paralysed daughter returned.

“How can we tell you this?” they bubbled. “She’s coming out of hospital tomorrow! She’s awake! She can move everything just as she should! She can’t stop talking! She’s completely well!”

They burst into tears and so did I. Such utter joy is rarely seen in this world and it’s a rare privilege to be present to join in. As our excitement began to subside and as we slipped easily together in praise and thanksgiving to such a gracious God they told me the rest.

“Everyone else in the hospital ward is going home too. They don’t know what’s going on down there but everyone around our daughter is better. They’re all going home!”

While we were speaking in that church, about kingdom dynamics today and about the wonderful news of the character of Jesus, a number of shadow healings occurred which are fun to remember and fun to relate. One in particular happened one Saturday morning when we held an open day for other churches around and about the same area of the city. By then the word had got out into the community, that the presence of the kingdom of god was healing people, left, right and centre and the open day was packed.

A mother and daughter had come together, the daughter unable to carry out her work as a book-keeper because her hands were so twisted, gnarled and pained by a vicious dose of arthritis. I heard them whispering together about half way through the morning’s talk, but I only found out the words later from another lady sitting nearby.

“Mum, look at this!”

“Quiet, dear, I’m trying to listen.”

“No, Mum, just look at this!”

“Hush up, will you? How can I hear what the man’s saying with you prattling on all the time?”

“But, Mum.....”

And then the mother looked down at her daughter’s hands. She was holding them in front of her, a few inches above her lap, and there was no arthritis., It had all gone. There were no lumpy knuckles and her individual fingers were flexing easily. I don’t imagine they heard the rest of my talk and it doesn’t matter at all!

At the end of our stay, two important things were decided upon in that church. Firstly they would create a drop-in healing prayer centre on the church premises and secondly they would collect a few testimonies and publish them to encourage the whole congregation. There were over a hundred and fifty of them went into the first booklet produced. They recorded that, since our arrival at the church, reports and testimonies had been pouring in of healings which have occurred , both as a result of prayer and ministry during the meetings and services, and of so-called ‘shadow healings’ of some folk, simply sitting in the congregations. They were celebrating each of these stories and giving thanks to God for every expression of ‘healing grace’.

The church leadership were also deeply aware that not everyone received the healing for which they were seeking. They expressed that their deepest wish, as a congregation, would be to continue standing with these folk in their need.

Some of their stories included:

“I have had Rheumatoid Arthritis in my hands for thirteen years, so bad that I could not even open bottles. A friend invited me to the Friday evening service, where they prayed for me. During the prayer, my hands were very warm, then the joints eased up a bit, not so stiff, and by the end of the prayers, they were tingling. Today they are still tingling, but there is no pain. What a feeling. Praise be to God!”

Debbie

“I have an increasingly strange spine, after too many years of running and of course age. This has created pressure on some nerves in my back, resulting in neck and shoulder pain and restricted mobility of my head. I have had this for a number of years, and have had Traction, Physio and Medication, all of which provided temporary and limited relief. I became so used to it that I resigned myself to the fact that I would always have this discomfort. On Sunday morning, I realized that something was different when I was pain free, even while blow-drying my hair which was always a mission. I never told anyone in case the pain returned and I would look silly, but I still have no pain!

Besides being really blown away by this, I am of course truly thankful and have begun telling friends and family. Their reactions have been varied, from joy to scepticism, but I will continue giving thanks to Jesus for this wonderful and unexpected gift.”

Lynn

“In 2002 I was diagnosed with colon cancer. As a result, I had radical surgery and after treatment, went into remission until 2004, when I was again diagnosed with cancer, this time of the liver. After surgery and treatment, I was again in remission until April of this year, when 3 tumours were found on my lungs. On hearing of Mike Endicott’s visit, and long before this most recent diagnosis, I had made the decision to attend his 3-day Seminar. Mike stated that Jesus said that I had an expectant right to be healed. After the Celtic Healing Service on Wednesday night, I sent an e-mail to Mike in the U.K., telling him of my intention of going for an X-Ray on Friday and that I had this expectation of healing. I had the X-Rays, and they have revealed that I now do not have the 3 tumours shown to be present in April, but only one! Praise be to Jesus!”

