NEVER HAVE A MINUTE TO CALL YOUR OWN

WELL NOW YOU DO

Les Norman
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Takes Me One Minute To Write
Takes You One Minute To Read
But In That One Minute
And With One Story
Your Life And Mine
Can Change Forever
INTRODUCTION

For some years on an almost daily basis, I told a story to encourage or amuse a growing number of readers worldwide who came our way through a shared interest in reaching the lost, the last and the least of the developing world.

My plan was to be able to type the story in less than a minute and for a reader in a hurry to be able to get the idea in just the same amount of time. Of course, it might have taken half-a-lifetime to live the story beforehand. We had so many requests for the 'Minutes' to be retold in a book, that now in my 66th year, with 30 years at the same desk, I have made the time to put together the stories everyone liked best, one for each day of the year. So, if like me, you are always saying you never have a minute to call your own, now you have. My minutes are now yours.

The collection is dedicated to our children who unknowingly lived through many of these experiences. James is now 44 and lives in glorious solitude on the banks of Loch Ness in the Highlands of Scotland; David, 42, and his wife Jessica and their daughter Hannah, are successful business people who live in Nottinghamshire; and Lizzie still in her twenties and her husband Zack, live not too far from our home. Lizzie works hard to give poor children in Guatemala a better life, and she has given us a granddog, Howard.
My wife Pilar deserves all your sympathy and a great reward for having innocently said yes to ‘for better or for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health’ and then had to live through all these conditions often at the same time. You will meet us later on as I have woven our own stories into the collection, but only here and there, so as not to intrude too much into the much better and bigger story that unexpectedly came our way. You have one story for every day of the year, so take your time, think about us and when you have a minute of your own, do send us a line to say hello.
TASTE AND SEE

After Sixty-Five Laps You Retire
Bright Red Sunglasses Are Back In Fashion
Café Con Something Por Favor
Don't Give The Locust The Last Laugh
Empty Theology Is Not Recycled

Fruitful Vines Grow Best When Planted
Green When Friends Are Black
Have We Met Before?
In The Dark Still Of The Night It Came For Me
Je Ne Regrette Rien. If Only.
Kiss Me Now And Always
Lurline’s Liver Salts
Me, Myself and I

No Rolex For My Retirement
Pants On Or Pants Off Today
Reject Rejection And This Is How
Sounds, Lights, Fangs And Claws
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Did Someone Get There Before You
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Didn't You Always Want To Be A Conductor
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About the author
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AFTER SIXTY-FIVE LAPS YOU RETYRE

Age 65 took me by surprise. Without asking me people retired me, the job rested me, the mirror betrayed me, the doctor diagnosed me and the buses carried me for free. Holiday brochures appear as if by magic. Church finds you a seat, puts a young man on to teach you how to live, then passes the offering and shows you the door. So, what do you do with all those years of life and learning? Unless your dream is the beach, the cruise or the garden, you do this. You set your heart and mind and you tell your body that while there is one man or woman who needs to hear the gospel, you will be there. While there is one orphan or one widow needing help, you will be there. While ever anyone of any age who dares to believe the call of God drips with the cold water thrown over him, you will be there. Henri Nouwen in his 60’s said, "I look at my ageing hands and know that they have been given to me to stretch out to all who suffer and to bless all who come my way." Take out the I in retire and put in a y. In a moment their retire becomes your re-tyre. Because ladies and gentlemen of that age, after 65 laps our race is not over.
BRIGHT RED SUNGLASSES ARE BACK IN FASHION

Imagine one day when you looked outside, it was misty. Only the mist never went away. Later, it became foggy and the fog became dense until one day not even an African sunrise could lighten the greyness. You no longer distinguish who is close by. You enter forever a land of perpetual gloom.

Close your eyes tight for a moment and look towards the light. That's it, at best. Except, when you open your eyes you now live by scratching the dusty soil of an African village. You walk for water which you carry on your head. Not once in your life will you have the money to see a doctor, not for yourself, not for your children when they catch malaria or measles. If they go deaf, they will never hear again.

Until now.

Imagine how you feel when someone tells you that doctors are coming and then takes you by the hand to where they are.
Next day, one of Spain's most eminent private surgeons operates on your eyes. No-one asks you for money, no bill ever arrives and when the bandages come off the mist has gone and you need sunglasses. So, choose the colour you like, no charge.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are sponsoring another visit to Burkina Faso by the EMSI Medical Mission. Your gifts and ours provide 40 of the many operations to restore vision and help to buy some very hi-tech micro-eye surgery equipment. Hundreds of extremely poor villagers are coming to be examined and treated. Each one will be prayed for personally, and have the love of God explained to them. The blind will see, the deaf will hear, and a long list of other wounds, diseases and dental problems will be soothed.

In fact, by the weekend those chic, bright red sunglasses will be the 'must-have' fashion accessory of the year.
DON'T GIVE THE LOCUST THE LAST LAUGH

My only experience with a locust happened when an especially large, giant green one landed on the head of my translator and remained there for an entire seminar. He was oblivious to it. I was afraid of it. The audience loved it. One locust makes people smile but one million locusts makes them weep. Locusts have a way of making a banquet out of our fields and our lives, but God has his way of restoring the years that the locusts eat. Last year, my friend Anthony flew off into a new life with a beautiful, believing and caring lady and inherited a family of three generations that loves him. For half a lifetime, Anthony silently suffered in an abusive marriage ruined by alcohol, then his job came to an end and his wife followed that by putting divorce papers in his hand. A tragic bereavement followed leaving Anthony a free man. The locusts had fed very well on Anthony's life for years in fact, they had a banquet, but they didn't get to have the last laugh. They never do when we invite the God of restoration, the God of the second chance into the barren wasteland that locusts leave behind in our lives.
We were already late, and the traffic was impenetrable. My driver slid his tiny car into one of Barcelona's narrow streets making both of us instinctively squeeze our arms against our sides. Another turn, and we were almost there.

Then we met the rubbish collection men working at a very leisurely pace. Before I could mentally despatch the men into a dark eternity, my driver began to pray a blessing upon them. He thanked God for their hard work and their willingness to be dirty and hot and clearly meant every word.

The longer I spent with Dan Smith the more I knew that if could not be like Jesus, then instead I would settle for being like this kind man. Not once did Dan Smith set out to influence me with words, but what an influence he had. So much so that 35 years later his words still guide my attitudes.

Seeing the incredulous look on my face as we waited behind the rubbish lorry he said, "Jesus went around doing good and healing people, so I reckon if I do the first part, then I might get to see the second."

As we slithered past the lorry, I emptied some of the rubbish from my heart into it and quietly tossed a packet of empty theology after it.
FRUITFUL VINES GROW BEST WHEN PLANTED

The prophetic word from Psalm 128 promised that my wife would be a fruitful vine in my home. However, in 1977 this was really unlikely given that my companion from the folly of our teenage years had grown up, moved away and was decidedly unpersuaded by God's suggestion of any further fruitfulness.

Five years later as these things happen, myself and our two small boys were part of a missions team in Spain. After four months everyone was returning home but the single-parent missionary family was staying which was either the call of God or a plan to escape all the trouble which was brewing over this less than successful visit.

The boys were at school and I was using my former business acumen to help Youth for Christ in Barcelona. One fateful morning, the director Eduardo lifted the phone to ask if we could have some coffee and shortly afterwards a young lady brought in a tray.
Momentarily distracted from the accounts register, I glanced up only to hear a voice inside me declaring, "This is your wife." Wife. Panic. I did not want a wife. Not any wife and certainly not a non-English-speaking wife.

For days I fought the idea, I prayed against it, I rebuked it in Jesus' name until the temptation was dead and buried. Yet not six weeks later with barely twenty words of Spanish or English between us, we ate our *bocadillos* on our regular park bench knowing that God was speaking beyond words in the language of the heart.

Thirty-four years later the fruitful vine, Pilar, has sent her branches over the wall as a wonderful wife and mother, as a poet, artist, gardener, *chef-extraordinaire*, intercessor and counsellor.

Which only goes to show that God does well not to answer some of our most adamant prayers.
GREEN WHEN FRIENDS ARE BLACK

I have gone a lifetime not fitting into anywhere. For people in mission I was too committed to church and for church, I was too enthusiastic about mission. When I was single, they wanted me to be married, and when I was married with children, the openings were for singles. Once I was too young, now I am too old and somehow I missed being the perfect age. I wanted to go but every time I did, I ended up back home. Square pegs and round holes, tell me all about it. Then one day I understood that I am me. My gifts and callings made me unique and God wanted it that way. In fact, in my case he made sure by locking every door that I liked, and instead opening the doors that he liked and pushing hard on my posterior to get me to go through them. He did well because had I conformed to others or insisted on having my way, I would never in ten lifetimes have achieved what God has done through us in serving missions, churches, people young and older, and the poor of the world. Unique is good, it just takes some living with. So enjoy yourself and relax a little because your Maker does not make mistakes.
HAVE WE MET BEFORE?

We did not tell Emma that we had already met or under what circumstances. After all, teenagers hate embarrassment. Instead, we smiled and said hello whilst her parents exchanged knowing looks. James and Luisa came from England to Spain to share their faith with drug-addicts and alcoholics and to offer them a home. One terrible day a very distressed James called to tell us that Luisa had just returned from a hospital visit having been told the last scan of her unborn baby revealed that the child was developing without a viable brain. The consultant recommended a late abortion but Luisa said no. Come what may. Heaven only knows what fears and anxieties she went through during the weeks that followed. Luisa prayed. James prayed. We prayed. Everyone prayed right up to the nail-biting finish and then we held our breaths. Whatever God did, and how and when he did it is still a mystery because Emma was born perfect and turned into a very bright and beautiful girl. As I said, we did not tell her that we already knew her - very, very well.
IN THE DARK STILL OF THE NIGHT IT CAME

Not many days after deciding to follow Jesus my friend telephoned to invite me to a prayer meeting that was to begin at 10 o'clock that evening. I thought this a little strange, but then again as the parties of my recent past never got going till midnight, why not? Not until we sat down did I discover to my horror that although the night clubs of the town closed religiously at 2 in the morning, this meeting went on until dawn.

Half an hour later I had prayed every prayer I could think of and there was still 8 hours to go. The old-timers were praying out loud for fifteen minutes or more without saying the same word twice and included a wide selection of Bible verses in their passion to persuade the Almighty. But not me, by midnight I was face down on the floor and not at all lost in deep contemplation. I was actually fast asleep and only a shoe to my ribs some hours later ended the appearance of holiness. A few dedicated souls were still in the room and the man that had been praying at midnight was still praying what sounded suspiciously like the same prayer.
Another man was hitting discordant notes on the piano and crying out for the glory of God to fall. What could he mean?

And then it happened.

If I had been asleep I was now wide awake. My eyes were like saucers and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I could hear a distant swishing noise as if a wind were coming. It was getting louder, coming nearer and through the narrow windows I could see the dark night turning golden with an unnatural incandescence that grew brighter by the moment. "Fall, glory of God," the pianist shouted. Amen they all replied, as the swishing noise reached the door and the golden light streamed into the room. My soul quaked, the glory whatever that was, had come and there was no escape from this supernatural phenomena better than Hollywood's best. As the sound of the rushing wind reached a crescendo and the golden light bathed our faces, the council lorry that sweeps the streets passed by with its yellow warning beacon flashing and it's huge brushes revolving. A minute later it turned the corner, leaving the night as still and as dark as God always intended.

Except for the insomniac pianist and his disconnected chords. With less than three hours to go till the final amen, there was only just time for me to stop shaking.
JE NE REGRETTE RIEN
IF ONLY.

Anyone who has sold his underperforming shares the day before they headed for the highest heaven as if gravity had lost its grip knows that being tenacious would have been better than being impatient.

'Je Ne Regrette Rien' by Edith Piaf - 'No, No Regrets,' is a powerful song but if it was you who sold the shares you will not be singing a duet anytime soon.

Did you ever abandon a plan the very day before all the uncertainties vanished with morning mist of the next dawn? I did. More than once. There may be a day to let go, but there are lot more days in the calendar to hang on in there, to hope, to pray, to watch and wait one more hour. My eldest son climbs vertical rock faces without ropes and for James not letting go is literally life or death. Our Jack Russell terrier would lose his teeth before he loses his bone. Both define tenacious.

Maybe for you tenacious means that you don't quit your job today because that bully could be gone tomorrow, and likely will be. It means that you don't walk away from marriage or ministry on a bad day because if you pray, you have no idea what changes will come tomorrow. What I do know from a long lifetime is that when it comes to having no regrets, it is best not to let go just before dawn. Just as God, the most tenacious of all, will never let go of you.
KISS ME NOW AND ALWAYS

Way back in my beginnings the ageing man who was my mentor, he who had been there, had done that and had worn out the t-shirt before the saying was invented, looked over my complex and highly detailed plan, looked me in the eye and said, "Kiss."

Back then any ambiguous meaning was truly unthinkable. He did not want a kiss. So what did he want me to do?

"Keep It Simple, Stupid," he said. "KISS a plan and people will get it first time." Since then like any decent, or these days indecent Hollywood film my ideas also pass through the cutting floor. Snip, snip, snip go the scissors on the complicated bits.

Keeping it simple isn't stupid.

It is actually really good sense.
Now Lurline was, and still is, a Jamaican lady of somewhat daunting appearance with a faith as big as the Caribbean itself, having brought up a large family all by herself with no other help other than God himself. It soon became evident that Lurline was on speaking terms with the Lord although her way of praying was more akin to direct communication at high volume and definitely not contemplative. The conversation with heaven could also go on for hours so in the end we provided Lurline and her prayer team with a room at the far end of the School of Mission building, and even that did not entirely prevent the distant rumblings.

It was on a Friday that I returned from Burkina Faso and thought it wise to make the family doctor my first stop. The lady soon discovered a tender and swollen liver, took blood for testing and sent me home to bed with a packet of pain-killers. Over the weekend the pain increased so much we called the emergency doctor who visited twice and counselled patience until the hospitals were better staffed on Monday. Lurline was having none of this and took it upon herself to pray the dreaded parasites out of my system, which she did, leaving me fit and well, if a little deaf. Not deaf enough however, not to hear some angry words from the family doctor who with a bill for two emergency visits in her hand, now found me impossibly well.
Accusing me of wasting her time and budget she promptly issued the entire family with a three-line letter ending her services forever.

The next week the blood tests came back as positive and disease-ridden as any can be after a few days in the African bush. Lurline, silent for once smiled knowingly, I imagine God did as well. As for the parasites, I don't doubt they were glad to leave with their hands over their ears.
ME, MYSELF AND I

There is an unholy trinity which is just as likely to hinder you as the real Trinity is to help you. As I know the three villains personally, I will give you their names. Actually, you are acquainted with them already: Me, Myself and I.

A young couple came along the other day with marriage problems. I said that there is no such thing. What we have here is me, myself and I in the room, two times over, each wanting life their way.

I is a great troublemaker. "What is wrong with the world" asked GK Chesterton in The Times and replied: "I am." When I bang my head against a wall and say, "What is wrong with my family, my church or my work," the answer tends to be the same. I am.

They may never change but if I am willing, God can change me, and myself, and that means that I no longer feed the problem. Instead I become friends with myself and then a peacemaker to them.
NO ROLEX FOR MY RETIREMENT

For me there was no gold watch. No-one made a speech once I had I cleared my desk. After a final cup of tea, my departure was quiet, unnoticed by anyone. I retired early and forever.

This week I made it to the official retirement age of sixty-five for which I am deeply thankful to God for keeping death, disease, divorce and disasters away from our door and our family. The government say that I shall have a state retirement pension and a number of holiday firms, cruise organisers and investment houses say that they will help me to spend it.

So what will I do now? I will tell you.

The fact is that in my early retirement which took place in 1980 when I was 31 years old, I left my own company without salary, pension, champagne, company car or that gold Rolex watch engraved with my name, to follow Christ and the Great Commission. So I can hardly retire again for a second time just because my age says so.
The deckchair at the seaside and the round the world cruise will have to wait as will a Rolex for my wrist. At least until the state pension increases one-hundred fold, and not even then I suspect.

Neither Pilar nor I think that we have even begun to scratch the surface of the call of God to bless the nations. The future may not be a continuation of the past but the call to Christ and to the coming of his kingdom is as exciting and demanding as it ever was when I took early retirement at 32 years old.

Whatever came over me!
Today I intended not to wear my trousers in response to an email from a pastor from Chile, who said that to wear trousers is to contradict Scripture. God forbid, I do not want to do that. However, the cool wind and rain persuades me to delay. If future e-mails become too hard to bear then I shall borrow a long skirt and present a more biblical male appearance, but then in Bible times the ladies wore the pants.

Oh dear, I am confused.

What I do know is that sermons forbidding fashions, earrings, hats and cinemas emptied our churches in England until the teaching about grace of God reversed the retreat.

When thousands of people shout Amen to cultural prohibitions, it only goes to show how much we like to believe that keeping a set of rules pleases God.

Rules, rather than working hard at the real business of relationship with him and each other.

So, come with your rings wherever they are, your tattoos, with hats on or off and bring all the mess of life with you.

Let's make a start at loving God, being loved by him and liking each other. And by the way, it's OK - keep those pants on.

Please.
REJECT REJECTION AND THIS IS HOW

When your Dad is swept into eternity on your tenth Christmas and your Mum follows not long afterwards, everything you think and do after that sub-consciously is to fill that emptiness. In your teens you marry for all the wrong reasons but when the girl grows up, she leaves, adding to the suppressed damage that weeps deep down beyond where pills reach. Rejection and fear of more rejection ooze up to the surface uninvited and colour every decision you make, or more likely, do not make. You long to be accepted yet rejection throws many a pity party for you and tells you and your guests to come clothed in misery. On the other hand Jesus also says, 'Come as you are,' but not stay as you are. Trust me here because this is my story. I listened to the words of Jesus and although it is true that rejection still stalks me from the shadows, its whisperings are pale and unattractive at the side of the unconditional acceptance and the healing and love that God gives.

Take it from me. Reject and eject rejection.

Accept acceptance. You will never look back.
The smiles hid fangs and beneath the velvet gloves were X-men claws, newly sharpened for the occasion. The cameras lit up. The TV screens flickered, and the live show was on. I was on the panel. Along from me sat Miguel Diez, a man following Jesus, who controversially reaches out to street peoples in Spain and another 56 nations caring freely for more than 50,000 men, women and children. A man who is admired by many, envied by others and criticised by not a few. "Who are you," one man in the invited audience asked into the travelling microphone, seeking more trouble than information, "an apostle, a prophet or a businessman?" The perspective on life that Miguel Diez has is this: "I am the donkey that carries Jesus," he replied gently. "Every morning Jesus puts his mantle on my back, and I take him to where he wants to go. He does what he alone can do, and we carry on." In the heavily charged silence that followed all you could hear was the muted mechanical whir of fangs and claws returning to their sheaths. Perspectives changed. Suddenly, Jesus had a choice of donkeys.

I ordered straw for supper.
THE CYCLIST RECYCLED

It happened at the tender age of 42, and as they say in Star Wars, in a distant galaxy far from here. In fact it took place in the rural depths of Aragon in Spain, far from the paparazzi and more critically far from anyone who might recognise me.

The time of day was carefully chosen to ensure that the locals were deep into their afternoon siesta so as not to gape at the sight of me astride a bicycle for the first time in my life.

Pilar's hands stabilised the prehistoric contraption at the rear and I wobbled precariously both inwardly and outwardly to cover several yards before mind overcame matter and all courage expired. Three days later, I didn't even notice when Pilar gently let go.

Before I knew it dusty streets became even dustier countryside, and today nothing less than a Tour de France will do. Well, that it perhaps a slight exaggeration as it is the gentle hills of my village not the alps that defeat me.

However, in a curious repetition of history it is now Pilar, of pension age, who is learning to swim for the first time.
She is aided by all sorts of flotation devices and a rescue helicopter circles the local pool, and she has the agile dolphin of myself alongside (another exaggeration) saying well done, keep going.

When it comes to cycling, swimming, painting, writing, learning an instrument, praying or doing good, why is it that most of us never do what we know is in us? We have blamed the devil, pleaded an empty purse, lack of talent, no time and a dozen other excuses for our procrastination.

The truth is if you start now, by this time next week the symphony may be composed, the portrait may be painted, the wheel may be between your hands, or whatever God said to you way back, is actually beginning to happen.

