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CAUGHT UP IN THE RIVER

Several years ago I went canoeing for the first time. I was a real beginner and volunteered to be the 'guinea pig' for some friends who were being examined for their instructor's award. Being on the bank was easy and I was quite enjoying waving my paddle around in the air. Getting in the canoe was a bit harder but after a while, paddling around in the shallows was very pleasant. The water was still and there was no current. Everyone was having a wonderful time when suddenly the instructor cried out,

"Everyone over the weir now!"

I couldn't believe it! I had only volunteered to be 'dummy' and now I was getting caught up in the current heading towards a roaring white-water weir! I was petrified. As the weir got closer, for some strange reason, my canoe would not go in a straight line and approached it sideways on. Suddenly it was as if I was in the middle of a washing machine being rolled around in the rushing water. I emerged, paddle still in hand but with the canoe merrily continuing on its way upside down. This provided the perfect opportunity for the instructors to demonstrate their rescue techniques as they got me back into the canoe. However, I could not get out of the current. There was no escape. The only way out was to go with the flow. I cannot remember how many times I capsized and was rescued before reaching the end. Other beginners were having the same problem.

I remember one Welsh girl clinging for dear life to an overhanging tree, one foot in the canoe, the other on the bank. Another girl, after several 'dunkings', abandoned canoe and paddle to the water and went walking off into the fields bordering the river. The whole thing was a nightmare! I had not mastered the basics of manoeuvring the canoe in order to enjoy the ride.

Years later, after many hours of practice I was accomplished enough to be able to lead a team of canoeists down the 30 km of the very popular Ardèche river in France, enjoying every minute of negotiating the rapids and feeling the thrill of being in the current. These experiences proved to be a kind of living parable for my beginnings in walking with Jesus as a Christian. God catches us up in His ultimate purpose. His Spirit gives a new dynamic to lives that are shallow and in a rut. I know there have been many times when I have wanted out or was simply in two minds before some situations (a very precarious position to take up!) before deciding in the end to go with the current and try, in the end, and with practise, to enjoy the experience.

My early Christian debuts were a bit of a nightmare. Up until then most of my life had been built on values and practices that did not match up with the new life Christ offered. It was as if the little mustard seed of faith which I had received that night at Goldsmith's College was now moving the whole mountain of my past life and experience. It was not always a comfortable experience. It often felt like a civil war was going on in my heart and I began to wonder who I really was. On one particular evening

I remember sitting down in front of the television to watch *'The Kenny Everett Video Show'*. Normally I had no problem with such a programme, but as I sat on the sofa something inside of me was uneasy to be watching some of the more compromising scenes. I could not believe it! Something very real and very radical had happened to me. I had never had a problem with sin until I discovered Jesus! As the days went by more and more areas of my life were being challenged and I found myself on the verge of abandoning everything. The presence of this new life was far too uncomfortable and disabling for my usual lifestyle.

One morning when I had more or less decided to pack it in, I received a letter from the evangelist who had preached that evening. He strongly recommended that I try to find a church to go to. He gave me the name of an Anglican vicar in Finchley and let me know that he was praying for me. I was so ignorant about church life at that time. I hadn't ever considered that this 'becoming a Christian' was linked to going to church! It came as quite a shock to me the idea of going to church and I resolved that I would not do it. (I had never been to a church since the early couple of visits to Sunday School, and I had even managed in some strange way to avoid marriages and funerals over the years.)

A few days later I was shopping in Tesco's, which was quite near where the church was. I had just bought some rhubarb and was heading homewards. Suddenly I had a strong impression that I must go and see the aforementioned vicar. I ended up in front of the door of the vicarage. I rang the bell to be greeted a few moments later by the beaming face of Alfred Sawyer, an American vicar who was very much linked to ministry among the Jews with the CMJ (Christian Mission to the Jews).

"Hi, Rob! Come on in!" he said. "I've already heard about you."

I was a bit taken aback but walked in. He was an incredibly open and friendly man and full of generosity and patience towards me. I explained some of the difficulties I was going through and he encouraged me to come back on Sunday and take part in the Service. Although it had been a short visit I felt strangely encouraged by it all.