Graham

“I have been suffering terribly for the past 18 months, with very irritated eyes. I have worn contact lenses since 1993, but never had a problem, until 18 months ago. On visiting a specialist, I was told that these things can and do happen over time. It is called Papillary Conjunctivitis. Big words, but it is a really awful feeling all the time, varying from a gritty sensation, to having mountain ranges in my eye lids. I haven’t been able to wear my contact lenses, and as a result of vanity, refuse to wear glasses. Life has not been very pleasant for me these past months.

Now for the good news. After attending the Wednesday evening Celtic Healing Service, my eyes are completely healed, smooth, clear and problem-free! I really praise God for this and still keep on closing my eyes and rolling them around to see if they’re still okay and yes, they are 100%. I had not intended attending the 3-day Seminar, as I’ve never been interested in healing, but I felt that God was leading me to do it, and I am so grateful that I did. God has ignited a fire in me, that I haven’t felt in many years and I don’t think that my life or way of thinking will ever be the same again.”

Heather

“During Mike’s demonstration of heaven’s healing grace with Bertha and Enid on Tuesday afternoon, I was aware of a sensation in my gammy right knee, an old rugby injury. I prayed along with Mike as he had taught us. At the end of the day, I was conscious of complete freedom in my knee. I asked my friends to wait for me before leaving and went over to the church steps. I tentatively climbed the steps and then came down again with no pain and with complete freedom. I repeated the exercise with the same ease, and headed for the car with wonder in my heart. My symptoms started to return on Friday evening and I addressed them in the name of Jesus and they disappeared immediately! All praise to our Lord and His healing power.”

David

“I have always had a gripping, immobilizing, stiff feeling in my lower back, the result of an injury about 25 years ago. I was surfing and hit a rock, breaking my coccyx. It was a huge shock to me and the recovery was very slow. Mike was praying for the healing of someone else’s injury on Wednesday and broke the shock!! I had never thought of the shock effect. I prayed for myself at the same time, for the shock to be removed from my back and blessing Jesus for His healing power. Over the past few days, I have had the most amazingly mobile back once again. I will continue to bless Jesus for his ongoing healing.”

Gail

“My daughter was admitted to hospital yesterday in preparation for a Gall-bladder operation today She was placed on a drip and during the night, praise God, she was healed. When they took X-Rays this morning, nothing was found. They again X-Rayed and she was clear and discharged without her operation.”

Lynette

And on it went, on and on, God’s faithfulness lavished on his people; when Jesus’ work on the cross is glorified.

We soon heard about the drop-in healing prayer centre that gifts of grace were being celebrated. One lady who travelled with her daughter from a neighbouring town had lost her side-vision as a result of a recent stroke. As she was ministered to she began waving her hands at the side of her face, exclaiming "I can see my hands again. I can see my hands again." She expressed her determination to return for further ministry in terms of some of the other effects of the stroke. Her daughter was overjoyed.

This healing was the cause of much rejoicing when the news spread amongst those who ministered during the day.

The night flight back to London was exhilarating, joyful, worshipful and full of promise of the coming kingdom.

Chapter 11 Back Home Again

Winter always comes in so bleakly when the memories are full of South African sunshine!

One Saturday morning the following winter after our first south African mission trip, I pulled my coat collar up about my ears and shivered. I had climbed out of a car into one of those short British late November days that seem to drip forlornly from a cold, dark dawn through to an even wetter, colder evening.

Outside the little Victorian brick church where the car had stopped, the heavy, grey clouds rolled around the valley, sinking heavily onto the tops of the surrounding hills and smothering them from view. The gusting wind, that blew them along the length of the valley and up across the tops of the overshadowing mountain range, brought lashings of fine rain in a thick spray of tiny raindrops that soak right through. That same cheerless wind whined and moaned its miserable way through the church's eaves, finding every crack in door and window. Inside, it was thankfully beaten into submission before it reached our ankles, by rows of large hot water pipes under the pews.

It was exactly the sort of day that always fills me with a desperate longing for a mug of steaming tea in my cupped hands and a blazing log fire at my slippered feet. It was a day fit only for wood smoke and hot toasted teacakes, and why anyone should venture outside on such a winter's day was quite beyond me, but a small number had done it. They had come to church.

I had been standing in front of this north country congregation for a while, telling them things they had never heard before. By mid afternoon I was getting fairly tired, and doubtless somewhat over enthusiastic as usual, as I told them about the every day workings of the kingdom of the God they worshipped every Sunday morning. They had never knowingly caught a glimpse of the healing work of the kingdom of God.