Cycle or recycle alongside me, will you.
UNSTOPPABLE TO THE FINISHING LINE

We spent one evening last week with our oldest friend, Terry, and his wife Ann. Over an Indian meal we remembered first meeting when I was 18 years old, and that is a while ago. Terry was living on an ex-WWII decaying motor torpedo boat until his lease expired, whereupon he moved in with me for just a 'week or two'. For years to come, we repaired car engines on the gold-coloured lounge carpet, and built a Lotus Elan in the garden. We were in business together until 1972, when Terry left the world of racing cars and even faster living to follow the call of God. It was Terry that led the wreckage that was me to Jesus in 1977 and he returned to the showroom in 1980 to allow me to follow the call of God. He retired early, and you can guess why - to follow the call of God. These days Terry at 70, and Ann have a very beautiful life-saving mission to malnourished infants in Ghana, which we feel privileged to support. After forty years in one church, on one mission, following one Saviour and doing one thing - God's will, the defining word that comes to mind for Terry in his life and on the track is: Unstoppable to the finish.
WHY JESUS WALKED ON THE WATER

First of all, you need to know that the fish that Peter caught for a living in the Sea of Galilee are Tilapia. Except on those occasions when he caught nothing at all, but that is another story altogether. We were listening, well, eavesdropping really, on a tour guide who was explaining the stories of Peter to a group of Russians who were visiting the ruins of Capernaum. The guide was finding the language difficult and in the end, not being able to find or explain the Russian word for Tilapia, he decided instead to say the fish were - piranhas. They knew that word. Well, of course, thinking about it, this makes perfect sense. With piranhas in the Sea of Galilee Jesus would obviously walk on the water, rather than swim or splash his way across. Similarly, this explains the fear that Peter experienced when he stepped out of the boat and walked a short distance on the water before falling under the waves and straight into the realm of the piranhas. Who would not cry out, "Lord, save me?" Finally, we now know why the other disciples were so reluctant to get out of the boat. We smiled and we hope that you will as well. However, we did not put our feet in the water. Just in case.
In my childhood home, the subject was never mentioned and names were not so much as breathed. Not once.

Where did my mother come from?

Who was she?

Her birth said to be in 1907 cannot be traced. Her origins, her childhood, the secrets of her heart and the story of whatever happened when a Jewish girl impossibly married a Methodist man in 1936 were lost 46 years ago when the curtains of time closed forever.

Her maiden name of Gene Edels had been changed to be more comfortable to English ears but nevertheless our friend Sally managed to trace an entry in the Aliens Register of 1905 noting the arrival of a immigrant family from Kovno, Russia into Liverpool.

They trail they left behind them was stone cold. Probably deliberately so. That is, until now. For a long time we had intended to visit Kovno, now Kaunas in Lithuania yet knowing that the entire Jewish community had been shot and their records destroyed in World War II made us hesitate for years.
In the end, because there are some things you just have to do, we booked two Ryanair tickets for a four-day visit to the land of my grandparents.

Last Monday Google gave us the name of a lady guide so we e-mailed to ask about a two-hour walk, and said why we were coming. Within one day, she had pinned down the family under their Yiddish names and located the graves of our 19th century relatives.

How do you explain our casual enquiry falling into the inbox of a leading scholar of all things Jewish and Lithuanian who without being asked turned the faintest of rabbit trails into a six-lane genealogical highway to an unknown destination?

Don't you think that sometimes God is waiting for us to make the next move before it becomes his turn to show us what he can do.
A SYSTEMATIC CONFESSION

Today I listened to a world-class businessman speaking about all the systems that he employs to order his busy life. Equally, I don't know how I could possibly do what I do without my technology and systems. Some are obvious while others run in the background. My computer has a system and that crashes. I have my systematic way of approaching each day, especially early mornings. This also crashes.

Yet a lot gets done, but it couldn't be true, could it - that the systems now own me, and I serve them? In the beginning, I was the master, and they were my servants who lived downstairs. The idea was that they would serve me.

Which they do, of course, but why do I have the sneaky feeling that they don't like me taking a day off or having a holiday?

Systems with feelings, what am I saying? This is creepy. Did we change places somewhere along the road? Sounds to me as if some time on the couch of a systems analyst is needed.

But do I go or do I send my systems?
A VERY ENGLISH SILENCE

Can two men sit side by side in a train for two hours and not say a word other than a good morning? If the two men are English, it is perfectly possible, because Englishmen do not speak unless they are introduced. I wondered why my young Brazilian friends were carrying their guitars, after all the train ride into Porto in Portugal was only twenty minutes.

No sooner than the train moved away, the guitars came out and the passengers were treated to songs and smiles between stations. Every song shared their faith, which got people talking and no one asked for money.

The Brazilians were making the most of the opportunity and when the train arrived, the Englishman, who had not been introduced, quietly emerged, red-faced from under the seat and feared what might happen on the return journey.

Opportunity is impatient. It often comes disguised and rarely knocks twice.

We do well to drop everything in order to take hold of a sudden opportunity, and if right now the future looks a little bleak, then today is a very good time to invite it or create it.

Some people even ambush opportunity en-route to where it is going, to possess the concealed treasure that it is carrying to whoever looks up and sees the stars.
AFRICA IN MY EYES AND IN MY HEART

Africa, land of red earth,
and deserts of sand
that colour my skin with dust.
Where peoples live
forgotten by the world,
and children die
never seeing bread
or clean water from a spring.
Africa, you seducer
of all who visit you
with your warm breezes
and infinite horizons,
yet in you poverty reigns
and breaks the hearts
of those who love you,
who want answers
for your people who are lost
forgotten and fallen
in your red-stained soils.
In the sandy wastelands
in the men who groan
in the women
with sandpaper hands
whose eyes forever gaze
towards the horizon
waiting for the embrace
of God and man
to put things right
in the lost and forgotten
world that is theirs.

Pilar
AFTER YOU PLEASE

A gentleman always opens the door for a lady to enter, the car door, the restaurant door - whatever. Of course, opening the door to a shop might be a little more costly.

Good manners expect that a lady should go first, unless she is descending a hotel staircase in a long flowing gown, and your big feet happen to step on the hem causing her to arrive head over heels into the foyer. Those were my feet. Nowadays, I go first and if the lady does trip, then I am there to cushion her fall.

I like the way that I love God only because he first loved me, and he was there to cushion my fall when my life fell apart half a lifetime ago. In fact, since then I have learned it is always best to let God go first, and to follow. Not only does he know where I should be going, but he knows the way too.

It is not just good manners to open the door for divinity and say, "After you, please," but it also makes perfect sense.
AGE IS NOTHING BUT A NUMBER

The advice was to 'do again what you did at first,' and in obedience to God's word and to the undoubted pleasure of the newly-teethed Charity Commission, the pruning clippers came out.

Not two weeks later we were around the table with Miguel Diez, the pastor of over 60,000 people across the world. To our astonishment we heard him telling his leaders in our part of the world to do exactly the same and to put evangelism and discipleship back on top of their agenda. As it was in the beginning. This week we heard the same advice for a third time.

How then do you do again what you once did when that beginning was thirty years ago in days when energy overflowed and life stretched into the distant forever?

Back then we bought a 3000 seat circus tent and took the gospel around the nation whereas this summer we are down to a tent for two of us.
Back then we were young people, naïve daredevils in the faith and penniless. Careless, in both the right and wrong senses of the word.

Today we are not so young, not so poor and the mirror says we have changed, as has the world beyond recognition, and many churches as well. Some of our founding supporters are now in their eighties and nineties with fast diminishing hearing, mobility and minds, and if they were to try to do what they did at first, it would guarantee an immediate entrance into the life to come.

Only the Lord changeth not.

Age of course is nothing but a number, and the required doing may well be an invitation to return to the inward attitude of nothing being too much trouble for Christ and the gospel, as it was in the heady and innocent days of our first love. What Jesus asks is always age-related and appropriate.

However, if we are to go back that far and do again what we actually did at first, we will have to ask the shop to change the cosy tent for two we have just bought, for something a little bigger and more colourful.

Another circus tent perhaps.
It is often said that the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. Wearing jeans instead of tunics and blogging on Facebook rather than a scroll will not save us from repeating the errors of our fathers. Yet hidden in history is a power for good that can be harnessed.

For example, in just six weeks in the late 1800's, 100,000 people in Llanelli, Wales decided to follow Christ. Empty church buildings on every street corner still evidence the crowds of young people who prayed to take the gospel to the world, only to lose their own lives in the trenches of World War I. How curious that 100 years later, this once derelict town gave birth to a movement that through prayer intentionally taps into a century-old heritage of unanswered Amen's.

World Horizons in Llanelli is filling the world with young people who live the dream that was swallowed by war. Similarly, in Hernhutt, Germany, a sensitive visitor perceives the pregnant atmosphere left by 100 years of uninterrupted Moravian prayer. In fact, many an ancient ruin hides an invisible reservoir of centuries-old prayer waiting to be released from God's pending tray through you, through me, and through anyone who dares to say his or her own Amen to the Amen of history.
AND LEILA KHALID SMILED

The sign made itself clear in Hebrew, Arabic and English: "Entrance forbidden to Israeli citizens. Your lives are in danger."

If all went quiet, it was because right there on the Jericho Road, the minibus engine died.

True to the Bible story, the Jews passed by fearing to stop. Christians in their tour buses waved, and Palestinians hastened on. The 24-hour rescue service only offered an automatic message in Hebrew, and darkness soon fell and cold gripped.

Do Good Samaritan’s still exist?

A taxi driver emerged from ancient Samaria, looked, backed up and took a risk to fill his eight seats with nine strangers. As a Palestinian, Raoud could not enter the Jerusalem area, so he took us up and down hills, then through dark, narrow streets.

He by-passed Bethany at high speed to evade the military and his own people, until we finally reached Bethlehem.
Near the impenetrable 30-foot high graffiti-covered security wall, he slid into a dim alley. We had to leave, only to be threatened by shouts, guns and dogs coming from the Israeli military.

Out of the shadows slid Khalid, a teenage coffee seller who whispered his presence and for a few coins led us through a labyrinth of alleys to a grim, grey, long caged tunnel which led towards the wall checkpoint.

We walked through very alone until an armed teenage Israeli girl soldier took a look at us and unceremoniously waved us through. Only for us to fall into the less than tende care of some very dubious looking Arab taxi drivers, with eyes that reflected the dollars in their minds.

And all the while Leila Khalid, the infamous airline hijacker of three decades past looked down on us from her mural on the wall and smiled.

I think she knew that we would never sing 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' in the same way ever again.
AND SARAH LAUGHED TOO

The voice on the phone was insistent, "Come and collect your wife, she is anesthetized but the surgeon has gone home and he is not coming back!" Pilar was having a suspicious tumour on her vocal cords removed, one that had stolen her song as well as her voice. But what did this mean?

About five anxious days later our Pastor, Eric, called me into his office and dared to say, "Believe this if you want to but Pilar needs to buy a bottle of cider vinegar, mix it with honey and warm water and gargle with it three times a day." As we drove home I repeated this unlikely comment to a very hoarse Pilar, who laughed.

"And yes," said a voice in my heart as clearly as any audible voice, "Yes, and Sarah laughed too." "Yes," I said, "and Sarah laughed too.

Our laughter stopped.

If you know the Bible story then you will know why we turned the car around and went looking for this unknown commodity.
In the promised land of vinegar and honey the gargling of obedience began. On the third day, there was such a choking cough from the bathroom, that I ran upstairs to find Pilar staring into the bowl at the shattered remains of a large black cyst whose grip had been broken, leaving no soreness, never to come back to this day.

That was 25 years ago but this year's problem is arthritis with only pain-killers on offer. Juan, a taxi driver in Peru e-mailed out of the blue to tell us about an improbable concoction that he was making out of magnesium which had released him from all joint pain. Then a coincidental passing remark from Peter, in London, mentioned Margaret Hills's classic book from years ago called Treating Arthritis without Drugs.

Do we believe in these kitchen remedies? No, we believe in Jesus who is alive and present and after prayer has a way of taking you where you have never been before. Like Sarah we have learned not to laugh too quickly, so cider vinegar is back on the menu along with molasses, Epsom salt baths and magnesium tablets.

Don't laugh, because all the severe pain in Pilar's legs has gone. Her hands are a whole lot better and although there is some way to go yet, we are learning again that it is still definitely better to doubt your doubts rather than to risk doubting the word of the Lord.
ANY TIME IS TEA-TIME

The white stripe on my sore wrist from being out too long in the scorching Ugandan sun caught Tom Okello's eye. Smiling, the man that Idi Amin executed three times said, "You people have the watches but we have the time. For us every day is Christmas Day and anytime is tea-time."

With that the cups appeared, the conversation flowed, people came and went in a timeless, unhurried way unknown to the Blackberry and i-Phone generation. Looking back, somehow, everything got done.

Some people have neither a Casio or a Rolex yet they have time for everyone and everything. They smile and serenity enters the room when they do.

Now tell me that's not better than the over-stuffed schedules that we call time management.

Tea anyone?

Milk and sugar?
The man's eyes take on a dreamy romanticism and oblivious to all around him, he says, "I wish this could go on forever." Slowly, the camera rises to show him seated in his car facing a stationary line of traffic to the horizon. Yet our VW Polo driver is so enamoured with his car that even sitting still and going nowhere fast, makes him feel good. Not many things in life feed our soul like that, not even a VW Polo in gridlocked traffic comes near.

On the contrary we are drained dry by this generation's addiction to our Apple and Blackberry phones that deliver information by the second and demand decisions from us by return. If there is no escape, then you and I have to make one. Did time and space ever unexpectedly stand still for you in quietness alongside water or at sunset? Did a mellow peace that is out of this world ever fill your soul even for a few minutes? Do you know what I mean? We can't make the moment last forever but we can make time and space for it to happen again. So why am I here writing on this side of the screen and why are you there, reading on the other side. Leave the Apple and the Blackberry and go for some God therapy for the real you that lives underneath all that technology. That man you see sitting quietly in the distance, hands-free and heart-free, well, likely that will be me.
APPLE, BMW AND GOOGLE COOL

Last night the church meeting where we live was so cool that within five minutes I was frozen solid by everything I don’t like. The loud music vibrated my ribs in rhythm with the bass. The smoke got in my eyes and the fast flashing images made my head spin. Young people smiled benignly. There was no preaching but lots of stories. It was totally Apple, Google and BMW cool, consumer friendly and a marketing triumph.

Now, in this packed-to-the-walls church people who feel the need go forward at the end to be prayed for and a team waits to pray for them. If a crowd gathers then innocent people who are hiding in the seats are ‘grabbed’ by a team leader and gently sent to the front to help. And so it happened to me just as faith was rising in me to get to the exit unnoticed.

One young man was still unattended so I asked him why he had come to the front, quietly hoping it was no more than a case of ringing in his ears from the music.
“I want to give my life to Jesus,” he said. These days, you hear this once in a blue moon.

He was genuine and sincere, his decision had been weighed, considered and reasoned. There had been neither the wooing of worship as we knew it years ago nor any soul-penetrating preaching. No Bible had been read and no tele-evangelist had made a guilt-laden impassioned appeal yet the young man had encountered Jesus and knew him to be alive and his Saviour. No sooner than we began to pray together than he promptly fell into the arms of Jesus again.

Today I feel like a dinosaur. Something big and clumsy from an age gone by facing extinction. But then again, hey - what does it matter whether or not I like the 'cool' of contemporary church, or the cool of Apple, Virgin, BMW's or Google. What matters is that last night someone knew how to communicate to Adam in a way that he understood. Good for them, I say.

Anyway, I thought I would tell you the story before the meteor strikes and brontosaurus like me go into the history books.
It seems to me that the people whose cards and websites announce their titles in lights are rarely as gifted as they say they are. Some people get to where they are by promoting themselves. Way back in antiquity a man named Korah did just that. He got himself into such a mess that being swallowed alive by the earth was probably a relief to him and to all. Later on, a young man by the name of Saul had some fans who made him king for his looks. He collapsed under the pressure and in the end took his own life. On the other hand, John Baptist was said to be a man sent not by himself, or his devotees, but sent by God. I like the idea of that. I always like it when the need of the day cries out to the right man or the woman who is quietly doing the job anyway and just needs a wider sphere of influence to do even better. The likelihood is that given the responsibility he or she simply carries on serving, untouched by the pride of titles, and changes the world. The wisdom of yesteryear always said that appointed without being anointed means soon to be disappointed. Looking back I imagine that Korah and Saul would agree.
ARE WE TWO THOUSAND YEARS TOO LATE

Whatever you expect, Israel is not what you expected.

If you expected the very, very old, Israel is as new as tomorrow. And vice-versa. If you expected the deeply religious, Israel is altogether secular. And vice-versa. If you expected to see the Israel of the Bible you are 2000 years too late. If you expected tension then you find peace, yet cross a line and things could be very different in a moment. You expected to see Jews and you find Israelis, Palestinians, Arabs and Bedouins and ten thousand visitors. All mixed up and all at the same time. You expect to find Christians just like you, more or less, but now you wonder where you fit in.

Today we baptised some ladies from Peru in the waters of the Jordan River where Jesus was baptised by John. The signs to our left said, 'Danger Mines.'

Soldiers did not want us to swim over to Jordan or the Jordanians to swim over to us. The quiet elegance of an Orthodox Christian group entering the water contrasted with the high spirits of Brazilian Pentecostals.
We did it our way.

Jose from Spain then offered to immerse me following a time of renewal of vows to follow Jesus.

We then immersed Pilar under the waters and we asked the same Holy Spirit who descended on Jesus to fall upon her. To our amazement, He did just that, and cameras flashed everywhere.

Right now, as the Sabbath begins on Friday afternoon and Jerusalem closes down until this time tomorrow, hundreds of Orthodox Jewish families in their fashions and finery from centuries past are streaming past our window that overlooks the Mount of Olives. They are walking to the Western Wall of the Temple to pray. Downstairs Maria Carmen and Paqui are preparing a traditional Shabat meal and Miguel, a scholar of all things Biblical and Jewish is putting the finishing touches to his talk.

We don't know what will happen next, but whatever it is, it will be good but most likely not be what we expect.

And looking back, it was not.
ARTHRITIS CAME TO STAY BUT NOT FOR LONG

Two or three years ago, Pilar was finding stairs to be increasingly difficult because of severe knee pain, and because of hand pain, I would often cut her meals into fork size pieces. Other pains came and went with the weather. Arthritis was the diagnosis, it can be inherited but as often as not it just appears uninvited. A life-long diet of pain-killers inevitably follows, but it does not have to.

Today, Pilar can walk for miles without difficulty. She can ascend and descend stairs without complaint and a knife and fork pose no problems. Most of the inflammation has reduced and if you ask why, we will say by prayer, pills and patience.

Prayer first and foremost, alone and together at every opportunity opens the door to knowing what to do, and brought one very significant moment as Pilar recommitted her life to Jesus when standing in the River Jordan in Israel. The power of the Holy Spirit visibly fell upon her which made a lot of tourists point their cameras our way.
Embarrassing it was, but nevertheless we have the idea that a lot of arthritis was left behind in the waters.

Long-term, Pilar follows a well-explained dietary plan from a book titled, 'Treating Arthritis the Drug Free Way.' We visited the Clinic founded by the author, Margaret Hills and came home with various natural pills and powders. Looking back, we can't put a finger on the how or when the arthritis lost its grip, but for sure we have seen faith, frustration, failure, actions, obedience, trust and tears all mingled together with some very necessary patience. What we do know is that many of our readers tread the same downward spiral staircase, and with this little story we want to give you hope and a reason to keep believing to find God's way to reverse, however slowly, whatever unwelcome disease has come your way.
AS NEAR AS THE NEXT ROOM

My father-in-law Alejandro never cared about Jesus, faith or people who believed. Yet in his very last days his heart softened and after prayer at 88 years of age, he entered eternity with peace in his soul.

Some weeks later, Juana, his wife for more than 50 years and a lifelong believer began to weep as she was tempted to question the seriousness of this unlikely last-minute change of heart. Yet before her distress became more than skin-deep, somehow, God opened time and space to her and showed Alejandro to her. She saw clearly and heard words, yet those with her could only see her amazement.

Juana said that he was looking young. All unbelief had gone and he was waiting for her. After that she never grieved for one more minute in the two years before she joined him.
Your e-mail from distant lands asked me to buy a car for you, and then you mention your eye-watering debts. Last week you joined a mission, but you need support and a four-figure sum to move your family across the country. Today you asked for school fees. Yet sending you a Western Union transfer will be like giving an aspirin to a man who has fallen under a train. It will have no effect. What is required is the axe that Jesus takes to the root of problems. And here it comes.

If it is true that God's work, done in God's ways never lacks God's supplies, there are three questions:

Is this God's work or your own good idea?
Am you doing this in God's ways?
Does God agree with your first two answers?

Jesus says that if you seek first the Kingdom of God and His right ways then all that you need will be provided.

One of those ways is for you give generously to the lost or the poor. A giver is the trigger that fires an explosion of God's prosperity.

You asked for an aspirin and I have given you an axe but one will work for now and the other will work for a lifetime. Best, don't you think, to suffer a little short-term pain for a long-term gain?
BAD HABITS ARE GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Bad habits are good for business. Let's face it, just ask Weight Watchers. Bad habits can get a grip first-time round and linger a lifetime defying all good sense, will-power, pills, snake oil and every quick fix on the shelf.

My friend Miguel Diez has taken tens of thousands of addicted men, women and children off the streets as they are. He insists that with God's help getting people off heroin but curiously not tobacco, takes maybe a couple of days but keeping them off can take many years and just as many tears. Freedom happens when the discipline of good habits squeezes the life out of the bad guys in there.

By the way, God does home calls too, don't be afraid to ask him.
BEND OVER BACKWARDS

It took years for me to discover that the best gifts from God and in life are intentionally placed on the bottom shelf. This means that instead of stretching upwards and scrabbling ever higher, you do some bending down to obtain them. You have to lower your heart, tell your head to do the same and then bend your back to reach down to pick up the gifts that are waiting there.