Sunday arrived. I had never been to a proper Church Service before in my life so I felt quite challenged. I arrived early and sat on a wooden park bench in front of St Paul's, North Finchley listening to the church bell calling the faithful. The presence of God seemed so real to me at that moment even though I was only just becoming aware of Him.

For someone who had never ever read or heard the Creeds (or even understood much about Church) I was quite touched by the Service and the message. However, I was still carrying quite an ache on the inside, struggling with the problems this new Christian life was bringing me.

After the Service there was a 'Tear Fund' lunch given in aid of the poor of the world. It was all very nice, noble and the kind of thing you would expect from good Christian people, but deep within I was still struggling to touch something real concerning Jesus. Was this it then? Had Jesus died on the cross and gone through all the

agony for this? Was it worth it? Was it worth my own personal sacrifice of giving up the pleasures and security of sin for such a life?

"How are things going?"
Alfred asked me.

"Well, I'm still not so sure,"

I replied.

He invited me back to the vicarage for a few moments of prayer with his wife and parish worker. Little did I know it then, but those few moments of prayer were about to radically change the direction of my life.

Up until then no one had ever spoken to me about the Holy Spirit. It seems that most people have no problem talking about God (even if their 'God' happens to be money, themselves or a plastic gnome in the garden!). A more limited group may be free to talk about Jesus, but ask if anyone knows the Holy Spirit and you will probably be greeted with confused silence. God, the Father, okay, God the Son, just about, but God the Holy Spirit remains a mystery to many. And yet it is the Holy Spirit who makes Jesus real to us. Without the dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit Jesus remains a mere historical figure, a kind of 'holy hippie' walking the streets of Galilee in sandaled feet and yet irrelevant to the world of twenty-first century men. The Holy Spirit puts Jesus into your flesh!

Anyway, in blissful ignorance of any theology and with only a beginner's grasp of the bible, I took my place in the vicarage, sitting a couple of metres away from the others. I was deeply aware of my own need.

"Let's pray!"

Alfred said. Apart from my hurried *'Lord's Prayer'* (which I had long since abandoned) I had never vocalised prayer before. What on earth could I pray?

Out of the very depths of me the only thing that would come out without sounding false, embroidered or hypocritical were the words,

"Help me!

God, help me!"

I prayed.

I was not expecting anything to happen so I was all the more surprised when a kind of shiver seemed to wash over me. The shiver was followed by a wave of love, which seemed to break almost physically over me. Another wave and another, each coming with greater force bringing a warm supernatural encouragement of God's

presence. I had never known anything like it. It was quite supernatural, spiritual and yet physical. Amazing!. I felt as though I was going to burst inside and when a more intense wave rushed over me my heart seemed to explode and I began to weep with tears of healing and inexpressible joy. Alfred and the others also seemed to be enjoying the same glorious experience of God.

"God has met with you," they said. "You've experienced the filling of the Holy Spirit."

I was quite overwhelmed. It was as if I had stepped into a kind of spiritual elevator, which had taken me far above my problems. Of course my problems were still there, but I had received a completely different perspective on them. Instead of being under them I was far above.

"God has taken the 'fag end' of your life and given you in exchange a beautiful palace,"

someone said.

I knew that I had received something special from God. I was filled with a real love and knew inside that I belonged forever to God. I left the house a new man. I had been caught up in a powerful current of love and my own heart was also overflowing with the joy of knowing Jesus. As I walked in the streets of Finchley I had an indescribable, yet genuine, love for the complete strangers around me. It was as if my little human heart had been suddenly invaded by the immense love of the Father. I could hardly hold it in! I walked down Long Lane and made my way to the tube station. As I bought my ticket I could no longer restrain myself and I leant over and hugged the lady who had just sold me the ticket saying,

"Jesus really loves you!"

She must have thought I was mad.

When I got home I found my little Gideon's bible. There at the back was a blank space entitled *'My Decision'*. Before, I had not had the conviction to fill it in for fear of giving up later, but now I was absolutely convinced. I signed my name. God had taken up residence.