They had heard things from others, but had never seen for themselves. They might easily have done —it is all in the Bible, after all. For the sake of bringing glory to the Father’s name, it would have been good if they had seen and heard, because they would most certainly have done something about it.

Standing there in front of them at lunchtime, leaning one elbow on the lectern while I chewed food and chatted cheerily about the dynamics of the kingdom, one thought kept running through my mind. Doing something exciting with an apostolic ministry is not, I reminded myself while I continued eating and talking at the same time, such a crazy idea after all. A certain parish priest had recently been attending our kingdom healing courses and had seen her church’s Saturday morning drop-in time as an opportunity to minister God’s grace to the sick and the injured.

The meeting had been transformed. This was a time when the local village hall, manned by church ladies good and true, became a weekly haven of cake, cups of free tea, and fellowship, to all those who passed the open door.

She began by watching for those who were limping and those in obvious pain, and the stiff-jointed, to come through that door and settle down with a cup of tea and a slice of home-made cake. Then, having graciously exhausted the pleasantries, she would fetch one of the tea-making ladies from the room at the rear, and together they would offer to pray kingdom prayers of healing on the spot with the injured person.

Some declined and some gratefully accepted — and those who did would get significant benefit from the encounter. Within a month, some watchful folk in the community were starting to send their spouses to the Saturday drop-in for healing. “It’s quicker than queuing for the doctor,” they would say, “and Jesus was coming with a cup of tea!” That little church had found the way to combine evangelism and healing into one ministry — and that is exciting!

Healing and evangelism belong together, but our specialists have generally built both of them into vastly complex ministries resulting in

high degrees of training and theoretical decision-making on theologies and methodologies, putting them in distinct boxes, both often being left to one side because of their consequential lack of simplicity and substance.

I so desperately hoped these dear ones in front of me were grasping the 'diamonds' I was holding out to them. But then it doesn't seem so long since I found out about them myself. I had been in full time ministry for twelve years before I saw it, before I heard the skylarks, before the bell rang in my head, before the penny dropped, before proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom and healing the sick became like shelling peas. And now it is becoming a working reality for many others.

An effective, authentic, apostolic version of healing ministry can be taught. In fact its ability to be taught is a measure of it. Jesus did healing ministry while the disciples watched, then they tried it under his supervision, and then he organised them to go out and do it themselves. I would go so far as to say that if a ministry cannot be easily taught then it probably isn't apostolic. Jesus, his disciples and the leaders and members of the early church, could heal the sick in droves merely proclaiming kingdom dynamics, and today we seem to fight for every healing.

Reading the New Testament, it looks as though it might have been easy. Now it often isn't. Jesus healed everyone who came to ask him for healing, but he apparently doesn't work non-stop miracles like that much anymore. A few are unquestionably healed, but most of us find other paths to getting well or we find the early path up to the graveyard. These days God seems to pick and choose, and he does not seem to choose that many.

So often, God is portrayed to us as inexplicably reluctant to stoop and help his troubled children. It is often deemed best not discussed at all. The church flounders around like this in the face of the healing ministry, overflowing with doubt and grasping at straws of instant philosophy in an attempt to second guess the Almighty and satisfy the people's questions. So, down the centuries since those early, wonderful and fruitful days, the people have lost trust in Jesus to help. There must be

thousands of prayers a day sent heavenward for friends and family, prayers said in hope, love, duty or desperation, but none of these are necessarily trust.

For possibly fifteen hundred years we have not been showing the healing and restoring kingdom to needy people. Trust in Jesus allows us to see the sick healed and the kingdom grow.

Long ago, God spoke against the spiritual leaders of Israel through the prophet Ezekiel. They were shepherds living off the fat of the flock, having forgotten to strengthen the weak, heal the sick and bind up the injured. Could he be feeling the same way about we church leaders today, or was I just feeling tired and slightly flat on this grey, dampening and dripping northern day?

In front of me was an ordinary church congregation, full of people it was easy to love, the sort to be found throughout our cities, towns and villages right across the land. They had some hope in the kingdom but little or no experience of it. I stood in front of them, longing to give them back a right understanding of the Jesus that the church knew two thousand years ago. They did not know it then, but they were about to be caught up in a river of grace flooding through their little church.