Humbling, but this is nothing.

The instructions now tell you that the gift you have in your hands is intended for giving to others and not for display on your shelf or chest. The truth is that people who lower themselves never go anywhere empty-handed because that bottom shelf has a way of always being full.

Not everyone has a bad back and cannot bend down, so why is there so much dust down there?
BETHLEHEM UNITED SCORES OWN GOAL

The eye-catching sign on the main square in Bethlehem was intended to make the visitor feel at home. "We make you welcome just as we made Jesus welcome." I am not sure which Bible the sign writer for the local Chamber of Commerce had been reading, but as far as I know the welcome that the parents of Jesus received consisted of being pointed towards a stable. That was because there was no room on offer at the Inn or curiously, anywhere else in Joseph's hometown. These days a welcome like that would be on Trip Advisor before the evening. Something of an own goal for the Bethlehem United shops team. We smiled and welcomed Jesus all over again into our hearts, lives, family, future and finances. The living Jesus that is, not the baby that drives Bethlehem's commerce nor even the crucified Jesus of Jerusalem's history. Every Christmas a thousand, thousand preachers ask if we will make more room for Jesus than the Bethlehem innkeeper of long ago ever did. Now, we are not going to say no and make the same mistake twice, are we? However much the street poster tries to rewrite history.
I once drove halfway across Europe to be a go-between in an argument that was none of my business. If you ever feel tempted to do likewise, know that it is like trying to grab a stray dog by the ears only to have it turn and bite your hands. Sure enough, true to the Proverb both parties sank their teeth into me.

These days I know exactly what I should be doing in life. I can tell you why that is and how I came to know for certain. Believe me, dodging the flak across no-man's land running between opposing trenches carrying messages to antagonistic leaders is not one of them.

Neither are another ten things I used to fall into doing most days. One man wiser than I calls it uncommanded work.

Like David, Israel’s king long ago, I have discovered that the boundary lines fall for me in pleasant places. So long as I stay in line with what I know to do my creativity flows, my gifts make room for me and life is satisfying.

Cross the boundary lines and I fall into the hands of pirates and cannibals who capture me, boil me alive and spit out my bones. To stay safe, be true to your call and never grab someone else's ears because unless they invite you they are just as likely to fight you.
BEYOND BREAKING POINT

In a seminar for leaders in Lira, north Uganda I used the word resilient and instantly hands went up everywhere, "What does resilient mean, we don't know the word?"

Try as I might I couldn't get it over, until a lady stood up, turned to the men and said, "We have been though Obote, we have survived Amin, the LRA abducts our children, our daughters die of AIDS, the UN food trucks pass us by, we have no money and no jobs - but we are still praising God, our faith is strong, and we are hoping for a better tomorrow. We are resilient."

Everyone nodded, now they understood perfectly.
Betty Roberts, our most faithful friend for over 20 years and a supporter of family and mission work in Uganda, has left this life after 88 years. Betty was born in Wales in the afterglow of the revival years. She loved Jesus and always wanted be a missionary, yet lifelong health problems got in the way. Instead, at home she sat or slept by the telephone, available twenty-fours a day to listen and to pray. She lived very simply, never married and to the end she was sending some of her state pension to Africa. There was always a tin of salmon for us to take home. If we ever dared to suggest that she should spend her pension on herself and somehow we 'forgot' to take the envelope she offered, then the cash would arrive in the post next day, or worse still, Betty would send a blank cheque in an open envelope. We never banked it.

The Lord arranged for Betty's final two years of increasing fragility to be spent in a luxurious five-star care home that would not be out of place on London's finest streets. For Betty, Jesus kept the best till the last and repaid a life lost for Jesus with extravagant interest. We said our goodbyes on a cold and very wet day, real Welsh weather to be sure. Betty would have smiled. 'Welwn ni chi fory' as they say in Welsh, see you soon.
BLANK PAGES MAKE FOR A QUIET TIME

Only a few years ago you were considered 'naked' if you came to church without a Bible, and a man wishing to be noticed would carry a thick black one with notes, maps and a concordance.

These days the spiritually adept fiddle with their i-Phones, i-Pads or Kindles whilst the unenlightened flick their eyes between the big screen behind the speaker and the blue glow of the neighbour's mobile. Back home six different Bibles may grace the bookshelf yet if you ask the Maindo people of Mozambique about which version they read, it would be a book of blank pages because not one word of the scriptures has been translated into a language they can understand.

This is true for another 2,500 peoples.

Think about it, not one word. This makes for a very quiet, quiet time. Knowing this, we felt no hesitation to send Roland from Peru up the Amazon carrying 540 first-ever editions of the Bible into the Wampi language.
On his return Roland said, "I will never forget seeing one lady sit for three hours, turning page after page, her eyes shining and her face a picture to watch as tears of joy fell. She told me that she had always believed that God spoke her language, and today she has heard Him speaking it for the first time."

John Wesley said "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. God himself has shown me the way and written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book! At any price give me the book of God."

Two centuries later it is still the cry of the world.
BLOOD MONEY IN CONGO

My friend David Roselli rides the roller-coaster of the mind. It carries him to the pinnacle of anger only to plunge him into the depths of sadness.

David walks the night-time streets of Kinshasa to hold the hands of small, sleepy children. He asks their names and speaks tenderly to just some of the 20,000 boys and girls who live and die there.

In a nation broken by poverty, wars and corruption, money-hungry so-called 'pastors' charge fees to discern the source of all the ills of a family and when an unwanted child is conveniently discovered to be a witch, he or she is driven away.

In an age long past, another money-loving prophet called Balaam was also contracted to curse innocent people but failed because God refused to cooperate and did the opposite. That is what God does best; he blesses and he does not curse. Not for fees, not for anything or anybody. David, the Chemin-Neuf community and many others are working to reverse the curse upon these innocent children and show them the blessing of God.

We say Yes! Hats in the air for these people, cheers and shouts from us.
BLOW THAT VUVUZELA

I am sure that life was terribly uneventful 40 or 50 years ago, apart from things like a World War, but these days we have extreme sports, extreme highs, extreme scams and many an extreme crisis so an extreme word was required by our extremely cool Facebook and Twitter generation.

Fantastic.

We say it all the time.

But why not.

Down with everything routine, boring, average, mediocre and meaningless in life, hopes and church. Let's break the monotony and do some fantastic giving, going, sending, doing and being.

Come on, someone blow that vuvuzela.
There is one management model where only the sky is the limit. In most businesses and churches structure is the regular triangle. The head man at the top works his genius and his frustrations out downwards by telling staff or congregation what to do.

Or else.

You know the feeling.

However when the top man chooses to be at the bottom as a servant leader who supports his team, the atmosphere changes. The core team in turn learn the benefits of lifting the staff upwards. The staff feel supported so they easily serve the customers or the congregation who feel good, wanted and needed. They return.

Bottom up creates a beautiful structure to shop in, serve in or worship in and the great side-effect is that future expansion is only limited by an infinitely open heaven above. Not restricted by a solid floor below.
BRAVERY IS SEEN NOT SCANNED

Alex at 10 years old woke up with serious lumps emerging everywhere. This week, after two and a half years of incredible bravery, prayer, tears and chemotherapy, the MRI scan came back showing no sign of cancer. When our friend John heard the words, "six months to live," with battlefield bravery he took to prayer, asking for prayer and choosing life by the minute. He took the palliative treatment - most of the time. This week, 14 months on, he eats well, works all hours, plays sports with his kids and gives like crazy to missions. More cancer stories than ever before have an happy ending, but sometimes it is not that way for you or yours. This I know all too well. Even so, 'fear not,' says the Bible - 366 times, that's once for every day and one extra for a leap year. That's how often we need to hear those two words. Fear not. It is true that hearts may fail for fear, yet bravery in the face of the enemy is always rewarded, hopefully in life, and if not, then in the good memories left behind. After all bravery is seen not scanned.
BREAD AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT

Give us this day our daily bread. Let me give you my addition to the prayer: “Give us enough for ourselves and a very great deal more to give to other people.” We are daily people. We are made to live one great day at a time yet how easily we daydream into the dark past and then time travel into an even bleaker future of our imagination. No wonder people get depressed, do nothing and then ask where the day went.

The best bread is daily bread, it's the freshest, straight out of the oven and your mouth waters just thinking about it. This daily bread is yours for the asking. Daily bread is food for body, soul and spirit. There is enough for you and a lot more to give to others. Trust me, my last salary was in 1980 when I was 32 years old. Today I am 66 and by following Jesus there has never been one day without daily bread on our table. Curiously when we break it up and pass it on to others even more that we gave away comes in tomorrow's delivery. For me daily bread is not so much for eating but for delivering.

What do you think?
BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY

Right now, a lot of people are badly affected by the economic crisis. This we understand, because in 1982 when we decided to leave all and follow the call of Christ the first stop was in a financial no-man's land.

Back then, there was a day we were being driven by a couple who we knew had a home freezer overflowing with food. I wondered what conversational gymnastics would be required to bring up the subject of frozen bread and perhaps be given a loaf to try. Instead, a Bible verse came into my mind, "I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." "Well Lord," said I, "there is a first time for everything. Keep listening."

The day never came.

Instead without appeals, fuss or marketing the mission or ourselves, we quietly talk to Jesus about things and leave him to choose who will respond to his voice, not to ours. Inexplicably, we have always had enough to live on and many times more to give to others, but don't imagine this is because of our goodness, for it is not. This is the extravagant, undeserved and unfailing goodness of God, a grace that is equally there for everyone. Especially for you. Prayer is your one-stop shop when it comes to fetching bread for your journey.
BASKETFULLS OF EMBARRASSMENT

What happens when you are in a strange country for the first time, you can't speak the language, you have very little money, and you have to do the shopping as well.

Every trip to the big Sainsbury's supermarket that had just opened was a reluctant journey of fear. How many times did I follow ladies with their trolleys filled to overflowing, whilst my hand basket had only a few essential items and whatever was still eatable on the reduced counter. Even then, I never seemed to have enough to pay the bill and the checkout lady had to take some items away. The embarrassment was intense and totally public. If coming from Spain to England was a challenge in itself, the real adventure was learning to depend on God, words which are easy to hear coming from the pulpit but a different story altogether at a Sainsbury's check-out.

The day came when hard choices had to be made and lines went through my shopping list as I walked around the store with anxiety and fear close behind, whispering and laughing at me.
Suddenly, I heard another voice speaking deep inside me saying, "From this day on do not fear. Buy what is on your list and you will always have enough to pay with. I will provide all you need." If this was the voice of God, and it was, then I was going to do what I was told.

How I got through the checkout that day I do not know, but what I do know is from that day to this, thirty-three years later, God's promise has kept our kitchen cupboards full. My family have never missed a mealtime, fear is a thing of the past and many hundreds of visitors have eaten well.

Pray or pay are very similar sounding words. Only one of them does not need the help of a credit-card and has no limits. That's the one to go shopping with.

Pilar.
It is very enriching to be able to speak a second or third language. My wife made sure that all three of our children did just that. It was different for me. In school, they put me out of German, followed by French and enriched me in the girls typing class instead.

In Spain, not having the language or the words, I proposed to Pilar through a Mexican cassette of love songs. We married without my being able to understand a single word of the ceremony despite having worked through endless books, tapes and classes. I just said "Si" when everything went silent and all eyes were on me.

One evening, calling it prayer, I grumbled to God about missionaries allegedly waking up with the gift of tribal tongues. So why not me? Of course, no such thing happened, yet the very next day and for the first time, I heard not a river of sound in Spanish, but distinct words. So, when a man ordered a coffee, like a child, I repeated what he said - and the waiter brought me a café con leche.

That was thirty-three years ago and to this day, having the gift of español we make a point of serving people in Spain and in the Americas because you know what Jesus said:

"Freely receive, freely give."
CALLIOPE, THALIA AND MELPOMENE

These black-robed figures leaning out onto Gedimino Prospektas are the world-famous Three Muses of Vilnius, Lithuania: Drama, Tragedy and Comedy respectively.

Which just about sums up our visit to Lithuania itself.

Drama because we expected to find a dreary, grey country after fifty years of occupation by the former USSR. Instead, we found green countryside, tranquil villages, elegant towns and an emerging nation trying hard to move on from a really bad history. Especially bad if your family happens to be Jewish.

Drama of our own because Pilar awakened after midnight gasping for air. After 15 minutes of prayer, the tangibly horrible atmosphere in the room lifted yet it seemed wise to say something. A brand-new ambulance arrived immediately and took us to a spotless clinic where by 2 o'clock, three doctors were examining the patient. They did X-rays, allergy tests, blood tests, heart tests, oxygen tests and lung tests and found nothing wrong.
Except to say that Pilar could not breathe. Then quietly the Lord passed by and by 7 a.m. we were back in our hotel room with a bill - for just £19.

Tragedy because it is no fun to find your family buried in a mass grave with two entire communities of 2,076 villagers. This is just one of 200 similar places hidden in the forests of Lithuania, where 190,000 Jewish men, women and children were executed in cold blood in 1943 and their properties confiscated. None survived.

Comedy because despite everything we actually smiled a lot. The unique pleasure of walking where my grandparents lived and seeing what they saw made us smile. People left us smiling when they went out of their way to be helpful without being asked. An unbelievable bill for just £10 for a two course meal for ourselves and our guide definitely made us smile.

Lithuania's young people are not to blame for the sins of their fathers or grandfathers, some of whom are still alive. Nor are they to be blamed for the gross sins of Napoleon, Lenin, Hitler or Stalin whose soldiers who marched over their border uninvited. What we do know is that forgiving is for giving. Once you forgive one person or even a whole nation, you are free to enjoy the comedy in every day, free to participate in the drama of life and free to learn from the tragedy so as not to repeat it.

Perhaps that is what Calliope, Thalia and Melpomene are silently trying to say.
CAMPING AS YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN IT

Back in 1978 a few rather naive and rather penniless men, young both in years and in their faith, seemed to hear God asking them to buy a breathtaking, red, white and blue 3,000 seat tent from Roberts Brothers Circus. Somehow we trusted God to provide the eye-watering price of £20,000 and he did. It was not long afterwards that a lot of people were hearing the call to follow Jesus. This though, was no camping tent.

The tent poles were telegraph poles, the tent pegs were sharpened lorry axles and a 40-ton articulated truck delivered the tons of rolled canvas to fifty volunteers who waited at each venue, sledge hammers in hand. Neither unconvinced local ministers, gales, a whirlwind nor a midnight siege by Satanists on motorbikes managed to stop the music. On a good night we might see 1,000 people in the tent although a depressing 100 people or less was equally possible.

Back in 1977 a big church in the UK might have welcomed 200 people to its Sunday services, so for us to have 1,000 visitors was brilliant.
I only say this because last weekend, a long 35 years after our camping extraordinaire we heard another 1,000 people raising the roof with their song. This time it was not the canvas covering of a circus tent that they were raising but the roof of a city church.

From my perch on a window sill at the back because all the seats were taken, the sight of the crowd and the sound of the music unexpectedly evoked the smell of canvas and sawdust.

I wryly thought to myself that even God had tired of having cold feet in a damp tent and in a repeat of Old Testament times, he had once again brought his people inside and put the heating on.
CASTLES IN THE SAND

With a mastery of several languages, an intellect that has taken him to Ph.D level, a sincere faith and an integrity beyond question my friend Philippe could easily have fled the harsh poverty and ever-present disease of Burkina Faso. He could have made a name for himself in Europe or the USA, but he chose to sacrifice wealth to stay with his suffering people.

Today, 30 years later he watches over hundreds of thousands in church gatherings and personally educates 7000 poor children in 70 village schools.

In this 'buy now, pay later' age of instant success, sacrifice is a word no-one wants to hear.

Yet in Philippe's desert nation you soon learn that although sand is easy to find it is a poor foundation for a home, a life or anything else worth having. Local native builders mix concrete into the sand to pour in solid foundations.

Wise men and women do the same because if you skimp on the cost of the sacrifice that puts the concrete into life, the day after the wind blows and the seas rise there is nothing left to see. Castles in the sand have to be built again tomorrow and the again the day after.

Something that Philippe will not have to do.
CHARISMA AND CHARACTER

Years ago a diminutive visiting African leader by the name of Sibiri was asked to say a few words. Taking a moment to balance an upright pencil on the speaker's lectern he quietly recited a line from the Bible, saying, "Take care, all you who think you are standing firm," and gently blew on the pencil. It fell and those were his few words.

Silence followed.

Within days news broke and three leaders in that group fell just as surely as that pencil did.

We thought they were big men and women, but had they been as big on the inside as they were on the outside they would have never got into the mess that they were hiding. In the end charisma was no substitute for character.

In fact nothing ever is.
CHILDLIKE IS WHAT CHILDLIKE DOES

With bad news competing with bad news, people taken ill, two bereavements, a husband taken in to rehabilitation, two serious losses of income for us in two days as families face business closure and job losses, I was feeling as grey on the inside as the day was on the outside.

As I walked to post a letter a car turned the corner in front of me with a child in the back seat. She was maybe three years old with ginger curls.

Seeing me waiting for her daddy to pass by she smiled the biggest most innocent, carefree smile in the world and waved to me. I waved back.

She smiled again and suddenly the sun shone and all was well with the world and with my soul.

That's what childlike is and does.

No surprise then that Jesus recommended it as a quality for grown-ups too.
CLICK NOW TO CONNECT

Over a million hits a month used to touch our pages on the Internet, later on Facebook, Blogger and Twitter.

Some people stop by for seconds, others stay longer but the truth is that many of our visitors are not people at all but robots and spammers trying to entice us into their latest scam.

We have registered over 100 million visitors from all over the world but don't be too impressed.

In 30 years of making life better for the lost, the last and the least of the world we only ever move forward at the rate of just one new God-given person at a time.

Literally, the one man or one woman in a million or two whose character, competence, communications and chemistry clicks with ours and connects us to possibilities bigger than anything we can think or do alone.
COLD FEET

It came so silently beginning late at night, 
by morning the snow was thick and bright. 
The Jack Russell with legs so short 
in a dilemma was truly caught. 
Not to go was surely courting disaster, 
a certain rebuke from her master, 
yet when your loo is in the icy garden 
a certain reluctance within you does harden. 
Out and back in a blur she flew, 
thinking what fearful things a dog must do, 
when for the family there is seating 
in a bathroom with central heating.
COLOUR MY GREY DAY WILL YOU

Even before the grass in Eden needed cutting the gardener noticed that for man to be alone was not a good thing. In all the years since not a lot has changed, except to say a whole industry has sprung up to sell to this deepest of all felt needs. A thousand and one Facebook 'friends,' a similar number of followers on Twitter, mega-church on Sundays in an ocean of strangers and men and women still weep with loneliness on the inside. Let me help you. Beyond church, think community. More meaningful than screens and shopping, community is where people know you by name and call you if you are not there. It is where people accept you with all your faults, feelings and funny little ways. Author Margaret Mead says, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world." And your world and mine. Cold church to cheerful community is grey moon to blue planet, emptiness into loveliness. I am thinking community, a hidden place where transformation happens. Come looking with me, asking we will receive, seeking we will find, let's go knocking and find a door that opens.
Celebration is more than an occasion. It is a rainbow attitude and one that Ebenezer Scrooge and his descendants know nothing about. Honour a date, celebrate a milestone and wait not a moment longer to make someone, even just one, feel loved and appreciated.

Scrooge worries about money, fancy catering and gifts, but I have seen dozens of men and women dancing on the dusty desert floor of the Sahel until every one of us turned the same red colour. The party food was millet porridge, and the drink was water, but did they celebrate. When a huge green locust landed on the head of the host and sat there as he translated for me, everyone found another reason to laugh.

Yes, Jesus was a man of sorrows and totally familiar with grief but he also enjoyed eating, drinking, turning water into wine and making bread and fish into banquets.

Weddings and dinner parties were big in his diary, and he knew how to jump for joy when good news came. Facebook and Hello magazine you missed it all by 2000 years, what a shame! Celebration is definitely the way to put the colour back into those grey days, and I can tell you that where I live, it is definitely time to turn on the rainbow.

Invite me to yours, I will come if I can.

I choose life.
COME FOR TEA AT FOUR

In the mid-1800's, David Livingstone was one of the very first Europeans who dared to explore the malarial interior of southern Africa. He was a leader who wanted to find the way, so that he could show the way, and unlike many a contemporary he went all the way, despite considerable risk to health. Livingstone knew that life is led from the vanguard and not from the comfort of the rearguard.

One evening, as dusk fell on the high ground, the lights of 10,000 camp fires began to twinkle below in the inky darkness. Overwhelmed by the vastness, a companion thought out loud, "Where do we go first?" Livingstone replied from his heart, "Onwards, anywhere, provided it be forward."

I was captivated by these words 35 years ago. They still guide us every day and to all who ask which way to go, I also reply, "Onwards, anywhere, provided it be forward." For Jesus and the Great Commission.

Onwards is the direction that we shall be taking today, given any opportunity at all. If you would head in the same direction, then perhaps we could meet for tea down the road somewhere.

So, would 4 o'clock be a good time for you?
COLOUR US You

We are a mosaic in which each little piece or person taken alone can seem so insignificant. One of us may be bright red, another cold blue or a dull green, another sharp yellow, yet another a warm purple touching one of shining gold.

How do you feel? Some of us look precious, others more ordinary. Some might mistake the sparkling ones to be valuable, and others perhaps less so, but first impressions can often fool you. Some of us look gaudy, others are delicate pastel shades. As individual stones, people tend to compare them and judge their beauty and value. When, however, all these little living stones are glued together by the genius of God's Spirit into one intricate mosaic that endeavours to portray the living Jesus as he walks in society, who could ever question the importance of any one stone?

If even one of them, even the least colourful one, is missing, our portrait of Jesus is incomplete. And I fear that it is, because it may be you who we are waiting for. Where we are, across five continents, each little stone is indispensable and adds a unique colour and texture in to making God's love visible.

So colour us you, please.
CONDEMNATION IS NOT FOR KEEPS

The judge condemned Leo to a long time in jail for being a violent man, a drug addict and trafficker. It was in that Spanish jail, strapped down on a table to restrain him, that my friend Miguel found Leo, out of his mind and fighting. Miguel told Leo that only Jesus could change his life and promptly fled to save his own.

A month later the judge released Leo into Miguel's care. Leo had decided to follow Jesus. He had prayed, days later he was healed and left jail with a sound mind to become a compelling evangelist before dying of AIDS a few years later.

I knew Leo, and for him there was no more condemnation in his soul or in his cell. If it is condemnation that keeps you under house-arrest, the key that opens the way out is the love and forgiveness of Jesus. The door will fly open.

Push it and see.

Life is waiting for you outside.
Isn't it strange how you notice how that everyone else is ageing, but you never consider that the same might be happening to you? Our Monday small group has been meeting since 1984 to answer the call to go to unreached, untaught or uncared for peoples, and because we cannot go to them ourselves, we send others.

I calculate that between us, we have 500 years of walking with Jesus and he with us, through good times and bad.

We leave our world a better place but in this highly connected generation of people half our age and even half of that, how then shall we live? Psalm 45.16 in The Message says this, "Set your minds now on sons, don't dote on father and grandfathers. You will set your sons up as princes all over the earth."

That gets my vote, let them come.

You know, I always like the way that Campbell's manage to condense a litre of their soups into a very small can - just add water.

I feel sure that somehow, we can do the same with our 500 and more years of knowing God - and let Christ add the living water.

What do you think about that?
CONNECT THREE

On his knees, forehead almost touching the floor, arms outstretched, his derriere in the air and facing east, was he at prayer?

No sir, down there in the corner was a one-bar mobile phone signal that mystically appeared from time to time. You have only to see the stretching, twirling ballerina antics of those who need to connect to know how important connecting is to us.

It is always worth going the second or third mile but you know, sometimes taking just one step in the right direction connects you with God, with people and with your own heart.

It seems to me that all three are looking to connect with you more than you are searching for them.

Stretch just a bit more right now, I know that connection is so near.
CREDIBLE CHEESECAKE

To be edible something has to be appealing, attractive, taste good, go down well and stay down well, do you good and make you come back for more without you reaching for the indigestion tablets.

Sorry, pardon me, oh I see, the word today is credible not edible. Silly me.

Now I think about it though I don't think I will change anything. To be credible someone has to be appealing, attractive, taste good, go down and stay down, do you good and make you come back for more.

Always taste and see before you buy in.
CRETE WHAT DID YOU DO?

I do not know what the people of Crete did to the Paul, the apostle, but for a review of his stay he called them lazy, liars, brutes and gluttons. Worse than that, Paul’s words found their way into the Bible and no book has more readers. So, is it Crete for my holiday next year? I don’t think so!

To anyone who holds down a job and for bosses who work all hours day and night, laziness is the red rag to the proverbial bull. Proverbs, the book, overflows with tales of how life passes by the lazy and although people say that it is the devil that finds work for idle hands, it is the owner of the hands that gets it in the neck and not the old tempter.

However, consider Onesimus. His name means useless but after this runaway slave decided to follow Christ and work hard at doing good, Paul’s review gave him five stars for being Useful. Zero to five is one big change.

What I have seen is this: give a man a big enough reason to live for and he knows it, hard work as well as long hours pass by unnoticed. Wherever you are, even I guess, on Crete.
CROSS FINGERS
AND CROSS PEOPLE

Sooner or later everyone who bought from our car showroom seemed to be upset about something. Raised voices and rancid comments left me scratching my head. Our products were first-class and the employees were honest and hard-working, but they did have this unfortunate little way of telling the customer whatever he or she wanted to hear.

Delivery on Friday at 5 o'clock? Yes, sir. Ready by noon? Certainly, sir. The parts will be here tomorrow, madam. They were not, of course.

I solved the problem with one sheet of paper, some words in large letters and a photocopier. That evening I pinned these words at eye level to every service counter:

"Never make a promise that you cannot keep."

A year later we walked away with a National Customer Service Award simply by displaying hundreds of hand-written commendations from customers who found us to be as good as our word. That was all they wanted, the same as we would expect for ourselves.

Maybe Jesus was resolving the same problem with his people when he said, "Do to others as you would like them to do to you."
CUPBOARD LOVE

Cupboard love and kids go together. The nearer your hand is to the cookie jar the more the kids love you. Trouble is some of these kids never grow up, they only grow older.

After their eyes catch sight of The DCI Fund they love you with an eloquence unmatched in literature. Whilst your funds are flowing to their project their letters declare undying devotion yet the day the funding ends you never hear from them again.

We decided that cupboard love is fine for kids but unconditional love is the goal. So, if people who give to the DCI Fund lose their job, we stick with them. When they age, we stick with them. If they give to someone else, we are still friends forever.

We don't always get it right because living out unconditional love is really hard. Only God is good at it but with his help we can close the cupboard door and love where it matters in marriage, ministry and managing our attitudes.
Whoever chose their time and place in history to be born? Who decided the colour of their eyes, their hair and skin, their shape and size?

A lot of us look in the mirror and wish we had been consulted!

Nevertheless with all that meticulous engineering of genetics and aesthetics taking place outside of time and space before we were born, why would we think that from birth onwards our destiny has now become random?

With so much invested in us beforehand could it just not be that there is also a master plan for our life in existence? Just imagine a map as diligently detailed as your DNA. A map that can be found and followed, one that comes with a 24 x 7 support line.

This is no fairy tale, you should be really curious, even curiouser and curiouser.
CUSTOMER SERVICE AND THE CURE OF SOULS

After thirty-one years absence without a glimpse of us or a message from us, the pastor recognised us as we approached, smiled warmly and welcomed us by name.

Juan is not just running a church, he is in the people business. He is dedicated to that ancient and largely forgotten cure of souls or in modern commercial terms, customer service.

The idea is the same: People are invaluable.

The fact is that we are God's poetry, not man's copywriter prose. We are God's image in a living portrait and his masterpiece, although a little professional repair work from the Artist might be in order to restore our original splendour, vividness and detail.

With not an empty seat in his Barcelona church, Juan, like every parent knows that a well fed and loved child, or congregation or company, is healthy and grows all by itself.

Cure the souls or care for the customers, either way the bottom line will take care of itself.
DARE YOU LOOK OVER YOUR SHOULDER

Look over your shoulder. Is someone, anyone following you? If the only people following are your long-suffering wife and the dog - the dog is there for food, and your wife because she married you, then you are not quite ready to lead.

First be a follower of someone worth following. Rub shoulders, hear what is taught, receive what is caught and know this: self-promotion is ugly.

So wait. Promotion from man can have mixed motives but when the promotion comes from God you are likely to be in line to change the world. As a patient follower you imperceptibly move forward and before long you are alongside the leader and respected. At God's right time a door opens, your gift makes room for itself and you move ahead to lead something new. Now look over your shoulder again. All those people are following you. Yet even as a leader you will be wise to follow someone else who is further still down the same road than you are.
"Duarte is dead." María, my student from Brazil telephoned late with the news. She was very shocked. "They found his clothes by the English Channel, that was twelve hours ago," she explained between sobs.

I didn't know Duarte very well. He was married to Maria's best friend, and this was a tragedy. Yet I heard myself saying, "Maria, this is not the end of the story." I did not dare say what else I glimpsed.

Duarte's body was never found. That is, not until five years later when the body of Duarte was seen in Rio, walking hand in hand with a young lady.

This is what I saw. Intuition, the proverbial sixth sense is good. I think it comes from God who knows everything about everyone, and sometimes he will share a tiny fraction of what he knows with us. A word of knowledge is that whisper in the back of your mind - easy to miss or dismiss and gone in a millisecond. Yet for reliability, given a choice between my feeling-based intuition and his fact-based omniscience, I know which one is going to help people more.
DEATH BY YAWNING

The way that a man or a nation loses its way is when neither one nor the other sees the right way forward. Solomon shrewdly observed many millennia ago, "Without a vision people perish."

Today more people perish through boredom and monotony with politics and church than any other way. We yawn while we wait for a man or a woman to spell out a vision of a way forward that is clear, credible and challenging.

When such a man sees what needs doing, sees how to do it and sacrifices something to get it started, it is not long before he sees something else too.

He sees people like you and me stop their yawning.

We begin to get excited and start to follow the vision to make it happen.

Politicians and preachers take note.

Please.
DESIGNER CULTURE

I suspect that creating culture is one of those sneaky, all but invisible multi-million dollar research industries. Who is it that puts the right colour on the walls, the right smile on the assistant's face, the right words in the her mouth and consequently the right amount of dollars in the till.

Do some churches buy a culture as well?

I know they do. They are cultured like a pearl, looking good but not entirely natural. Yet how well we all know the difference when we are served by a man, or a lady, or a pastor, who communicates a genuine desire for our well-being. No-one is talking to you from a script on a screen.

It might be the boss in person. More likely it will be one of the people that he has chosen and trained to display that same natural, genuine, organic caring culture that he passionately believes in.

He knows that in that kind of atmosphere you will be visiting again soon.
DESIRE IS A FLAME. FAN IT.

The doctors will tell you that when desire for your wife or husband is no longer there, then there is no treatment that they can give you.

Either get it back or live without it.

Same goes for a vision, a call and a goal. If you neglect it, lose it somewhere down the road, close it or fail to renew it then it is going to smoulder and go out.

Oh dear, did that happen?

Yet even at the very last moment and beyond there is hope and help because God says that he never breaks a bruised reed or snuffs out a flickering candle.

Say 'Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew,' and you know what: those embers can burn again. Desire God, desire his help and his promise, let him blow on the candle and fan the flame. He is good at doing that.
DESTINATION INNOVATION

Change is the only constant that is here to stay. Either we will be changed by the innovation of others or our innovation will change them.

Standing still will turn our businesses, our marketing or our churches into museums but on the other hand innovation will have people standing in line for hours to be the first to have it. Just ask my son who spent a day at the Apple Store.

Innovation is an act of creation and words like 'just at the right time' and 'new thing' is the language of the Creator. From the microscopic universe within to the distant galaxies beyond discoveries are in God's diary with a release date.

In fact eye has not seen, ears have not heard and minds have not yet conceived all that God has got prepared.

"Ask me," he says, "and I will show great and unsearchable things that neither you nor Google know anything about."

Now what about that thought that startled you, that flash of genius that you had?
DID ANYONE NOTICE THE LIGHT GOING OUT

I grew up on a diet of impassioned preaching by ageing Pentecostal pioneers, underlined by the writings of Smith Wigglesworth, Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts and their contemporaries. On Sunday when you heard the call to "Repent, be baptised and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," spines everywhere tingled at the imminent excitement. Does anyone know where that excitement went to and why we don't miss it?

Respectability has a way of taming tongues, fading faith, making interpretations insipid and words weak. Discernment dissipates, healing hides, miracles migrate and we get peanuts for prophecy. Like children playing outside at dusk who never notice how dark it has become, we churchgoers imagine that it is still day, until someone switches on the light and we blink. Our friend John went to India for us to see how the Banking for the Poor project was doing. It was fine, but God had sent a better gift to India hidden in John's soul.
On five separate occasions, four of them around the kitchen table, he prayed for thirty-four men and women. Five decided to follow Jesus right there and then, and every one of the thirty-four, up to twenty-two at once, visibly received the gift of the Holy Spirit and spoke in new languages exactly as happened in New Testament days.

John said, "I achieved more in India in that one week than in all nineteen years at home put together." Meanwhile, we who never leave home are wondering if God can be persuaded to switch the lights on again.

Please.
DID HE GET THERE BEFORE YOU?

You try your hardest and someone gets there before you. How bad does that feel? One ancient story tells of the man who had been lying by a pool for 38 years, where once in a while the natural spring water would bubble up with mineral properties that would cure a man. It was however strictly first in, first healed. Our long-stay patient has his reasons. "First," he said, "I have no-one to help me. Second, I am trying to get ahead of everyone else, and third, someone always gets there before me." The question he was answering was, "Do you want to get well?" The man that was asking was Jesus and for this patient, all three reasons were true, at least the way he saw it. The same reasons might be true for you and for me as well, but he had Jesus at his side and so do we. Five minutes later when our paralysed man walked away his excuses fell away and life came his way. So, are you as tired as I am of trying and competing? We need to look away from legends, doctors and the bankers and look to Jesus where real help comes from. Five minutes from now things could be on their way to being very different.
DID SOMEONE STAND ON YOUR HEAD

"That man will reach the top of the ladder but he will walk over people on the way up." The words of a pastor on his first visit to Africa startled me as we whispered across a shared bedroom late at night. I listened and wondered what he saw in our young host. Half a lifetime later the man in our whispers is the earthly saviour of his tribe and the head of his denomination, but not terribly popular with the people he stepped on to reach his position. So, how did my travelling companion know? Call it instinct, some would say intuition. Or does God sometimes share a tiny fraction of what he knows about everyone and everything, past, present and future? The Bible calls it a word of knowledge, often heard by sensitive men and women who capture whispers from heaven as they swish through our minds. Knowing this and with the wisdom of years, these days I slow down and consider what I am hearing on the inside and I weigh the idea. The whispers help me to be more right and less wrong.

Happily, my friend never did say, "I told you so."
DIDN'T YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE THE CONDUCTOR

It seems to me that harmony is one of those beautiful things in life, similar to feeling well, that we take for granted. It is only when one singer in the choir hits the wrong note that we notice the disharmony. Every five minutes at Christmas time the TV shows a perfect family opening their presents with smiles and homely harmony all round. But we all know that even after breaking the bank before hitting the shops, all it takes is one glass of wine too many and someone around the table will sing a lament. Before long the entire choir is out of tune with each other. To have harmony on Christmas Day, or in the office on Monday, or in church on Sunday means that someone, and it may have to be you to begin with, has to work on it the other 364 days. Be kind with the difficult, don’t feed the arguments, soothe the frictions, pray, be patient and always expect God's help. Every choral masterpiece makes a feature of the different voices but it takes a conductor to turn a cacophony into a symphony. Now didn't you and I once daydream about being in front of an orchestra? Well then, here we are. Shall we pick up the baton?
DIG ME UP ROOTS AND ALL

A seed must go into the ground and die before new life emerges. This is true enough, but sometimes it is not just a seed which has to go into the ground but the whole tree, and maybe the garden as well has to be buried.

Towards the end of the fifth year of our first, small but very successful, School of Mission three things happened. First of all, prophetic words came indicating change. Secondly, the quality of the applicants for the sixth year disappointed us, and finally, the city council purchased the land and gave us a date to demolish our building.

At this point we got the message.

We thought it was the end of the world, it really did feel like that. It was not, but if there is one thing that is harder than taking the first step into the unknown then it is taking the last step, because by now the unknown has become familiar territory, and you don't want to leave.

Yet as Thomas Merton says, "The biggest human temptation is to settle for far too little," and he was never more right.
This is what we know: If we had not buried that first School of Mission and walked away albeit with tears and fears we would still be there today. Now, whatever you do, don't bury anything or walk away from anywhere until you 'know that you know' in your heart that God is calling for this to happen.

You need reliable yet unknowing people to bring confirming words to you and circumstances should begin to fall into line. When providence (which is provision as evidence) is in line with God's word, it is time to move.

If you have all that already, and you are still there, you really must hire a man with a JCB and ask him to dig you out, roots and all.

What do you think?
DISTURBED, DIAGNOSED, DOSED AND DRILLED

It began with a distant grumbling as if a Metro train was not too far from the platform but still some way down the tunnel. Not long after a concentrated, brilliant dot of light emerged from the darkness but it was no Metro train that arrived because at this point the dream transformed into an intense throbbing toothache whose epicentre was just where that dot of light had been. A Metro train would have been easier to stop than this incandescent pain which was now rapidly radiating into the facial nervous system. Ooooh. This is what I heard that night: "Beyond the dental, the medical and the pharmaceutical you still have the spiritual and the supernatural." This is good to know in the early hours of the morning when there is nothing left to swallow, nowhere to go and no-one is going to come. Except Jesus. Prayer was neither eloquent that night nor for too long because the next thing I knew it was morning. You should know that I have now been diagnosed and dosed, and soon I shall be drilled. Funnily enough, I do think that everyone should put this little formula in their first-aid kit because you never quite know when the next Metro will arrive.
An unexpected knock on the door brought me face to face with a tall, good looking young man who held out his hand. He said that he was Joel from Burkina Faso and that he had come to say thank you.

If I looked blank he forgave me because for me Joel was a village boy whom friends of ours had educated, with our help in transferring funds safely.

But you know, years pass before you know it. Joel was no longer a boy but a grown man, newly graduated with a first-class Masters degree. With a management job in gold mining, he was visiting Europe on business and went out of his way to say thank you. He told us that he was going to do for village children what we had done for him, and I believe that he will.

We have forgotten how priceless it is to be educated. The boy that is playing in the red dust of Africa today can be the Mandela of tomorrow, and if you sponsor him now, just imagine how good you will feel then.
DOES SHE KNOW WHERE TO LOOK

Before we can focus on something, we need to know where to fix our gaze. That can be hard because when you have too many choices, you often buy the good and miss the best. Years ago I dreamed of being a pilot and the medical exam included a test of peripheral vision. They wanted to know how far to the side I could see while looking straight ahead.

Wiggle your fingers at ear level - can you see them? You can’t - oh dear!

Anyway, I have never forgotten the test because when I am looking for direction from God I tend to concentrate on the good in front of me and not notice God beside me. Sometimes to find the way forward you have to look side-stage not centre-stage. Some people call it lateral thinking, others tell you to take the horse blinkers off.

Either way there he is waving to get your attention and you never saw him there until now.
DRESSED FOR DINNER

I don't know if it was always like this but these days things and life can go pear-shaped overnight. Jobs, marriages, careers, businesses and health can be great one year and later on you wonder what happened to you.

Yet when God says that he restores the years the locust has eaten, he means exactly that however many locusts have dressed for dinner and had a banquet on some of us.

He restored the wreckage that was me before I was 30. He has done it for a lot of people I know since then and he will do it for you. Restoration is a sweet, beautiful word full of hope so for locusts in the home it is not Rentokil you should call in.

Call the one with 5000 years of experience and watch him make those fat diners jump till they vanish over the horizon.
DUTY FREE SHOPPING

It seems to me that embracing duty, being dutiful or full of duty, defines the character of a man or woman. These days it is a word that we hear all too often coming out of Afghanistan when a soldier valued his duty to his comrades and nation more than his life.

Applying that same sense of selfless duty at home, that is to say my family, my business, my church and my nation are more important than I am, would surely turn society around in no time.

Let's go one step further and say that if to fear God and keep his commandments really is the duty of all mankind, as the ancients concluded, then we really have some catching up to do there as well.
When people reach their sixties or perhaps even their fifties, they sometimes feel they don't know who they are any more. Neither do we know who we are meant to be, what we are supposed to do or where we ought to go. We may feel guilty about doing it or not doing it. It might be the provocation of seeing empty bedrooms at home. Even more likely is that church has become repetitive or no longer relevant to our age. The job we loved once upon a time, no longer satisfies or worse still, someone else with half the ability now sits where we sat. In the film Polar Express, when the train came to the end of the rails it slipped and slithered on thin ice for a while, and then it found new tracks. If the familiar lines that governed your journey in the past have vanished, see if you can find encouragement in this truth: "God is still working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him." This means that God is still at work in us if we so desire him to do that, whatever age we are with absolutely no upper limit. It also means if you say 'Yes,' God will put his desires in your heart and by following them you will please Him and yourself. God's desires comes with God's power to achieve them, otherwise you would be very frustrated. This is not just one carrot in front of the donkey, this is a sack of them within reach, and I don't know about you but we are going to reach forward and eat ours!
EXCELLENCE DOES ITS OWN ADVERTISING

Punctuality was never one of its strong points, but this morning we who waited patiently at the bus stop had reached the obituaries in our newspapers before we decided to walk. Turns out that the bus company collapsed overnight with huge debts and 200 job losses.

You see, excellence is a choice but not one that this company ever embraced. Instead, our fares bought unashamed lateness, bad attitudes from staff and last week’s mud stayed on the floor.

In this competitive age the likes of Amazon have taught the world that excellence does its own advertising and brings the buyers back time and again. In fact, here is some sound business advice:

Any enterprise is built through wise planning, becomes strong through common sense, and profits wonderfully by keeping abreast of the facts.