They would not have known what to expect. They did not know of the wonders of the kingdom because no one had ever taught them. They knew and hoped that God, very possibly, was a worker of miracles, but only a very few of them had seen only one or two. In those times when prayer was desperately needed for some sick member of the congregation, or one of their families at home, they were praying very hard to get God to do something for them. Some of them had heard distant rumours of healing miracles in other parts of the country and then, with hearts lifted by hope, were struggling onwards, optimistically crediting the Almighty with every little circumstance that favoured them.

Here I was, standing in front of them, trying to encourage them to set aside their dented mental models of Jesus and the status quo, the current and ineffectual state of healing ministry today, and accept that miraculous kingdom walking was comparatively easy. God had done a

great deal, too much to write about, to ensure that we could have the kingdom, live in it, work in it and see the benefits of it, but most of what they had learned in and around the church family would have to be put away in favour of simple, biblical, kingdom truths to be received with childlike faith.

Some of them had spent a lifetime listening to those they perceived to be 'the good and the great', learning about sanctification, admiring the 'anointed', practising spiritual discernment, listening to encouragements to be overflowing with the Holy Spirit, and debating how to pray more effectively and how not to pray. It had all got so complicated that some of them confessed they did not even know how to think about these things anymore. And getting the sick healed just felt like hard work. Most they prayed for got better naturally or by virtue of medical intervention, and some did not get better and died. How I wished, in short, that they were 'kingdom walkers'.

We had gone there in response to the same old question, the same old query that constantly assails us: so what's different? What is so different about this kingdom ministry that you are trying to teach?

"Kingdom walking," I was explaining as best I could, "is not a question of what we do, of how we conduct ourselves in ministry, or what we say and how we speak to God." I was not trying to tell them something as comparatively insignificant as how they should pray. Kingdom walking is absolutely nothing to do with methodology or with technique. It is all to do with how our own heart reacts to Jesus.

To be disciples in the kingdom we have to imitate Christ in his ministry of healing. This is where I so often stumble in my speaking. The wise and the learned and the greatly experienced, the mature Christians, will sometimes say to me, 'But that's what we are! We are Christ-centred, cross-centred ministers of God's grace!' And all I can say to them is this: before I learned kingdom walking, before I learned to stand in a place with the living Christ in such a way that miracles happen naturally and easily around us, I saw one or two miracles a year which I could honestly say I had something to do with. In some way or other God had involved me in those individuals getting better. I had originally concluded that my

job as a minister was to 'pray and let God be God'; now it is very different: I am travelling through the kingdom with the one who knows all things and can do all things. Any Christian can do this: we proclaim; he does the healing.

This is why Kingdom healing is not another method of ministry. We have quite enough styles and emphases to choose from; this is the original way taught by Jesus and is not based in prayer at all but in proclamation.

Now I am thrilled when people are healed and quite shocked when they are not. Before I expected that I might see something this year if God would bless my ministry, and now I expect everyone to receive, and the odd occasions when it doesn't happen is a mystery. It used to be a mystery why some got healed, now it is a mystery when someone doesn't. That is not a statement of faith, as it might be with some, it is a statement of sight. It is not a boasting in my own anointing, for there is only one Anointed One, it is a boasting in the manifest glory of the active kingdom of God.

Nowadays, the great majority of those who come to Jesus on occasions like this are able to receive significant improvements to their health, either ratified by themselves on the spot or discovered medically at a later time. It is normal, it is happening far too frequently for most to believe it possible!

I was feeling, as at most Taster Day teaching occasions, as Paul might have done in Athens. He tried to teach the local philosophers with his intellect and had remarkably little success. That sort of hard work is merely pitting one intellect against another! In the end he decided to focus his thoughts only on Christ and him crucified, and to display the wonders of the kingdom to the people so that they would believe in the power of God and not because of the outflow of his own intellect. So it was that I asked,

"Does anyone here have a painful joint — a leg or an arm or a shoulder?"

This was not a word of knowledge about someone the Lord was wanting to heal, someone the Lord had selected for some special gift of healing

that evening. Such outbursts in those circumstances are often a wishful-thinking display of spirituality. The Gospels show us that Jesus healed everyone who came to him with a mustard seed of faith.