That's from the richest man of his day, 3000 years ago. In fact his book Proverbs is jam-packed with cutting edge secrets to give you an advantage in business. Find it in the Bible, which just goes to show that God has always wanted you to succeed. One bus company boss evidently preferred to read the tabloid newspapers and sadly, today his face will be as red as his buses.
EXCELLENCE SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

Today I saw something I have never seen before in 63 years. In fear and trembling I went to visit a young family man who six months ago was diagnosed with incurable, inoperable widespread cancer and given little time to live.

The man I met looked and sounded good. He is eating well, gaining weight and is days from launching a new product whilst leading two other businesses. John prays in Jesus' name, his amazing friends pray for him round the clock, he goes to places where God is moving and asks for prayer.

While waiting for a miracle he is a miracle. What the next scan will say I don't know but what I do know is that the man who wrote most of the New Testament said if anything is excellent and praiseworthy then we should talk about it.

The excellence that touched me today makes me want to not just say, but to shout something.

So here it is for you and for yours:

There is hope.
EXQUISITE PERFUME COMES IN SMALL BOTTLES

Our small groups have been meeting since 1984, in fact we have one or two of the original members still with us, albeit with a few minor signs of ageing here and there. In one group we counted over 600 years of walking with Jesus between us.

We have all the usual ingredients, the worship, prayer, knowing and being known, caring for each other and eating all the things that doctors forbid on the other six days. However, we have one little extra and this has made, literally, a world of difference.

The story is something like this.

Back in the 1930's Pastor Oswald Smith was reaching the end of his patience with people who couldn't grasp his passion for souls and the challenge of mission. It is said that one Sunday he put his Bible down on the pulpit with a thump and said, "If you can't go yourself, then for God's sake, send someone else in your place."
Whether this word was intended or it just slipped out, before long his Toronto church had sent hundreds of men and women to the four corners of the earth.

People may say to you, as they have said to us, "You are too old, too young, too single, too married, no longer married, too many kids, too many debts, too unwell, you have too much to do, or too something else to go too far for more than a couple of weeks."

It may be true, so over the years we have sent a lot of people in our place and with our prayers, encouragement and support we and they have changed the world for Jesus.

Exquisite perfume comes in small bottles, or in our case, small groups.
FAKE IT TO MAKE IT

As the manager of a small fund that supports people in mission around the world, I know all about pretenders. Apostles can be avaricious and preachers can be predatory. I have inherited more legacies from Nigeria and won more lottery prizes than years in my age, but strangely, not one cheque ever comes. People with their last breath but one bequeath a gift to our mission, saving only their very last gulp of air to ask for my bank account number. After thirty years in the chair, I can usually see the man behind the mask in the first line of his letter to me. All too often he is not who he says he is. I have lost count of how many times hearing the still, small voice of God behind me, as promised in Isaiah 30.21, has saved our money. But then there is Moses. A Kenyan by birth, and now a missionary in Malawi surrounded by poverty and corruption, yet he never puts a foot wrong. He under no circumstances exaggerates, he always does what he says, and returns meticulous accounts with receipts and photos without ever being reminded. For Moses and for all like him who never fake it in order to make it, we at this end of the rope do not become weary in well-doing.
FAST FLOWING COMES FROM PERFECT PLANNING

For me a plan is the canal that keeps the water flowing in a determined direction. Never leave home without one for if you don't know where you are going any road will surely get you there.

Allow me to say that every worthwhile long-term plan I have ever made has been based on four ingredients: Revelation followed by Inspiration to which I have added Information and Dedication. I have found that a perfect plan is born in the heart, it rises to your head and moves your hands in that order. Then you are on your way.

For me it's God before Google every time because Google will only tell you things that can be known.

If you want the competitive edge it's only God that says, “Call me and I will tell you great and unsearchable things that you do not know.”
FAST IS NOT ALWAYS FIRST

"The race is not automatically to the fastest runner, nor the battle to the strongest man, nor does food come all by itself to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant mind.

Favour cannot be taken for granted even by the educated, “but,” said Solomon, wisest of the ancients, "time and chance happen to all."

We all have a God-given level playing field of 24 hours a day so when it comes to time we start equal. It is only a question of what we choose to do with it.

The secret is to notice what Solomon calls chance or opportunity as it briefly enters your time and space.

Seize the moment and focus on doing that one thing superbly well and before you know it, as fast as everyone else is, the race will be yours.
FEAR THE LATE NIGHT PHONE CALL

On the Spanish side of my family it was always the custom to make a phone call to say that you had arrived safely home after a visit. Not to do so would guarantee tension, fear and harsh words. Not once in 30 years was there even one incident worth reporting other than perhaps a bus arriving late. To the English mind this is incomprehensible superstition, however, the dash to the telephone no sooner than the front door was opened did not go unnoticed by our children who quietly learned from what they saw and heard. Such is the power of discipleship whether for right or for wrong. So very dutifully and from deep within his sub-conscious memories, as soon as our son James, who is now 43, arrived back from his holiday, the first thing he did, naturally enough, was to telephone his father to say that he was home. Don't you just love it when you hear the telephone downstairs ringing at 2 o'clock in the morning? And ringing and ringing. Perhaps James' granddad who was the chief propagator of this tradition would have liked these words of the apostle Paul: "The things that you have heard from me, you entrust to reliable men who will then teach others." This three stage world-changing strategy which Paul learned from Jesus never fails. Take care though, what people hear from you or it might be your phone that rings in the depths of your dreams.
FERRARIS ONLY HAVE HORSE POWER

Not five years earlier Akiki, orphaned by war and AIDS, aimlessly wandered the dust of Uganda with his head down. His childhood lost, he was uneducated and unwanted.

Akiki was empowered by the loan of one goat which cost us just £25, and requires no serious looking after. After a while, goats being goats; two kids came along, and then many more. The first one was returned to be loaned to the next orphan.

Goats give milk to drink, fertilizer for seeds, and even if they die, they give leather. Akiki sold his surplus goats to buy clothes, medicines and to pay for education, and within very few years he had enough goats to exchange for a cow.

On that day Akiki became someone in town. Now he walks with his head high and he feels epic. Now Akiki can be married and raise a family. Cars have horse power but we have goat power and with goat power we empower.

For sure you feel good, but Akiki and his friends feel even better.
FINISH YOU WILL, BUT WELL?

Whatever made me think that it was a sprint to the finishing line. It's a marathon, whether you run it, walk it or reach the end on your hands and knees. No wonder people hand you energy sweets and cold drinks on the way.

I have learned that whether we are talking about life, a career, a call, writing a book or bringing up a family you have got to press through that pain barrier, find that second wind and keep going to that distant white tape across the road.

Beware though, that last lap because how many grand-prix drivers relax too soon only to spin off the track. By waving to the crowd someone slyly overtakes them with the line in sight.

You think that you are too old for temptations? Don't you believe it.

Finishing well comes at a price!
FIRE IN THE KITCHEN

In 1984 we met a young Spanish couple who were just starting to follow the call of God as they understood it. We walked with them for a year or two and tried to influence them with what we thought we knew.

Yet such was the power of their passion and vision that today they welcome, house, clothe, heal and find jobs for over 50,000 street people and poor villagers of all ages in more than 60 nations. In their kitchen where we talked for hours there was more fire in their hearts than there was under the stove.

Twenty-eight years later we still hear the echo of their far-seeing words back to us. Today we measure our lives against theirs.

In the end we know who had the greatest influence around that kitchen table.
FIREWORKS FOR THANKSGIVING

Having a special day for Giving Thanks is that great American idea that goes back to 1621 when the early settlers who leaned hard on God and each other found they had so many reasons to be thankful that they made an occasion of it.

Yet we can do even better by taking thanksgiving beyond a day and into a lifestyle. It's like this: I could never have done what I have done without the patience of my wife and children, and the thirty-five years of prayer, encouragement, serving and giving from a wonderful circle of friends around the world.

For you all, and for God's invisible hand behind you, I give thanks. A thousand times over, underlined, in bold, highlighted and with a fireworks finale.

I guess I just had a Thanksgiving Day all by myself.

Now, if you did the same we could really start something . .
FIRST YOU PUSH
THEN YOU RUN

You may have never heard of Rees Howells from Swansea in Wales but he was one of the great characters of the last century and to be sure he was an unusual, single-minded man. Nevertheless God found him appealing, so much so that many inexplicable, crucial turning points in the Battle of Britain are openly attributed to the prayer days and nights that he led.

Howells would talk about the moment when an intercession is won, meaning that you just know that you know that the answer is given. Momentum from God starts and you move on.

In 1985, four of us met together early every morning for a week to ask God to tell us how to follow his calling to world mission. In the end the meeting continued for fourteen months and then, one day, we knew.

The momentum of the universe entered our time and space and to this day, the same God-given snowball has been rolling downhill gathering speed and size. After a while it is best to keep out of its path and not get in its way, all you can do is to run behind and see where God takes you.

Now, we did what we did, but what will you do to start what can't be stopped?
FOOLS RUSH IN
OR SO THE SONG SAYS

The Blackberry is switched off. The iPad is having a rest. We are packing our bags, taking the dog to our friends and then taking ourselves down the road. The old has gone and for us it is a new season. Somehow it seems more important than ever to start the journey from a place of rest and not rushing in without further thought.

I always used to think that the Sabbath meant Sunday yet I could never see how Sunday could be a day of rest when it was usually busier than any other day. So in the end there was no day of rest. Later I came to understand how much easier it is to work six days after taking a day of rest for both mind and body.

It took me years to realise that the Sabbath is a priceless principal and not just the 24 hours between Saturday and Monday. The Sabbath, OK call it your day off, is a gift from God to end the 24 x 7 working week of his people.

Back then it was slavery in Egypt, today only the technology and the fashion worn by the boss has changed. So to start our new season we are going to give the Lord and ourselves a week of sabbaths with extra stillness at our end to eavesdrop on the silence of eternity that is so pregnant with words. As Frank Sinatra sings it so well, "Only Fools Rush In." And we did, but not this time.
FRIENDS BUT NOT ON FACEBOOK

Some people have a thousand friends on Facebook and they may even know some of them. Jesus only had eleven friends who were men and some ladies too. Three of the men were special friends, one particularly so.

Friends mean everything to you when you are young and they matter even more when you are older. If your marriage partner is a true friend as well as my wife is to me, then you and I have a God-given, rare treasure to be valued. Some people make friends easily but others like me find it harder.

Here is one promise from God that my wife and I took for ourselves one lonely evening years ago, parked by the River Trent being known by everybody yet knowing nobody: ‘God sets the solitary in families.’

Ask Jesus for yourself, and see who comes your way.

Or how many.
FROM NOBODY TO NOWHERE

I just listened to a man on the radio saying that the trouble with our multi-million pound epitome of architecture, the Humber Bridge, is that it connects where nobody lives to where nobody wants to go. You and I can do better than that. We can be the span that carries our surplus of men, money and materials in the north and the west of the world to the opportunities in the south and the east. On the basis of 'If you can't go yourself, then for Christ's sake send someone else,' I have lost count of how many thousands of pounds my friends have sent over the oceans into the pockets of men and women serving the poor in the developing world. Having crossed the bridge themselves from north to south, and met people on the other side that they can trust, they came home changed forever and started talking. As there is nothing as contagious as enthusiasm when it is connected to a vision and has a plan attached to it, before long, they became the bridge that satisfies two worlds. True, a few people have driven us into the ground from both directions, but hey - if you don't mind who gets the credit, there is no limit to how much the man in the middle, the span, can achieve.
Once from less than two metres away, I overheard two brothers, both friends of mine, saying some tough things to each other.

Turns out that fights down the years were kept buried in a shallow grave in their minds from where the rotting memories could be unearthed.

Today the shovels were out.

Neither one had ever released the other. No-one was going to 'give up to go up.' Offences come, yet release for both victim and perpetrator is only ever a moment away.

There is one beautiful word that even tells you what to do and how to do it.

Forgiving is - for giving.
GIVE ME THIS DAY THY DAILY BREAD

Is tithing obedience to God, a membership fee or an ecclesiastical tax?

In the competition for our daily bread, church is a main contender either as an Old Testament practise or a New Testament principle. Both would become 100% more appealing if the money was spent on people following the call of God and on refugees, orphans and widows which was God's original idea in Deuteronomy 14.28. Also in the running for our daily bread is the white-suited evangelist. Giving my name to one preacher has brought books, full-colour magazines, photos, promises and personal letters to my door costing the man in the white suit far more than I am ever likely to give him.

Years ago George Muller cared for thousands of orphans without ever making an appeal. He leaned on prayer and God's faithfulness with the conviction that God's work, done in God's way will never lack God's supplies.
On the other hand DL Moody never stopped asking, and the work of both men greatly prospered. Elijah said nothing and God sent ravens to him carrying bread and meat from a heavenly McDonalds, yet only a little while later God told him to ask a poor widow to feed him.

Ladies and gentlemen, take care not to be carried away following godly men rather than following God himself. Tithe if you are so persuaded. We always have and it is a great way to start giving, but do choose a storehouse with serving hatches, not just an entry point for deposits.

Some of the white-suited preachers do a lot of good, and others live rather better than all of us put together. So a little discernment never goes amiss, after all it's your money.

Whatever we do let's present the world with the all-sufficient Jesus of the Bible with his hands raised in blessing, rather than a poor Jesus with his hands held out day after day. The first one is the real one, the second is a man-made disgrace.
GLUE FOR BROKEN DREAMS

My business partnership was a teamwork that really made the dream work. By my early twenties I was driving the Rolls-Royce, going on the cruises and living in countryside splendour.

Then, can you believe it, my partner decided to leave fast cars, wine, women and song and follow Jesus. He wanted to give 10% of our profits to missions. I wanted a refund from the church for all the time he was spending there. Then when he wanted us to close on Sunday, the dream really ended in an abrupt awakening.

Yet five years later when my excesses brought about my inevitable ruin, it was my former partner who showed me how Jesus glues a life back together again. God’s super-glue for broken dreams mended the team but with one final twist.

When it was me that God called away, the glue held tight.

Thirty-seven years later we are still inseparable and we both tell the same story.
GOING TWO WAYS IS ALWAYS TOO BAD

No matter how hard I tried, the reservation system refused to proceed because my subscription to the Camping Club had expired. My association with them was at an end and so were my benefits. Similarly, I read today how Barnabas ended his association with the apostle Paul over a different way of seeing things. Being the older and more experienced, he thought that he knew best and said so. The trouble is that by evening time, Barnabas had left both the room and the pages of history while Paul went on to fill them. That is what happens when you end an association with where God is moving. I have done this three times. It was the will of God, or so I told myself, but more likely looking back, it was impatience. Either way, I will not be doing it again, and neither should you, because the benefits of being in the right association are too many to lose, and we are not talking about camping here. But because our God is forgiving, and mercifully he is the God of the second and third chance, we lived happily ever after. Eventually. So believe me when I say that it is best by far though to renew your commitment to God and the association he has put you in, right now. Before the price goes up or the membership is closed.
GOLD IS GOOD BUT STEEL IS BETTER

For richer or poorer, better or worse, in sickness and in health, familiar words at the altar all of which are scheduled by life for testing. Did any of us know what was coming?

Commitment is a scary word these days because people like easy in, easy out options in case the feel good factor fades. Which it will. Yet nothing is more securing and empowering than being in a two-way, see it through together ownership of life.

So right now, yes now, why not tell your spouse, your boss, your pastor or your staff that you are in this with them for the long run. Come what may.

You see, gold is nice on the finger but commitment pours steel into their backbone.
GOOD HOME WANTED FOR AGEING CAMEL

Life throws up some weird and wonderful ideas at times but riding a three-humped camel as a way of financing your way in world mission must be in the running for the first prize.

Worse still, Rowland Evans, the founder of World Horizons, promised that a more uncomfortable ride could not be found. Let me tell you all about it.

Paul, the first-century missionary, wrote that from his own experience, funding mission begins by the work of your own hands which provides for your own needs. This is hump number one. Those same hands of yours will inevitably need to help to get your companions started in their own life of faith. This is the second hump. The third hump is for your hands to provide for the poor because in the words of Jesus, "it is more blessed to give than to receive." So, like Rowland Evans I also have a strange looking constant companion tied to the garden gate, and a sore bottom. The good thing about these camels with three humps is that they live a long time but to be honest, I am looking for a good home for my ageing friend who has never failed to provide for my family, friends and for the poor. He eats very little and has lots of miles left in him.

Just two previous owners before me, Paul and Rowland Evans.
GRACE IS FOR EATING NOT FOR SAYING

My last salary was in 1980 when my company wished me well and let me go to follow what I said was the call of God. I closed the office door in faith. Perhaps it was really only hope or my imagination. Whatever it was, 33 years later our two bank accounts for living and for giving are still in the black.

Visitors are often surprised that we pause before eating to thank God. The fact is when you go for years not knowing where the next meal is coming from, as we did, you are not slow to be grateful when dinner time comes and table is full again.

In our family we don't say grace. We thank God for grace. People say we live by faith and this is true, but it is not our faith that we live by. It is the faith of Jesus, who is forever faith-full.

All of which, my wife says after serving over 20,000 meals, not all at the same time of course, makes life in the kitchen a whole lot easier.
GRACE CAN BE MEASURED IN KILOS

If anyone knows how to do it, it is Miguel Diez who since 1984 has seen his Spanish mission Remar grow from a handful of street people being rehabilitated in his own home to a work across 60 nations that gives a home, healing, food, clothes and employment to well over 50,000 men, women and children.

Last week we had a bit of a quiet retreat and our annual get-together with Miguel and his wife Maria Carmen, as we have been friends since 1984. Years ago, we travelled widely together.

We met at a spotless hotel in Alicante that has been repossessed by the bank and passed on to Remar as Business for Mission at a peppercorn rate of interest. You should go there.

Yet for all the experience that the years of seeing a continual miracle have brought him, Miguel, now 70, said that he has never felt so useless.

He shared warmly about the grace of God which alone has spread this work of compassion and which alone provides for
the everyday needs of all the people in his care, most of whom are desperately poor, especially in the African nations.

Speaking of grace, as amazing and undeserved as God’s grace always is, he told us the story of how a major supermarket chain which had been donating vast amounts of 'end of the day' fresh produce ended its support overnight because of a hostile newspaper article. Yet even before the impact was felt, another company donated 90,000 kilos of fresh meat, with the promise of more to follow.

With an astonishing and eye-watering 90,000 kilos of best beef and pork in the pot, a lot of people who might otherwise be eating out of bins, will be eating well this year.

This is what Miguel had to say to us, to himself and to all of us, from the Bible: "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

Because it is sufficient. Evidently so.
I really like the idea that some people are like elevators, or lifts as we British say. They lift us up to where we want to be. But isn’t it sad that there are also people again just like elevators, who open their doors but take us down with them to where they want us to be.

I would like to be a one way elevator-attendant. The word encourage from the French language means to give someone courage to go on, conversely to discourage someone is to drain them of hope and strength.

Personally I'm ground floor and going up. Come with me and bring someone with you, let's go up together.
GROWING OLD AND GROWING UP IS NOT THE SAME

We have paid the money so we have to go. Camping that is, and the forecast is rain, cloud, fog, more rain and then it will rain again in between the showers. We first went camping in 1983 in a borrowed caravan awning with three sides. It rained from before the start to after the finish and we slept in our boots which for Pilar was a novel and very British experience. Since then, in tents large and small we have seen the hidden sights of Britain on good days and bad nights. One night was so wild that our neighbours saw the stars when their tent ripped in half as they huddled in fear within. But hey - that was in the old days, because after ten years of always being too late on e-Bay, we now have a second-hand Dutch designed, French made Cabanon Guadeloupe canvas tent. This has only one pole so it goes up in minutes and stays where you put it. It never leaks or flaps, and lasts 30 years. We have electric lights and heating, gas cooking, proper beds and films to watch. Why don't you don't look very convinced? Solomon, a king and clearly a camper spoke from experience, "When the clouds are full, it rains, but if you wait until the wind and the weather are just right, you will never plant or harvest anything." Neither will you go camping in England.
HATS OFF TO UNSUNG HEROES

Take a visionary, a man or a woman who sees what no-one else even glimpses. He knows the way to get there and has a passion and a fire that illuminates the world. The trouble is that the visionary fire tends to leave a trail of burned-out loyal people behind them. So the visionary needs a caring figure at his right hand to heal the wounded and the man himself. Now, a visionary loves to see but hates to do, and a pastor loves to care but loathes to organize. So they both need a man for whom heaven is digital and spreadsheets are sublime. A man or a woman who listens, learns and leads by serving and supporting. If this is you, then it’s hats off and three cheers to you my friend, the unsung hero behind mega-growth in the market place and the ministry. Even so, I have seen how easy it is for us to rely on figures and ignore feelings, and make papers more persuasive than people. That's why the administrator needs the visionary to keep him focused on divinity and humanity. And why the pastor with a box of Kleenex may just need to call by the admin office after the visionary has passed by.
HAVEN’T I BEEN ROUND THIS WAY BEFORE?