Jesus said that he only did what he saw the Father doing. It is therefore, simply and logically, the Father's will to heal everyone who comes to Jesus for it! He does not choose some and not others. Picking out certain people or types of illness for prayer is simply not Christ-focused ministry. No, this was just an attempt by me to encourage a person to the front of the congregation to demonstrate the grace of God, someone with some condition or other which we could visibly and easily measure — before and after, as it were.

In a moment, Margaret was standing beside me. Although she could easily raise her left arm above her head, she was quite unable to lift the right arm any higher than the horizontal. There was something wrong with the shoulder joint. It was inflamed, she told me, and it hurt.

I always think the best way to begin a ministry to someone with a sickness or any injury is to bless them. The Bible says that if we do this, then God will place his mark on them and bless them. So I blessed her in the name of Jesus. I blessed her to know the healing purposes of God in her life. I blessed her to know that she could receive through Christ. I praised the Father that Jesus had taken all our pain and carried all our sickness, and that it was by his wounds that we can be healed. I paused to ask her how she was feeling.

Within only a few moments, and at the first attempt, she could raise her reluctant arm comfortably and vertically. She stood beside me, waving happily to her friends in the congregation, and she ran to the back of the church to wave at God with both arms aloft as she worshipped and thanked him.

Encouraged by this almost instant heavenly reaction, I suggested that anyone needing Christ's ministry should step forward. Three queues quickly formed in front of three waiting ministry teams, a further four supplicants in front of me. Margaret was already healed and John was next.

He took my hands and told me quietly that he had bone cancer. A tumour had been growing at the back of one leg, at the top of the calf muscle. Since its surgical removal he had been unable to put his full weight on his foot or bend his knee at all. I repeated the blessing and began to give thanks for the cross and all its wondrous gifts to us. In other words I was proclaiming.

In answer to my enquiry he reported no improvement whatsoever and I became a little conscious of the others queuing behind him.

“Sit down here, John, close to me where I can find you. Don’t go away. I will pray again with you in a little while”, I said to him.

As the chair took his weight a lady in the congregation jumped up and shouted, “Praise God! Alleluia!”

I, along with most others present, looked in her direction and asked for an explanation. I knew full well what was coming as I had seen it many times before, ANOTHER SHADOW HEALING, but I asked her nevertheless, for the sake of the little wondering congregation.

“I’ve been healed!” she shouted excitedly. “I’ve had a pain in my side for four years and while I was listening to you praying with that gentleman it disappeared completely. I’m healed, I’m free!”

A few gasped with surprise and delight while the rest then began to clap, starting to realise that something very special was going on in the middle of their LITTLE church.

I turned back to John but he was gone. I asked where he was and he had found his way to the back of the church too. He had run there. He was bouncing up and down on his leg, dancing around with his wife, and tossing praises into the heavenlies with unbridled delight. His leg was moving freely and painlessly.

Three out of three! Now the congregation was sitting stock-still with mouths open in wonder. They had never seen this before. The very thing I said they ought to be able to see every Sunday was taking place under their noses. Then up stepped number four.

I took Diane's hands in mine and she began to weep uncontrollably. That very morning she had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Months of treatment some years ago had originally said a firm goodbye to that pernicious disease but it was back, and back with a vengeance. Her face was a sculpture of crumpled devastation.

There was nothing to do but bless her. As with the others that afternoon, I blessed her to know that she was in the kingdom of God, that she belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ and could receive from him. As I blessed her again and again, the tears stopped flowing, the shoulder jerking of the sobs subsided and her face began to lighten. I asked her what was going on.

"I can't explain it very well," she whispered, "but the sense of wellbeing inside me is tangible. I can actually feel it!" She was smiling gently now, the tension had gone and her face had changed from that picture of devastation to one of total peace. Something was happening to number four.

And then up stepped a lady with a tumour growing out of the back of the index finger of her left hand. She held it up for all to see and it was about the same size, colour and shape as a bright red Brussels sprout.

"I've had one here before," she told me. "I had it surgically removed which left a huge scar but the tumour has grown again. The best I can hope for is that Jesus will stop it getting any worse!"

But this was not Jesus and this would not have been his way. So I asked her gently,

"Did you ever hear of Jesus saying to a leper that all he could do would be to stop the leprosy getting any worse?"

"No," she said, and then she went on quickly, "Look at that! It's starting to go down!"