The same man that was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, half-drowned, mugged by bandits, betrayed and chased out of town somehow managed to see his calamities as opportunities to learn to be content. For him they were a test of how well he was doing in life. Or not.

I notice the words 'I have learned' in his writing, so being thankful in all circumstances was not something that came automatically, quickly or easily to Paul, one of the first followers of Jesus.

Personally, I am still learning with many a test having to be repeated. Call it going round in circles or ‘deja-vu’ and say "I have been here before," but every lesson in life worth learning comes with an exam to see if we have grasped the idea. Fail the test and the lesson repeats and so does the exam.

And again, until you pass.

You might suspect a kind of holy conspiracy.
HEAR WHAT YOU FEAR

Have you ever noticed that everyday conversation is filled with expressions like, "I can’t do that, I'm afraid that, I fear that, I doubt that, I worry that," and many more like these.

Once I listened to myself for a day and by that night I decided that being positive was better than being paralysed - by my own words.

They say that no-one can tame the tongue but you crack that whip and before long you will hear yourself saying, "I believe that, I expect to, I can do that." With God’s help you surely can.

And then before you know it, you will have done it. You will have cleared the air of all those self-fulfilling negative pronouncements, prophecies and predictions that were hovering over you looking for an opportunity to be fulfilled.

I do believe that you can do this.
HELLO
MY TICKET IS A WINNER

I was given a lottery ticket for my present. I had never even seen one before now but the words Euro Millions sparkled and visions of future grandeur passed before my eyes, eclipsing all the lovingly wrapped socks, chocolates and nail-clippers that people buy for you.

In my bones I could feel that it was my day. Now, locating the winning numbers was an alien experience but in the end I reached the page and with eyes like saucers I checked and double-checked the numbers.

I had won precisely nothing.

Better gifts by far, which can be enjoyed every day of the year, are the gifts that God gives to us to make the world a kinder place. One old proverb says, "A man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men." These were the very words that a godly man whispered in my ear many years ago when poverty and obscurity were my only reward for following the call of Christ. What he saw in me I do not know, but this is what I have discovered for myself: If you will accept the gift God has given you and use it - and neither hide it nor display it, then your gift will make room in life for you too. Imagine for a moment the sharp cutting edge of a snowplough as it pushes all aside to make a straight path for you to walk down. That's God's gift at work, and believe me, a gift like this beats socks and lottery tickets any day.
HENRY WILL YOU PLEASE THINK TWICE

My caller telephoned to say that he was divorcing his wife. He says that it will be the end of the matter but little does he know. It is just the beginning. You can legally separate people but the lawyers' bills will bring the first of many tears to your eyes. Losses have to be swallowed and if children are involved, maintenance has to be provided until they are grown.

All those years, the man or woman whom you divorced will still be in your life, and you will have to get along. Worse still, if everyone goes for a win in court, you can be sure that the accusations will be remembered forever. The end of the matter, I don't think so. You know, this is one reason why God hates divorce; I do too. I still have vivid memories of what happened to me nearly 30 years ago. In the end, it is very likely that my caller will hate divorce as well.

Knowing both parties I gently suggested that there is still time to grasp a hope of reconciliation. I said to ask God for help, get counsel, patiently seek peace and try one more time. What I know is that the cost to pride of healing wounds today is far less than the cost to two souls, minds, memories, bank accounts and children in the many tomorrows that have to come. Famous divorcees excepted of course.

I don’t think so, do you?
HIS MASTER’S VOICE

Last week, an 89 year retired pastor drove 50 miles to see me face to face. Half way through the journey, he realised that he had left his hearing aid on the kitchen table, so he returned home. When he finally arrived, he was still stone deaf until by sign language, we agreed that hearing aids work better when put in the ear rather than kept in the pocket. With communication renewed, he had something good to tell me. I listened. I learned and for sure, I will lead better for what I heard. Way back in the old days, another older priest told a child called Samuel that when he heard his name whispered he should reply, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." This is quite contrary to the popular notion of, "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking." True, my deaf pastor friend may hear far fewer words than most of us do, yet in silence he hears his Master's voice and because of that when he speaks he has much to say.

Listen Lord, your servant is learning. To be quiet.

Speak soon.
HOME IS WHERE GOD GOES FIRST

I knew the decaying apartment was unfit to live in because some years before on my instructions it had been boarded up and now, unthinkably, we were sleeping in it. Once I had been the owner of the block, now we were a family of four called back after two years of mission in Spain, with nowhere to live.

One morning, faith or more likely bravado sent us to buy a house that we had viewed many times and certainly could not afford, only to find a Sold sign in the front garden.

We could only lean harder on an obscure Bible promise that had leapt from the page, "To one who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to a sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God."

We didn't even know what that meant, until weeks later when Pilar wanted to see inside some new houses we came across. "Just looking," we said, "we don't have even half the deposit."
The sales lady looked over her shoulder and then whispered, "This builder is in serious difficulties, offer him what you can afford to pay for that one over there."

So we did.

The man did say yes, but with not a glimmer of hope in his eyes, added that we had to pay him within four weeks. Now in 1983, people were waiting months even to apply for a mortgage and not one bank would give us an interview. Then days away from the deadline a broker rang to say, "I have got an appointment for you. The manager is some kind of church-goer and maybe he will understand you."

Except the manager never turned up.

However, his clerk produced a paper and said, "Sign here." We never did meet the manager, we never did have an interview, we never did explain how we would repay by answered prayer, but seven days later what we did do was to collect the keys and move into our first home.
HOME IS WHERE GOD GOES NEXT

When a church in West London said "Come and help us," we leaped at the idea, only to discover that the property market in the capital was so hot that any house we heard about was always sold before we arrived.

After several wasted journeys, the church simply went out, bought a house for us and gave us the keys. For us that was a big Yes from God and we spent two years with the new training school, then it was time for house move number nine.

Now, years before, a lady vicar who was the daughter of a baron had prophesied over us and then said, "I only wish I could be around to see this." As these things have a way of happening, Claire's wish was granted because at this point the Lord gave her the idea of turning a Victorian farm worker's cottage into a temporary home for us.

Seven delightful years later we were still there, paying a tiny rent and hidden away in the countryside, but then we heard about a government plan to help people buy their own home.
A lady explained that the scheme was for teens and twenties and we at fifty-six were perhaps a little outside the criteria. In the end she filled in the forms and six weeks later an astonishing £30,000 grant arrived, at 0% interest and with no repayments required. The bank gave us a loan and with our savings we became home-owners for the second-time.

Six years later, by the grace of God not only was the mortgage repaid in full but so were the eye-watering £24,000 fees for our daughter's university degree.

What we know is this: Even though my last salary was in 1980 and since then we have never once asked for money, when Jesus calls you to leave all and follow him, expect to be cared for by Him in a better way than you could ever provide for yourself.

After all, He who had no place to lay his head, and few possessions of his own, also had to employ a treasurer.
HONESTY IS NOT THE BEST POLICY

It was the last thing I expected to hear from the man on the platform. "Is honesty the best policy?" he asked. Like me, everyone thought they knew what was coming next.

"It is not," he said categorically.

"Honesty is not the best policy either in the home, in marriage or in business." A long pregnant silence followed. People stopped fidgeting. The ones doing their Facebook looked up. The people who were tweeting the funny bits ceased mid-way but kept their fingers on the buttons.

"Honesty is not the best policy, " the preacher repeated himself. "It is the only policy."

And so it is.
HONG KONG SUNDAYS

The first time I visited Hong Kong, arrival was midnight Saturday, and all I wanted was the nearest bed. Where I lived not one shop opened on Sundays and the only sound was a distant church bell, but in Hong Kong what woke me up was the roar of bumper to bumper traffic and wall to wall people. There was so much life and noise at 7 o'clock on Sunday morning, that I thought that I had slept until Monday. That was 25 years ago. These days Sundays back home are just as busy with everyone available 24 x 7 and always connected. Did you know that burn-out only used to happen to electric motors? Now it happens to us as well, when like a metal spring we are stretched too far and too often. When a spring goes limp, only serious heating, recoiling and sharp cooling restores the elasticity. This is not a nice feeling. So, let's listen to our bodies, and if you feel regularly overstretched as I used to do, take time to recharge yourself as often as you charge your I-phone. "Come apart," said Jesus, "lest you fall apart." Even in Hong Kong, work has an Off button. You know, the one with no wear on it. Press it often, please.
HOTEL SIMPLICITY

Every room in the Hotel Panorama was taken by drug-addicts, traffickers and prostitutes. If you thought that you had stumbled into the annual Cocaine Convention of the Costa del Sol you would be mistaken. Daniel del Vecchio, an Italian-American, explained his thinking to me, "Live simply, so that others may simply live." His eight words had more impact than eighty sermons but what really spoke volumes was seeing the way that he had sold everything to live simply - and with the surplus he had converted an empty hotel into a rehabilitation centre. Within years, his movement cleaned up the drug haze over Spain and brought thousands to faith in Christ. Then it went global, releasing hundreds of young leaders into mission around the world. Learn what I learned that day: Living simply with no unnecessary frills, froth or bubbles at home, work and in church, satisfies. Simplicity is a less-stressful lifestyle that channels God's gifts of energy and resources into you, saves you being ripped off right and left, and empowers the purpose of your life. It is that simple, isn't it?
HOW BLACK WAS YOUR FRIDAY?

The shops have their Black Friday, the day that people wait outside from before dawn hoping to be the first to buy the loss-making bargains in the windows. The stores however, know full well that our eyes will also be tempted by glittering displays of very profitable items that line the aisles, gadgets and gifts that we never knew that we needed. Until now.

Some people we know will not be celebrating Black Friday or any other Friday because their night was only a journey through darkness into gloom after an already grey Thursday. If by any chance you also awakened to an empty soul to feel the walls closing in and the world imploding upon you, and if that was exacerbated by illness that refuses to go away and the heating has broken down, this what we know: In the face of every pharmaceutical, bottled or retail alternative: Choose Jesus. In the face of a conveyor belt of reasons to fear the worst: Choose Life, especially your own. If in the face of a dozen overwhelming reasons to be sad: Choose Joy. When suffering joins hands with hardship and recruits difficulties, weakness, fear, refusals and all the reasons why not to reinforce its cause: still nothing is impossible for God. Without any help from the shops of Jerusalem, Friday was at its blackest for Jesus, but Sunday came soon after, just as I surely hope that it shall for you.
HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Last week our two friends of many years, Colin and Lynne, took us for lunch at Nottingham's Malt Cross, which is a Christian owned pub and restaurant dating back to the days of Queen Victoria when it was a music hall. Today it is a safe place for young people to gather in the frenzy of Nottingham's notorious night-life.

The meal was a humble sandwich but the size of it left us all incapable of eating one more mouthful. The waiter came with the desert menu but we had had enough, which made me wonder how you know when enough is enough. One of the Rockefeller family famously considered enough to be, "Just a little bit more." Perhaps so and perhaps not, it all depends.

Around that table in the Malt Cross we already had enough years, experience, memories, grace and favour under our belts, not to mention the sandwich. Yet, at this end of life when it comes to having enough, only the one thing is insatiable: Time. Of which there is never enough. Time to see all that I have asked God to do in me and my family, and for me to see him to do what needs to be done for the lost, the last and the least of the world. So, how much is enough?

One Malt Cross sandwich for sure and just a little bit more, and a little bit more, of priceless, irreplaceable time garnished with opportunities to serve, and the wisdom to make each day count.
HOW MUCH IS HAPPINESS?

Happiness doesn't come easy. It's not automatic, the pills wear off and it successfully plays hide and seek with millions. So I ask myself where is happiness to be found and how much is it?

The price is whatever it costs to decide to be happy. If Paul the apostle could write that he had learned to be content then we can learn to be happy. However, notice the word 'learn,' which implies a repetitive process of lessons and unwelcome tests. These will come anyway in life, so let's make them serve us.

We can learn to be happy and even content in prosperity or in poverty but know this: Both can come our way, both can change places at a moment's notice and they rarely give notice or ask permission first.

However, once you decide to be happy and thankful, neither poverty nor prosperity can rob of you of life, health or your smile.
HOW TO CATCH THE WIND

Jesus said that the wind blows where it pleases. In those days, people didn't know where the wind came from, and they had no idea where it was going. Today the weathermen say that they know better, yet we still get wet on the sunny day that they predict or prophecy. Be that as it may, only the wind that can get away with such a laid-back lifestyle of coming and going as it pleases. If you and I try to live like that, we know what will happen to us. Actually, the wind is not quite as laid-back as we think, because it moves air to where it intends that air to go, and for a reason set in motion by Creation itself. Intention is a discipline that we also can introduce into our own lives with advantage. What then, are my intentions? I intend to pray and I intend to live according to God's word. I intend to work hard. I intend to stay focused, honest, astute and ever learning. Today I fully intend to raise my sails and catch the wind of the Spirit and see the new world over the horizon. I intend to do what I am writing because the one highway I intend to avoid is that ancient road to perdition which is allegedly paved with good intentions. Left undone of course, like so many of mine.
HOW TO HAVE A HEALTHY HEART

I have cycled, I have swum, and I walk until even the dog pleads for mercy. I take the pills, I drink the Benecol and I eat the oily fish.

In fact, our diet is so Mediterranean you can get a sun tan just sat at the table.

On this basis I should live forever.

Yet when I heard God through his word saying, "My son, give me your heart," I knew that I had found the best cardiac surgeon of all.
HOW TO HEAR MORE THAN YOU HAVE EVER HEARD

Margaret Gobran is Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Born into an upper class family she chose a career in management and later became a university professor in computer science. However, for the last 25 years, Mother Maggie, the 'Mother Theresa' of Cairo has served thousands of children and parents living in the fetid squalor of the city rubbish dumps. As a Coptic believer, in a church that finds its roots in the desert fathers of the first century, she has a compelling spirituality. When the prestigious Willow Creek Global Leadership Conference invited her to share her faith she took three minutes to say these words and very little more:

Silence your body to listen to your words.
Silence your words to listen to your thoughts.
Silence your thoughts to listen to your heart.
Silence your heart to listen to your spirit.
Silence your spirit to listen to His spirit.
Leave the many and yourself for the One.
You should manage the first, possibly the second and maybe the third, but from then on if you are anything like me, you will need the help of the Holy Spirit to take you further and deeper.

I am sure he will do just that if you ask him, but I wonder if you will want to come back?
HOW TO KEEP WARM AT NIGHT

Not without good reason did the richest man of his day, a king of the ancient middle-east, Solomon, say that when it comes to keeping warm on a winter's night, "Two are better than one." With a world record seven-hundred wives and half as many again mistresses, he definitely knew what he was talking about. If perhaps he did take things a little too far. Nevertheless, two are definitely better than one. "Me' is always safer and better for being 'We.' Iron does sharpen iron and "I" is only ever complete when partners add their gifts to mine and when colleagues bring skills that I do not have. Then of course there is the woman behind me, only one in my case, as there is usually a woman behind every man who gets somewhere in life. Now, why not go one step further and factor God into the equation of life, marriage, business and ministry and make him the senior partner.

Now we find that not only are two better than one, but 'we three' are as intertwined as a three-fold cord.

And that is not something that is easily broken.
HOW TO KNOW MORE THAN CAN BE KNOWN

Because we are a spiritual people any worthwhile plan we make gains a huge advantage if it is based first and foremost on revelation.

To be complemented by inspiration, to which you may add information and finally, your dedication. Always of course, watching out for the temptation to do more or less than you planned.

A perfect plan is always born in the heart before it rises to your head, and then moves to your hands. It's God before Google every time. In the decision making process, revelation theology always beats information technology because Google can only tell you or sell you things that can be known. The really competitive edge comes when you hear God say, "Call me and I will tell you great and unsearchable things that you do not know."

Until now, that is. Time to make that call, I would say.
HOW TO LEAVE A TRAIL WORTH FOLLOWING

It was Henri Nouwen who said that we learn to love by choosing to take small steps of love every time there is an opportunity. A smile, a handshake, a word of encouragement, a phone call, a card, an embrace, a kind greeting, a gesture of support, a moment of attention, a helping hand, a gift, a financial contribution, a visit - all these are little steps toward love.

Each step is like a candle burning in the night. It does not take the darkness away, but it guides us through the darkness. When we look back after taking many small steps of love, we will see a trail of candle flames showing where we have been and discover that we have already made a long and beautiful journey.

To love is to think, speak, and act according to the certain knowledge that we are infinitely loved by God and in turn we are called to make that love visible in this world lighting one 'candle' at a time.

Today will certainly bring us many opportunities.
HOW TO LIGHT UP THE WORLD

Vincent Van Gogh once said, "If you hear a voice within you saying "you cannot paint," then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced."

Many people who know what they should do, do not do it because they do not believe that they can or they think that no-one really cares if they do it or not. God is the great encourager but to get his confidence across he often needs to come alongside dressed in the skin that is yours or mine. I never realised how much a man or a woman can be empowered by a few words that say that you see value in them and in their idea. In the tongue is the power of life or death so give the gift of words.

Follow on with maybe a few books or a little start-up funding and later when they light up the world, quietly remember who it was that pressed the switch.

It was you.
HOW TO LIVE WELL ON LEFTOVERS

You will know the story of how Jesus fed 5,000 men and shortly afterwards another 4,000, a figure which may need to be trebled to take into account all the women and children who would have been present. The disciples saw how the few loaves and fish continually multiplied until everyone patted their stomachs and declined even one more mouthful.

Later on, the same disciples got in a boat without a restaurant on board, and sure enough before long someone admitted to leaving the sandwiches and coffee behind. As they began to discuss their inner rumblings, Jesus said, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand?"

What is it they did not understand?

Jesus then asked them, "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you have left over?" They said, "Twelve." "And after feeding the four thousand people, how many full baskets did you have at the end?" They replied, "Seven." Jesus said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"
What is it that did they not understand? What they did not understand was the meaning of the leftovers. The leftovers were provided for the servers to eat. The first time there were twelve servers and twelve basketfuls left over and the second time round there seven baskets of leftovers - the number of abundant completeness. In the end, those that had been serving and missed their lunch had more to eat than anyone else.

So what was it that they had not understood?

Simply this: Jesus will take care of you when you take care of others. You can't out give Jesus, so when you spend your life and time for others, your own needs will be met miraculously and in great abundance.

So, should come for lunch at our home one day, we thought that you would like to know what will be on the menu, in fact the ingredients have been the same for the last thirty years.

Leftovers.
HOW TO LOOK GOOD IN YOUR SIXTIES

In London's very splendid National Gallery among thousands of irreplaceable treasures whose beauty brings tears to your eyes there are two self-portraits of Rembrandt. At 34 he is strong and he knows it. He strikes a pose that looks down upon you and invites you to look up at him. He is confident that he is going to be up there with the best. Yet at 63 you see a very different man, one broken by financial failure, illness and disappointment. He paints himself with true brilliance yet with eyes cast down in the hope of gaining your compassion. Rembrandt makes me think how much better it is to humble ourselves before God in our youth as our careers rise. The sooner that we ask for his strength, his love and his protection to accompany us for a lifetime the better, and before the passage of time humbles us in ways that we will not appreciate. The strength of youth is good, but when even that enviable strength is exchanged for God's strength, then that's the best of all. We can do that. It is perfectly possible. We might even get to look good in our sixties.
HOW TO MAKE A MAN ENVIOUS

The line for passport control was long and grumpy. You don't enter or leave Israel easily and they have you check-in three hours before your flight. We were the next to be questioned, when an Orthodox Jewish man brusquely pushed in front of us, passport in hand.

"My flight leaves in 25 minutes, let me through." The policeman said, "No." The guard said, "Back to where you were." He pleaded. They pushed. He was going nowhere.

I spoke quietly, "Take my place."

In ten days not one Orthodox Jew had spoken to me, not one had returned eye contact or a smile, but now the barriers fell. He said, "Thank you" and despite much grumbling and hissing from behind us, he explained his crisis to me and went through.

Almost 2000 years earlier, another Jew by the name of Paul declared that God had opened his heart and his home to those of us who are called Gentiles, in order to make the Jews envious.
However, they did not seem very envious to me.

On the contrary, I felt rather envious of their close community, their commitment to God and the contagious joy of their Sabbaths and Bar Mitzvah's.

So apart from being at the front of the line, how do you make a Jew envious? Not by religious or political debate, for these are masters of both their faith, their long history and our inglorious past.

So how?

I suspect that God will find a way into their hearts when we who follow Abraham, Moses and Jesus serve the Jewish people in kindness, love and mercy, without words or conditions.

In this way we might display the nature of YHWH and his living presence in us, a closeness so desired by God's ancient people who have only known exile and persecution for 3000 years.
HOW TO MAKE YOUR GRASS GREENER

Today for the first time I heard about Destination Disease. This just has to be a virus - the one with no cure and no treatment. Aspirins do not touch it and taking it easy only gives it more space. If you always want to be somewhere else, what we used to call restlessness or wanderlust, then you have got it. Trust me, I am a lifelong sufferer but I am in recession these days. A nun who fought the cloistered life until she found peace now says this, "We are in the right place now. It may not be the right place tomorrow, but if we open our hearts and minds to the love of God, he will guide us to where we are meant to be, at the proper time and in the best way." I believe this is true. The truth is that the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence. The grass is actually greener where you water it. All it takes is a garden hose or sprinkler to turn things around and make other people want to be where you are. A change in the way you see things might have the same effect and green your inner lawn. Is this worth thinking about?
HOW TO NEGOTIATE TO WIN

Everyone likes a bargain and for as long as men and women have walked the Earth, we have employed familiar strategies to beat the price down. People did it to me this week when I advertised a bicycle.

However, there is such a thing as righteous price, one that is fair to the seller and good for you too. Drive the price down beyond it and you may walk away with your bargain. Not however, with a clear conscience and a new friend who you will be pleased to see across the street.

Of course, the hardest person of all to negotiate with is yourself. Your eyes see something. Your heart wants it, and you imagine yourself telling envious neighbours just how little you paid for it. Until that is, a quieter voice appeals from deeper within, counselling patience and wisdom. At this point, it is best to go to the coffee shop or better still to the Cross, to negotiate with God and haggle with yourself until you discover the righteous price. After all we only pay some in money; the balance gets paid in peace of mind.
HOW TO SURPRISE YOURSELF
AND SHOCK OTHERS

The invitation was for a short walk in the mountains before breakfast, and what could be more agreeable on a sunny morning? My friend Dr. Ángel, splendidly outfitted in Lycra, drove us to a nearby National Park promising views that would take my breath away. In fact, my breath almost departed forever within the first five minutes as a walk in the Park turned into a steep climb up the mountains. From the barren, cold and furiously windswept summit of El Moncau at 1,056 metres, Ángel pointed out a distant peak looming above the mist and snow like Mount Doom of Mordor from the Lord of the Rings. Right then I knew what was coming my way and sure enough, half an eternity later, we reached the ancient hermitage on the top of La Mola, accessible only on foot or by donkey.

By lunchtime, in my 64th year, I had walked five hours, and climbed and descended two mountains but before you either applaud or laugh, you need to know the next morning Ángel ran the whole course as he does every weekend.
On this occasion, without me of course. Nevertheless, this is what we know: We can all do much more than we think we can. Particularly if we do not think too long beforehand.

When we choose to climb higher, go a second mile, do new things and give more of ourselves in answer to God's call then:

As we step out God steps in.

When he does, you surprise yourself and you shock others. In fact, the whole future of world mission depends on young people discovering this truth for the first time and people of our age seeing it all over again.
HUNGRY AND THEN THERE IS HUNGRY

People who are hungry are willing to do the things today that others will not do, in order to have the things tomorrow that others will not have. I have seen this, in fact, the preacher who said it must have been standing right behind me when two ragged pastors from a village way out in Burkina Faso walked three days, and then fell to their knees and shuffled the final fifty yards to where I was sitting. They had not eaten in days, and the women back home were mixing the last handfuls of millet with dust to make it go further. The pastors were willing to beg the 'nasarra,' the white man, today to have food for tomorrow. They got it, as have many others since, yet nowadays even people in Spain and children in England are going hungry. Being hungry for success which was the speaker's theme will likely make a man a million dollars. When it does, in fact why wait till then, would you remember that being hungry for success and being hungry can be two very different experiences. One however, contains the solution to the other.
I-BELIEVE IS NOT MAKE BELIEVE

Someone just said the word unplugged meaning he felt out of the cool circle.

When I think about the word unplugged what I see are all the digital offspring that we plug in every day or night. Our i-Phones, i-Pads and i-Pods.

Leave them unplugged and tomorrow will not start well. Guaranteed.

How about this i-Person though. What about me? Let me tell you what i-Believe and what i-Know. Leave me unplugged from God, family, friends, advice and wisdom and my soul will soon be as dead as some of our batteries. And we all know what that feels like.

i-Have to go now.
IF GOD IS NOT BEHIND THIS THEN WHO IS?

It seems that all was well before Job came along. Because before then bad things allegedly only happened to bad people, and if they happened to you it had to be because you had done something dreadful. Then one day those bad things started happening to a good man who loved God.

For Job's friends this was very uncomfortable, and as scandalous for them as it is today for the prosperity gospel preachers. Nevertheless there it is, bad things sometimes, in fact often, happen to good people. With 2015 hardly begun we are already pained by the ABC of people's arguments, bereavements and cancers, and like Job, anguished friends ask, "If God is not behind this, then who is?" Job did not know the answer to that, but because of his story, we do.

Job's suffering is some of the earliest writing in human history and the story tells us from the very beginning, God wanted to expose the real villain behind the malevolence in this theatre of tragedy into which we are all conscripted as unwilling actors.
Yet don't forget this: In the end after the suffering and his friends had all done their worst, God came to visit. Job entered into a kind of Life Part Two, knowing the Lord infinitely better and enjoying a whole new prosperity and happiness.

The Bible say that such things are written for our encouragement and to give us hope when life unravels and ABC is only the beginning of the alphabet. Like Job, we know where to turn for answers and help.
IF THE SWISS HAVE WATCHES AFRICA HAS TIME

We have to go now. "Never mind, have this drink." People are waiting for us. "Never mind, have another glass." We really must go. "Never mind, you must try our food." And so we did, until the people who were waiting for us across town fell asleep. The meal they had prepared was now cold and worse still, we were too full of fizzy drinks and pancakes to eat any more.

Emily, who answers our emails in Indonesian, had met an African refugee who was selling newspapers. It turned out that he was a believer from Ethiopia with a daughter who is very poorly. Emily said that she, with her mother-in-law Regula and their visitors, namely us, would call round that evening to pray for the young lady.

With time against us, we finally located the apartment in Thun, Switzerland and found three generations of the same family waiting for us, together with an Ethiopian pastor and his wife from thirty miles away.
The 'quick visit' turned into hours of timeless African hospitality and in the end most of us were on our knees in worship and prayer. "Now we really must go." "Never mind, sit down a moment, I must tell you something." The young pastor, a refugee from cruel violence in Ethiopia ten years ago had led about forty other Ethiopian refugees to follow Jesus. He was desperate to find material to train leaders, but it had to be in Amharic, their language from back home.

Could we help?

As it happens, we have our School of Mission, translated into Amharic, free, gratis, no charge. For refugees this is very good news.

Some smiles just light up the world.
IF YOUR HORSE IS DEAD

If it is hard enough to find the courage and the means to follow a vision and have an opening day, it is surely many times harder still to have a last day, close with a celebration and mean it.

Yet every vision is time limited. It comes with a best-before day and a sell-by date. If you go past the date fearing to let go, then you risk missing where life and God has moved to.

As one cowboy said to another, if your horse dies on you - dismount and move on.

If you do not, you risk carrying one big dead-weight of memories instead of allowing a new horse with a vision to carry you.
IMAGINE A FERRARI WITH NO BRAKES

My favourite author is Henri Nouwen, and I have read and re-read most of his penetratingly honest books, which have a way of softening my heart and shaping my life. His book, 'Gracias', recalls how he sacrificially resigned from teaching at the renowned Yale University to go and serve the poor of Bolivia and Peru. Wholly convinced, he went on a one-way ticket, yet not twelve months later he wrote, "The poor of Latin America had not called me, and the Christian community back home had not sent me. My experience was not what I expected and as friends rightly say, I can do more for the South from the North." With that, he caught the next flight home. I also have found myself in such unusual places that I had to wonder which brains - if any, had been employed by me. Zeal, you see, is a fine asset, a driving force with Ferrari power but like the Ferrari experience, it can consume you if you are not careful. You need to know what you are doing and when to put the brakes on yourself. One ancient proverb puts it this way, "Zeal without knowledge is not good."
IN A NUTSHELL IS THE MOST SURPRISING FRUIT

"You have been in our church for twenty-three years and we still have no idea what you and Pilar do." Last night when everything went quiet and all eyes landed upon us, there was no more escape.

It was time to put things right, at least in the proverbial nutshell: We lend, we send and we make three things.

We lend to many nations to follow the first word God ever sent our way in 1977, from Deuteronomy 15, 6-11. We also send to many nations, in this case men and women of all ages. We were never able to go ourselves and instead we find, train, equip and send others, which is even more effective.

We want the people we send to make known among the nations what God has done and is doing, to follow Psalm 105.1, and to make more leaders who will follow God's call to the lost, the last and the least of their world.
Then, through these leaders of tens, hundreds or thousands we make life better for the poor of the world, simply because that is what everyone should do.

Back home, we work with words, most of which are spoken to God, and some are spoken or written to people. None of this has ever been particularly easy to understand, to live with or to do and neither has it got any easier as the world and the church changes by the year and not always for the better.

Now, at least in the proverbial nutshell you know how we have spent the last thirty years. The funny thing is that as the photo shows, sometimes a nutshell hides the most surprising fruit.
IN NEVER NEVER LAND

The day in 1987 started hot, the traffic was awful, everyone was late all day long, and nothing went to plan. No-one came to our meeting in an obscure corner of San Sebastian harbour, except one evasive, morose young man who then followed us all day.

At two o'clock the next morning our hosts, newly converted drug addicts one and all, took us through a maze of back streets to an apartment, to somewhere, where we all collapsed onto beds and sofas.

No more than an hour later a persistent rattling of the door startled everyone and through the security peephole, I saw the strange young man who had stalked us for hours. "Let me in," he shouted, "Let me in." "Give me one reason," I hissed back. "This is my flat," said he. I looked at the people stretched out on the floor. "Si yes - it is," they nodded.
Not an hour later our white Toyota Celica hurtled over the French border heading for Calais non-stop. "Never, never, never," I mumbled to Pilar, to God and to anyone who might be listening, "Never again."

Never, Never Land though is only for Peter Pan who never grew up. Thankfully, with God's help we did, and over the years our friends in Spain have taken the gospel to more people in more places and in more ways than we ever could have done alone.

Best then not to say never, ever, because as Jesus replied to Peter's 'never' in that historic foot-washing session: "Never means that you will miss all that I have for you." "In that case," said Peter, "wash my head where the problem begins, and then do my hands and feet as well."
INSIDE OUT MEANS UPSIDE DOWN

Transformation begins with you and me. Not until something happens in us, can it emerge in others and then onwards until society is transformed. I am not a Catholic, and it is not likely that I shall ever be one, but I cannot help noticing the difference between the new Pope Francis and his predecessors. The golden throne is replaced by a wooden chair. The gold-embroidered red stole is in the cupboard. He wears old black shoes, not the classic and classy red ones, and a metal cross. Presumably, the one with rubies and diamonds is in the safe. His ring is now silver not gold, and if you look, he wears the black trousers of an ordinary priest under his cassock. Popes don't do that. The red carpet is gone as the only real celebrity, Jesus, doesn't expect one. It looks like God means business because history tells us that when he wants to change a nation, he changes a man and the man does the job. Leading from the inside out has a way of turning a church, a community or a company upside down.

Hooray.
INSIDE OUT PROSPERITY

Isn't prosperity an elusive thing? The TV preacher promises it in return for prospering him. Pastors and motivational speakers all over the developing world repeat what he says word for word and soon they drive a Mercedes or two while the people get poorer. How do you or they understand this?

Rich men I counsel seem to have all the problems in the world yet some of the poorest people on the earth seem to be richer by far and sleep at night. One elderly man nearing the end of his life had the prosperity thing all worked out. He wrote this to his friends, "May you prosper in all things and be in health just as your soul prospers."

For John, the closest friend Jesus had, prosperity in all things was good. Prosperity in mental and physical health was even better but John knew that both flow out of the inward prosperity of a satisfied soul. For me this seems to be the right way round. For sure doing it back to front as many do, and as I did 40 years ago, is no guarantee of anything good.
INSTANT PROMOTION HERE AND NOW

Our niece Debora is a remarkable young lady. She left home and friends in Spain on a one-way ticket to Bolivia to care for child mothers and their babies. Some are not yet teenagers but all have been abused and then turned out of their home to avoid the shame and expense of a pregnancy. Just lately, as happens to anyone who is doing good in this world, Debora is struggling with a crisis of confidence. The thoughts come from nowhere, half-truths that allege that she is not a leader. A leader being that choleric, tireless, alpha male that all too often is the only model we see. According to leadership expert John Maxwell, a leader whether of 5, 50, 500 or 5000 is simply a man or woman who influences others for good or bad. Through this influence he or she leads them and they follow. I like this definition. It makes Debora an instant leader. It makes me a leader at my age and you too through the influence of your life. Knowing this the only question is what are we leading people into? Debora has made her choice for good and for God. So have I and I do believe that you would say the same.
INTENTION OR IN TENSION

If intention does not move you in action then you will be in tension. The words sound the same but one got the job done and the other did not.

People who work from home know the fight. Pyjamas still on at noon, blogs to read, one more coffee and those temptations that whisper from the fridge, Facebook and the TV.

Listen to those voices and sure enough we are in tension by the end of the day.

If the road to hell is indeed paved with good intentions then it's time for some of us to build a highway in the other direction with better and more compelling intentions fuelled by our convictions.

As for those temptations - you might be surprised how quiet they become after prayer and the word 'No.'
INVISIBLE UNTIL YOU LOOK

The authorities could wait no more. Social workers swooped down to rescue a year old toddler and his three year old sister. They took them to our friends Richard and Catherine who are on-call foster parents. The children arrived dirty from head to toe, barefoot and covered in lice. When the Bible says that even if father and mother abandon you, the Lord will hold you close, then as often as not God does this through the hugs of an army of invisible heroes like Richard and Catherine, who know how to heal infinite loss with endless love. Daniel in India has opened more than 100 family homes for abandoned children. Johnny in Haiti became 'Papa' to 21 small children on the day the earth shook. Debora left Spain to care for abused and abandoned child mothers and their babies in Bolivia. Easy it is to admire men and women like this but better by far to visit or e-mail a thrown-together not so invisible family and say, "Well done you heroes, what can I do to help."
IS CARE COOL, QUAIN'T OR WHAT

In this day and age numbers seem to matter more than anything else.

Mega is cool but community is quaint.

Why is it then that the number one question that people have about their leaders is not about their competence or charisma?

It is about another 'C' word altogether.

Does anyone up there care about me?

The fact is that people are not concerned about how much you know until they know how much you care.

Think about it. In other words my dear boss or pastor, it's our hearts before our minds.

It's your love before our loyalty.
IS NAÏVE GOOD OR BAD?

There is no excuse for being naïve when it means not having the experience, wisdom or judgement to handle marriage, business or the church. On the other hand, naïve is to be envied when it means a person is beautifully natural and unaffected. Way back in 1977 I was too naïve to handle life and my ruins were at my feet for all to see. Naïve, dumb, they said. However, later on, as a new follower of Jesus, I was naïve enough to simply believe God's word over and above every evidence to the contrary. I had left my job. My wife had left me. The children probably wished that they could go too. Yet one day Psalm 128 said to me that my work would provide me with prosperity, my wife would be a fruitful vine and my children olive shoots around my table. How naïve is it to believe that? Well, it happened and without any help from me. What I learned is that simple believing slowly displaces self-deceiving. In fact, the naivety of going God's way equips you so well for life that it is those who think they can rip you off that are naïve. Not you.
IS STUCK FOREVER A GOOD THING?

When Brian and Brenda celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary, the Queen of England sent them her personal congratulations in a royal blue envelope embossed with the regal cipher. Their lifelong commitment to each other was deemed worthy of honour.

Contemporary commitment between people is more short-term than limited shelf life in the supermarkets and comes with an expiry date if the mutual feeling for each other is no longer there.

Employees, celebrities and churchgoers all part company with monotonous regularity because they are committed to one thing alone: Themselves. Especially when it comes to marriage.

Yet everyone on all sides is the loser because the super-glue of commitment is the inexhaustible fuel of longevity and the motor of achievement. Commitment creates the character that holds people and society together from the inside out.

When Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her own Diamond Jubilee, a sixty year commitment to the nation was honoured by a world of people.

Three cheers, your Majesty.

Three cheers Brian and Brenda, and three cheers to you for your commitments. As Her Majesty would say, "We are seriously impressed."
IS THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER LONELY?

Anyone who is familiar with buying shares or investments will be familiar with the warning that you should only buy with very long-term growth in mind. Looking five years ahead levels out the bumps along the way and lessens the risks. Ten years gives you an even smoother ride and best of all, they say, is to stick with a low-cost, successful fund all the way through to pension age.

Although we are investors in people rather than pounds the principle is the same. Some people and projects that we support bring an almost instant if occasionally risky advance of the gospel yet with others we deliberately take a very long-term view.

It will be years before Ian and Sarah in Cambodia are able to present the first-ever Bible in the language of an unreached people group. Before then, they have to learn the spoken language, create the first written script for it, teach the people to read and then translate the Scriptures from the original languages into the new written form.
It might be just as long before contemporary worship led by the Holy Spirit changes the spiritual atmosphere of the traditional churches of Spain, but our young friends Marc and Ana have made a first-class start in their marathon.

This week an old friend reminded us that we had next to nothing in our pockets some thirty years ago, we still regularly helped a young man in Burkina Faso to get started, and another in Spain to move forward. Today, with all of us past pension age, Philippe now has some 750,000 people under his care and Miguel leads Spain's largest mission with some 60,000 people being cared for in just as many countries. Not too many pension funds can give you returns like this.

In the famous book by Alan Sillitoe, the long-distance runner was said to be lonely. Do you know why we never feel that way? It is because as they say in Africa, "If you want to go fast then go alone, but if you want to go far, go together." Together, of course meaning with the Lord and with people like you who have made so many things possible.

Your investment is likely to be one of those that give a thirty, sixty or hundred-fold return.
IS THE PEACOCK RIGHT TO BE PROUD

It is not very often that we see being proud in a positive light. In fact after hearing all the woeful tales from grim-faced preachers, most of us run scared of the P-word. We help young innovators with a vision to persevere through poverty because we and they see the possibilities of God's sufficiency in the future. We stick with them through obscurity by reminding them that in the end it will be worth it. Then when prosperity comes it is fragrant, and we rejoice with them, but if pride ever catches the scent, weeping is not far behind. So we hate pride. Yet, I am proud. I am proud of my young friend John who swims against the current of peer pressure and carefree living. John visits Africa and India at his own expense to invest his money into people that care for the lost, the last and least. I am proud of John and all like him, but do I tell him and risk him becoming proud? Without a doubt, maturity and right timing is needed on both sides before the p-word is spoken. How very confusing! One word with two meanings yet we find ourselves so afraid of saying we are proud in the right way, that we rob someone of affirmation just when they need it most. A tightrope to walk indeed.
IS TOMORROW WHAT YOU MAKE IT?

You take control of tomorrow by thinking about it today. This is called strategy. Everyone should do it. Think Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timed smart goals. And so on.

The leader's seminar in a terribly poor African nation had been all smiles, nodding heads and note-taking. Until now when the atmosphere died and faces went so blank and for so long that eventually I stopped and asked why.

A long embarrassed silence followed until my translator explained that only men who are confident of being alive next week dare to make plans for the future. Stalked by hunger and prey for militants, malaria and AIDS my listeners had no such certainty.

Now it was my turn to go quiet.

Learning, I learned that day, is two-way traffic.
IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE
THE WAY THEY SAY

Everyone knows at least one pessimist. We know one man who can foretell how bad any particular day in next week is going to be for him. His 'prophecies of doom' are reliably self-fulfilling just as the economics experts on TV predict how bad the next year will be.

By believing them we make sure it is.

You can fly above these clouds of gloom with a mind that is transformed by God's word to express truth and hope through a tongue that is tamed and leaves a trail of light across the gloomy skies of negativity.

Say to yourself now, 'it doesn't have to be this way.'

Because it doesn't.
IT’S THE TEETH WE DON’T SEE THAT BITE

I have often wondered why it is that I can read between the lines and hear what is said in the silence between the words. I can discern a scam even when it comes clothed in the finest religious language, and my ears pick up Nigerian accents even when the email asking for money for the poor comes from the Philippines. Yet sales people wrap me around their little finger and more than once I have pressed Buy Now only by the next day to wonder what or whose brains I employed. If any. I learned today that discernment only works in your area of gifting, the place where you are called to function. Within those boundary lines you see the invisible but anywhere else you are as vulnerable as Red Riding Hood who never did discern why her Granny had such big teeth! The best protection is to know where your gifting in life begins and ends and even in there, and definitely on the other side, it is best to work as a team. You never know but some enviable female intuition might just save the day. Can you discern the truth in that?
JOHN LACEY DIED TODAY

When the news came, even though we thought that our hearts were prepared, we deeply felt the loss and still do.

John, a young man in his 40's, leaves a wife, Lizzie and two small children. His heroic no-holds barred fight against an inoperable cancer more than tripled the original life-expectancy that he was given. His faith in God and the best works that professionals could offer were fully employed in the battle. Almost to the end we thought that he would win yet in an unexpected moment he was gone.

Seeing our distress over the news, our friend, Ángel, an eminent surgeon in Barcelona who has faced inexplicable and sudden loss many times, shared his observed conviction that, "We are only passing through this life."

This is true.

We will see John again and until then his example, his love and Christian values will guide his family and ours. By his giving to help the homeless and to world mission, especially through helping to fund a clinic for the poor in Ghana that he passionately supported, John's life will save many lives.

In a previous century C.T. Studd succinctly put it this way: "Just one life, ‘twill soon be past, only what's done for Jesus, will last."