And so I proclaimed again. I proclaimed the character of Jesus in order to raise her trust levels in him. I proclaimed the message of the cross having learned that this is truly where the power of god lies. We disciples do the proclaiming and the Holy Spirit does the restoration to prove the

truth of what we say. That's the way it was always supposed to work and that's how it does work again today.

As we stood together and gave praise and thanks to the father for Jesus and for what he did for us on the cross, blasting a way through the wall between heaven and earth and letting through rivers of flooding grace into the world, so the tumour went down and down in the face of such a spiritual onslaught until it disappeared completely.

“Look at that!” she shouted with glee, “Even the old scar has gone!”

I turned round to find number six waiting for me. Peter was awaiting a heart transplant. There was so much wrong that the heart muscles simply did not have the strength to pump all that was needed everywhere it was needed. He was grey-faced, round-shouldered, and his hands were shaking slightly. Again I praised the Father for Jesus' work on the cross —and I blessed Peter, and asked him how he was doing.

His face had begun to fill up with colour. He looked as if he had just been very embarrassed by something. He was actually blushing! The blood vessels in his wrists had begun pounding and he could hear throbbing in his ears. His hands became steady and the constant muscle pain in his heart subsided and disappeared.

“I have a problem I haven't had before,” he announced, “my legs have gone all wobbly.” I wondered aloud if that was due to the work of the Holy Spirit rather than any physical difficulty, and we sat him down to take his weight off his legs. He recovered quickly and soon ran off to join the praise party that was still going on at the back of the church. That was number six.

Clive was number seven. The poor man suffered from a terrible dose of tinnitus. He described the condition to me: “It's like living next to a waterfall, all day and all night long.” Again, we repeated exactly the same treatment, not applying it through any skill or with any mechanical precision but just because we believed it. This was praise and proclamation, thankofferings for Christ and the cross.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“It’s like standing next to a hosepipe. It’s much better, thank you.” He made to walk off, doubtless happy to count his blessings and cling on to what he had received. Any improvement, I guess he was thinking, would be much better than nothing at all.

“Come back!” I encouraged him. “Jesus never left anyone half healed!” He turned back to me and there followed more blessing, more praise for the cross, more thanksgiving for Jesus and his redeeming work and the awful sounds in his ears left him.

Outside, the cold grey rain still spattered, dripped and dribbled down the church windows. One of the great oak doors at the back banged open and shut as someone left the building, and a wave of cold air flapped my trouser legs, chilling my ankles. The wind still moaned through the eaves and I could hear a kettle boiling up in a distant room. A general hubbub of conversation was rising in the body of the church.

Someone to my left was talking about their forthcoming summer holiday, and someone else to my right was complaining about the state of their car. The service was over. I wandered over to the rear of the church to catch up with those who had been touched by the Almighty.

“How are you doing?” I asked each one. “How does it feel now?” and how I revelled in their joy, washed with the overspill of it as they bubbled and squeaked their pleasure at thoughts of what life could be like from now on. It was a thrill and an honour to be among them.

The kingdom had come near to them. The Spirit of the living Christ had touched and changed most deeply all who had asked in the space of forty-five minutes. The congregation had witnessed someone doing a ministry which, at Pentecost, God had empowered every one of them to do. Had they realised that? Almighty God had stooped to touch his people, in front of their very eyes, and the kingdom had come near them all.

I lay in my bed that night and praised the God of Israel for all the miles he had carried me to that point and for all he had been teaching me and for all the struggles that without doubt lay ahead.

The calling to do ministry as he had done had come as I listened to God and heard the Bardsey skylarks: return to a replica ministry. Every Christian believer in every pew can have an apostolic healing ministry. What a picture!

It has been important to try and do it the way that Jesus did it, rather than the way that this group or that group determines is best, carefully identifying and avoiding the things that he did not do; and to work on one's mental model of Jesus everyday, recognising every aspect that is built out of our experience of being Christian, and compare it with the picture of Jesus in the New Testament.

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

2 Corinthians 10:5 (NIV)

The meaning of that had become quite clear in the context of this whole journey to find the promised fountain of grace. We might think of our wrong mental models of Christ and of his healing ministry as being like those ‘pretensions’ that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. The way to defeat the influence that they exert over our thinking and our ministry is to compare those mental models with the actual evidence of the New Testament. Most often there are huge differences between the two!

Nor must any of us lose sight of the fact that trusting Jesus is at the heart of receiving. Healing is available to all. The Father's giving is never a problem. It is the receiving that is not always so easy for many. Trust is essential, but it is real trust in the real living person of our risen Lord we

need, not trust in an inaccurate mental picture of him as being untrustworthy, unreliable.

In conclusion I would offer to the reader a letter I received, illustrating something of the practice of a replica of the apostolic. The writer of the letter saw replica results in what I believe to be New Testament proportions:

Dear Mike,

I am a minister at a local Methodist church and attended your healing teaching programme and found it very challenging and informative. I believe that most ministers (including myself) know the truth about healing but are just too scared to take up the challenge in case there is any failure.

Well, your workshops took me out of my box and I stepped out in obedience to what God is calling us all to do. The results have been absolutely awesome.

Three weeks after your workshop I ran a three week sermon series on healing, based largely on your teaching. During the last week I had a special workshop for seven people who I had identified as people who could assist me during a time of healing ministry. After the last sermon we had a time of healing ministry that was very well attended and accepted by all. This session lasted about two and a half hours!¹⁵⁷

During that last week before the end of the sermon series, a lady drove for six hours to get here who was riddled with cancer. She could not stand for long, could not breathe properly and had extreme pain in her side, behind her nose and in her head.

During the first session Jesus healed her breathing problem and she was able to stand for about twenty minutes. In the next session Jesus healed the pain in her side and her general health had improved to the point where she could stand chatting to us for a full thirty minutes after the healing session. During the next session Jesus healed her pain in

the nose and in her head and also healed her of tremendous emotional hurt.

Without me knowing, she contacted her sister and arranged for her to come up to the church for the final sermon on healing. Her sister was totally blind. After praying for her she opened her eyes and exclaimed that I was wearing glasses. She could identify my glasses on my face!

She came back on the Tuesday and after we had prayed she muttered, "It's a butterfly!" I did not know what she was talking about until she started to describe a butterfly, as well as all the colours and detail of a flower that was printed on a banner about ten metres away! She could see! On the Thursday she walked in without her white stick!

During this last session the two sisters looked at each other and declared their love for each other — this had not been done in their whole lives! Emotional and spiritual healing had also taken place!

During the healing session after the last sermon in the series a young lady with chronic Parkinson's disease came forward for healing. I quite honestly was very nervous. We prayed and she was not healed. I asked her to come back on the Wednesday (I decided to have a healing session every Wednesday afternoon).

For two Wednesdays she did not come and then on the third afternoon she braved a visit. She continued to come every Wednesday and her hands are now completely stable and steady! She can once again do her work (writing out cheques) and her migraines (which she had every second day) have disappeared! Jesus had healed her!

These are some of the other miracles that have taken place in our church:

A lady who had her kneecaps removed eleven years ago can now kneel; a young deaf girl has had her hearing aids de-tuned by over fifty percent; a lady with crippling arthritis can now do a normal day's work; a lady who needed an operation for osteoporosis of her jaw cancelled her operation as Jesus had healed her; a lady with nodules on her thyroid has been healed; three ladies with chronic back pain have been healed; a couple

of drug addicts have been cured of their addiction; a lady stood proxy for her daughter in another country — she is healed. The list goes on and on.

We have still got our healing sessions every Wednesday afternoon, and about once a month we have a session after our Sunday service.

So Mike, I would like to thank you for being obedient to God's calling and in so doing helping me to get out of my comfort zone and start doing what God is calling us to do. And through all this we praise Jesus and give him all the glory for the healing that is taking place here in our church and everywhere else throughout the world.

Ray

Back home and off again! Getting to grips with kingdom dynamics, stripping away modern and well clung to philosophies and theologies of healing ministry, watching God's proving work going on and on in New Testament proportions, teaching those who would learn and pressing on, always on!

We have been back to south Africa and taught eager minds,

WE have held healing conferences in the USA , in Canada, South Africa and in the Middle East and still god comes. Still the kingdom draws near to restore his expecting people.

May his name endure forever;

may it continue as long as the sun.

All nations will be blessed through him,

and they will call him blessed.

Praise be to the Lord God,
the God of Israel,
who alone does marvellous deeds.
Praise be to his glorious name for ever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and Amen.
Psalm 72:17 –19(NIV)