John would agree with that. So do I.
JUST GO TO THE NEXT WINDOW

One man passed me to another, and he to yet another, each glancing at my application. Each added his official stamp and passed me with a directional nod or a monosyllable to the queue at the next window. Finally from behind two layers of security glass, one hapless clerk, his voice muffled by the barrier, looked me up and down, compared the photo with the now visibly ageing applicant, stamped it and said, "OK, go the next window, they will give you your permit." It was 1982 and I wanted to have a resident's visa rather than slink over the border with France every few weeks, and sneak back in a few hours later. This sounded good to my ears until I looked to my right and saw nothing but a blank brick wall and the exit. Before I could say the words that the man had heard innumerable times, without looking up he added, "It's in our office in Madrid. Next!" We were in Barcelona, 383 miles and eight hours on the train away from the next window. And the same to come home. So today, if the boss tells you or me to go that extra mile for him, there should be no complaints, because after all when you have travelled seven hundred and sixty-five miles to collect one paper, one more mile is a mere blink of the eyelid.
KING CANUTE NEVER KNEW THIS

When you find 76 e-mails waiting for you at 6.30 in the morning your first thought is that the end of world took place while you were asleep and everyone is telling you their new address.

Then, when you discover that every one of the e-mails is total nonsense and they are as unstoppable as the incoming sea which totally ignored the royal command to desist given by the legendary King Canute, you know that it is going to be a long day.

By midday emergency measures were in place but just like chemotherapy in the hospital, the treatment was killing off the good news as well as the bad. Still the tsunami of meaningless messages continued to flood in by the minute, driven from somewhere in the world by a sophisticated computer program intent on closing down our support line.

That is until Capt Fred Mercer, 79, undeterred by the ocean tide succeeded where King Canute failed.
That evening he prayed out loud that the man behind the cyber-attack might have a Damascus Road experience, like the one that turned Saul into the apostle Paul.

At that moment, some of us with bleary eyes from deleting e-mails might have wished to see the hacker under the Damascus Road rather than kneeling on it. Nevertheless, within thirty minutes the incoming tide of e-mails stopped.

Next morning when there might have been thousands more messages to be deleted, there was not one.

It was F.B. Meyer who said, "The greatest tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but not praying at all." Now that is definitely a message that needs to go out a million times, but not to the same person.
LAUGH AT YOURSELF

After you have opened a church seminar in Murcia, Spain, with a gathering of Murcianos which is what the local people are called, but you greet them as Murciélogos - that is vampire bats, and you follow that by telling them that we are saved by the blood of Christ; after that - you have no problem laughing at yourself and using your own mistakes as your best illustrations.

People love it.

They know that you are not perfect.

Just like them.
LESS FROTH OR BUBBLES PLEASE

I don't know about you, but it seems that when you reach a certain age the only thing you want from morning until night is God. God himself. Glimpses of his presence. Whispers from his Spirit. That certain age may be because in time and space, you are nearer to your future home than to your previous one and you feel it is time to get to know the landlord better. But not necessarily so, because not a few young people also wake up and to their surprise, unexpectedly find that they want God. From then onwards, no amount of multi-media froth and bubble on Sundays remotely satisfies when the soul hungers to worship, pray, listen and to talk about Jesus, alone and together.

Perhaps what is happening is that our soul overhears our name being whispered or spoken about. The desire that emerges from deep within us is our reply to open the conversation. As the child Samuel said: "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Is this true, can it be cured? Should it be cured, what do you think?
LIFE IS NEVER FASHIONABLY LATE

For me tomorrow did come because yesterday I said I would do this today and here it is. But if we are giving prizes for procrastination mine goes to Lionel in Uganda who wrote, "I am replying to your letter dated 1997."

Some have not because they ask not and others have not because the people we ask say No to us. However, how many of us have not simply because we put off asking, replying, form-filling, learning, going, giving, doing, praying and being different and better people - until tomorrow?

As we all know mañana never comes, except it did for me today and it did for Lionel too. Albeit seventeen years late.

'Carpe diem,' I say to myself:

Seize the day, because life is never fashionably late.
LISTEN THIS REALLY IS URGENT

Perhaps it was the tiredness hidden in our faces, or maybe it was the long journey by train, plane and Fiat Panda to Angel and Abigail's home near Barcelona, that did it. Either way, over the evening meal the light-hearted conversation turned towards us and for a moment the faces of our hosts looked worried. They suggested that it was time to concentrate on the important not the urgent.

Of course, we have given the same advice to many others before now. The complication is that by pursuing the important you inevitably create the urgent as well as the unnecessary so frequent refocusing needs to happen. Something we had perhaps neglected. Like the mermaids of old, both the urgent and the unnecessary have a beguiling way of luring the unwary onto the rocks. We remember how one of our mentors, Pastor Alex Buchanan would deplore what he called uncommanded work and frequently told us to be merciless in refusing to engage with it.
Of course, what is important for us and what is important for you will be very different. What God says is important might easily be poles apart from where we are both thinking, but the safeguard for all of us is have a quiet centre in our life.

This quiet centre point is the place where we are simply present to Jesus and he to us. A place where his truth and our honesty will eventually agree and show us what is actually important. That quiet centre so disliked by our need to do, is actually the most creative and productive place of all. Henri Nouwen saw in it a possibility of growing older without being worried about usefulness, knowing that it offers a way into a service that you had not planned for.

To us, that sounds intriguingly important enough to look into.

Oops. I nearly said 'Urgently' as well.
LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

I have often thought that an ideal team is a line-up of three led by a visionary who knows the way forward. Accompanied by a caring, pastoral figure at his side because visionaries tend to drive people mad with one vision after another.

Both of them need an administrator to make everything work because visionaries and pastors are both notoriously bad with papers, diaries and actually doing what they promise.

The first two tend to live in the public eye and get a few goodies at Christmas but the poor old administrator, the God-given gift that he or she is has to live in the shadow of greatness.

How nice then, that America has a day once a year to say thank you to the back room boys and girls.

Like you and me.
LOOK NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Right now I have a terrible temptation upon me to micro-manage. From a distance I am watching a young man design some new material for us and being three times his age I don't like what I see. I can also hear mumbling behind me, but having empowered the young man do I now disempower him?

I like the way Jesus showed his followers what to do then sent them off to have a go by themselves, "Come back, tell us what happened and we will talk about it."

I often wish that God would micro-manage the mess we make of doing church but having empowered us, he trusts us and says to call for help if we need it. No divine interference for us, no micro-management from above, so none from me.

Let me grit my teeth, glue my feet to the floor, tie my own hands and think about something else lest I spoil a masterpiece in the making.

The young man I mean.
LOOK WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU AT FIFTY

Is it only me but does anyone else leave the instructions in the box and press buttons until the latest thing we have bought springs into life?

Likewise, when did we ever read in God's manual for living that at the age of 50*, leaders should step down and let younger people learn the ropes from their seat. My mentor did exactly that and is still travelling the world. What I know is that when he is asked, God has a way of turning our many years of stories, experiences, learning, joys and sorrows into the real and ultimate point of our lives. In sharp contrast to the deckchairs, pills and vacant demented minds offered by the retirement industry. Our later years can be the most effective and rewarding of all. Jeremy, 67 and his wife Gladys know this. They have moved to the Negev in Israel caught up in a prophetic passion to bless Israel. Jim at 69, and Marie, go the Crimea to teach young church leaders and children. This week, Terry at 70 is in Ghana with his wife Ann arranging long-term care for malnourished children. Miguel and Maria Carmen also at 70 are teaching throughout South and Central America, and when she retires shortly, our friend Carmen will go to work with the poor in Bolivia, forever.

Late starters at 50 onwards we may be, one and all, but the God who fits a thousand years into one day will not be leaving us bored anytime soon. *Numbers 8.25
LOOKING FOR A BREAK HERE IT IS

Unemployment in Spain has hit 27% and almost twice that figure for young people. So, if you happen to be in your early twenties and have never had a job, frustration is your closest companion. One proverb writer from years ago perceptively observed the truth that "unrelenting disappointment leaves a man heartsick, yet a sudden good break can turn life around."

In unemployment, only faith and hope effectively soothe frustration and a man or woman with a family to feed should give God no rest until he makes a way where there is no way. Revealing a dry path through a towering ocean of obstacles when enemies are snapping at your heels is a God-speciality. This month, our young friend Jason was chosen for the only job on offer in the profession he studied for at University. He might have swept the streets had there been a vacancy, but the same God of the Breakthrough that answered Israel's king David 3000 years ago pointed Jason in the right direction. Now think about this: The very next breakthrough could have your name on it. Ask now.
LOOKS LIKE WE HAVE A GAMBLING HABIT

For the man from Moneygram, the money transfer agency, who was phoning from Denver in Colorado, it was 3:45 in the morning and his coffee was strong. He wanted to tell me that he was returning a transfer of just £50 that we had sent to Brazil. With a stifled yawn, his next sentence passed on the news that our account with them was now closed. Western Union did the same six months earlier, but not nearly so nicely. At least the people at Moneygram said that they were as sorry as anyone can be at such an unearthly hour.

If you send funds to more than ten nations, computer spy programs assume you must surely be money laundering. So, on the blacklist you go, with no appeals just a, "Have a good day, sir." When we sent money to Liberia, the United Nations intercepted it. When it was Myanmar, Singapore sent it back to us. The USA blocks every gift to Cuba.

Curiously though, once they had carefully looked us over through very dark sunglasses, a gambling syndicate in Moscow quite legally transferred our money via Switzerland.
Next day it re-emerged in full and in dollars from under the counter of a grocery store in Cuba. It may be that our visit to the gambling den will now become a habit.

Paul, the apostle, said that against showing love, creating joy, promoting peace, staying full of faith and being patient, kind, good and gentle, there is no law. Not anywhere in the world, even to this day. However, take my word for it - there are some cold-hearted people in finance and politics who go out of their way to make doing anything good for the lost, the last and the least of the world to be as difficult as possible.

With a certain irony we ask the question: Was it because of the banks that Saul of Jerusalem changed his name to Paul of Antioch so he could continue sending offerings to help people in mission? Perhaps we shall have to do the same, so it is only for the moment we sign off today as: Les + Pilar.
LOVE IS BUT I AM NOT

Love is nothing if it is not the favourite reading at 1001 weddings. As it was at the wedding we enjoyed last weekend. The happy couple heard that love is patient and kind, not jealous, boastful, proud, irritable or rude. It never demands its own way, keeps no record of wrongs, loves the truth, never gives up or loses faith, always hopes and endures through everything. Now, here's what everyone misses. Love is all these things. The writer never expected me or you to be them, nor our newlyweds who will surely stumble at the first hurdle just as we all did.

Unless. And there is a secret here. If we will ask the God who is love to fill our lives with himself day by day and then allow him to be himself in us, he will love through us. Love, as described on the tin, will come from beyond us to flow in us and then overflow from us, and trust me in this: The first time it happens, no-one will be more surprised than you.
LOVE IT OR HATE IT

Marmite is a very English delicacy that is thick, sticky, smooth and dark brown with a smell like unrefined petroleum and a taste not unlike asphalt. We spread Marmite on toast with butter usually at breakfast time.

Just the mention of the name causes Brits in faraway places to drool and secretly fantasise about it. Marmite is the number one item on the 'please bring me' lists sent to visitors. Just don't take it into airport security though because the scanner will bleep alarmingly and men with big guns will appear from nowhere.

As the Marmite adverts have said for years - you either love it or you hate it. No in-between. The first taste fixes your opinion forever.

We recently visited a mega-church where the music was truly extraordinary and the talk that followed was compelling. Yet it felt like a gathering of strangers drawn together by a common but private interest.

People seemed to be searching for someone they knew in the crowd who would venture beyond a brief hello.
Afterwards as we walked through hundreds of parked cars we knew that our souls had been touched by the Holy Spirit, the Word, and a penetrating loneliness.

Like Marmite, a cathedral such as this, you either love or hate, or perhaps there is way of loving it and hating it all at the same time? The truth of the matter is that in every gathering whether mega or minor, if you go looking for friends, you're going to find they are very scarce, but go to be a friend, and you'll find them everywhere.

Love it, don't you?
MAD DOGS, ENGLISHMEN AND THE NOONDAY SUN

They say only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun. With the temperature nudging 40 degrees C that day, even the dogs stayed home. The Englishman however was alone with his troubled thoughts and leaning on the parapet of a crumbling bridge over a single-track railway line which stretched endlessly from horizon to horizon. The tracks vaporised and reappeared in the shimmering heat haze. Only two trains a day mournfully rattle through Villarquemado, Spain heading for distant Zaragoza and neither one has stopped here for maybe a quarter of a century.

Close to midday I opened the soul-soothing book of Psalms and saw this: "The justice of your cause will shine like the noonday sun." For sure, I had a cause and the cause was causing some heartache. Yet now, in one life-defining moment, I knew how God saw the future. Before daybreak this morning, thirty years later, people in two different nations had let me down badly but unexpectedly I remembered the promise. I recalled the eye-watering brilliance of the noonday sun in Aragon and I breathed again. We haven't seen light like that in our work yet and justice is not yet done for the poor.

So, because the promise cannot fail, even if we do, my story cannot be over.
MAKE ADVERSITY YOUR ADVANTAGE

More than a century ago when tea was rushed to England in fast state of the art sailing ships, known as tea clippers, whoever reached the port of London first could sell his cargo for the highest price. So a race was always on. Out on the ocean when the sky darkened the cautious skippers took down some of the vast sails but other captains who saw value in adverse winds and storm took the advantage by doing the opposite and raising even more sail.

In life ill-winds will blow. No-one likes it and no-one can stop them. Nevertheless you can harness the adversity by taking hold of it in prayer and understanding the suffering through God's word.

Do this and you give adversity permission to do a work in you that nothing else can.

Disempower the harm in adverse, contrary winds by steering your soul with skill through the storm and see how you emerge not bitter but better, and sooner than you thought possible.
MARRY ME OR MY HORSE

On a hillside high over Barcelona we sat down with our lunchtime sandwiches, nothing special about that except on this particular day I was carrying a heavy cassette player. When the moment seemed right I pressed 'Play' and seconds later an amorous Mexican launched into a song which I hoped conveyed everything that I would say myself - if only I could speak Spanish.

The night before I had painstakingly translated every word of the song, yet one lingering doubt remained. Was he saying caballo o cabello? One letter of difference made a world of difference. Was this Mexican singing about caressing his lady's hair or her horse? I was about to find out. These were the days of high tension over Gibraltar and the Falklands Islands. The former Franco officials also took a very dim view of any Catholic lady who had become something else, and worse still, wanted to marry a Englishman.
Six months later, thirty-three years ago this week, with a large file of unnecessary papers in our hands, one even carrying the Britannic Majesty's seal, we were married. First in the City Courthouse and then more properly in a tiny Baptist Church hidden in the shadow of the world famous Sagrada Familia Cathedral.

I did not understand a single word of the ceremony but when all went very quiet and every eye settled on me, I detected that it was time to say 'Si'!

Our reception was a pizza for two at La Mama and our honeymoon was three days in an unfurnished flat with a resident traffic warden who emerged from the shadows and gave us an on the spot fine for parking the wrong way. This turned our romantic dining ambitions into a supermarket visit, but ladies and gentleman, from that point onwards, by the grace of God, life together has just got better and better.

And by the way, it was hair not horse. What a relief!
MERCY BEFORE MAFIA

In the early days of our funding people for mission, years ago, I was always surprised by the applicants who gave me instant e-mail or fax replies right up to the day that their money came through. Yet a week or so later when you wanted to know how things were going, "the Internet is down, or the power is off, the PC has broken or the phone was stolen. No 'thank-you's, receipts are promised 'mañana;' the creative accounting of how the money was spent would impress even the Wolf of Wall Street.

The beneficiary might even report himself dead - which is one of the more reasonable excuses. A wiser man than I once warned, "If you don't like excuses or being ripped-off then don't get involved in handling money." For sure, knowing when to stop before the excuses start, saves you from sending the Mafia round. Better still is to hear Jesus say, "God desires mercy not sacrifice." In Bible days, when the sacrifice was killed, it had no future. So when everything in me wants to take the knife to a project and say excuses means no second bites of the cherry, mercy stands up to counsel patience, prayer and perseverance. After all, in 1978 when I presented twelve good excuses about why I could never follow the call of God, I fully expected to be roasted on the church sacrificial fire. Instead, people who knew mercy made a way, and now I must do the same.
MIND THE MIND THAT IS SET IN CONCRETE

Back in 1988 my wife was expecting a baby contrary to all the expectations of our brilliant and most eminent fertility consultant. Dr Liu himself said that this was a million to one chance, the one in this case being Jesus.

Throughout Pilar's pregnancy I had a mindset. In fact it was a mind set in concrete to the effect that this miracle baby was a boy, and his name was John. I told everyone in sight.

Of course, this hastened the demise of my prophetic career when Elisabeth was born.

You can smile. I did. Pilar did too.

So, if we are going to have some non-negotiables in life and beliefs let's think it through first. Then weigh it, test it, adjust it and ask God what he thinks about it.

Only then is it time to pour the concrete in to fix our mind and when it sets solid, lo and behold, we have a clear highway in front of us.
MIRROR, MIRROR WHO IS THIS?

The poet looked out of the window. Then he looked inside himself. In the mirror he looked himself up and down and shaking his head in disbelief he wrote to God: "What is man that you are mindful of him and that you care for him." Despite the best efforts of market analysts, psychiatrists, soul-searchers and Google both the question and man himself still remain unexplored territory beyond the surface. Yet to even begin to know yourself, your place in life and where your skills and gifts begin and end is crucially important. The same poet whose name was David wrote a slim volume that is a best-seller to this day. In it he said, "the boundary lines fall for me in pleasant places," hinting that he had discovered his place and had feared that life on the other side of God-given lines may not be quite so appealing. "Man, know thyself" said Socrates some 2500 years ago. Wise men and women have been taking his advice ever since. The mirror for the face but clearer still is God's mirror for the soul, his word.
MISS THIS AND YOU WILL KICK YOURSELF

The ancient Greeks had two words for time: chronos and kairos. Chronos is Switzerland by night when every clock on every church, on every building and every wall in the home chimes every 15 minutes.

The passing of earth time is solemnly marked and you are wakened to appreciate the moment.

Kairos is different. Kairos is the supreme moment, the right time. Kairos is God's time. That oh so brief window of opportunity when timing is everything.

Waste chronos and it's sad but miss a Kairos moment and trust me, you will kick yourself every time you see someone else carrying what could have been yours.
MORE IN YOUR HAND THAN YOU THINK

Today my young friend Henok from Ethiopia explained his plan to operate a free School of Mission in his country. He will train and equip men and women to go far, wide and over the borders with God's love. To raise the start-up money, Henok intends to translate from English into his language of Amharic, one of the oldest languages in the world, as spoken by the Queen of Sheba to Solomon. Way before then but in the same part of the world Moses was also concerned about how he could do what God called him to do. In reply, God asked one question: "What is that in your hand?" The answer was not a lot, not even the loaves and fishes of Jesus' time. This however is God's plan and a test.

First, use what you have. Prime the pump, put in what you have and do what you can do. Not what you can't. Then when your hands are empty and your pocket as well, that is when the miracles start.

Showtime, as they say.
MORE THAN YOU WERE BORN TO BE

Josh Groban sings:

“You raise me up,
so I can stand on mountains;
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas;
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders;
You raise me up...
To more than I can be.”

This is how it happened to me.

Half a lifetime ago, the men and women who visited the pulpit of the first church I ever attended told stories, usually from distant lands.

Elephants, expeditions, flying in ancient biplanes over uncharted territories, meeting cannibals and chiefs. Perhaps they were the last of a dying breed of old English eccentrics but they spoke eloquently with the accents of black and white films that betrayed an education and an heritage that had been sacrificed for a greater cause.
Such men and women, legends one and all are now extinct, but they caused me to aspire, with God's help, to be someone greater than I was ever born to be.

Now, I haven't entirely got there yet and I don't know if there is still time. What I do know is that even by just aspiring to be 'more' brings focus and courage into decisions, and causes me to discover unexpected areas of life both noble and ignoble that I had never even thought about.

Aspire and see which mountain you get to stand on.
MY SOUVENIR OF GLASGOW

It must be thirty-five years ago that a friend took me to hear a famous man speaking in Glasgow, Scotland, a six hour journey from where I live.

I don't remember the speaker but I have never forgotten what he said. "I have a great sense of obligation to people in both the civilized world and the rest of the world, to the educated and uneducated alike." That obligation, he explained, was because of what God had done for him and his family. He was convinced that God would do the same for anyone and everyone who called out to him, and he was on the road to discharge his obligation. I don't know how these things happen but I picked up a souvenir in Glasgow that is still with me.

I brought home the same obligation for just the same reason and here I am saying the same words: "I know that God will do for you all that He has done for me and my family. And even more. You have only to ask."
MY VISION HIS VISION DIVISION

For me any mission was my great omission, I stayed home. My husband's first School of Mission back in the eighties had students coming from different countries and he spent all day with them but I did not.

Inevitably, it was not too long before the questions over dinner were getting hotter than the meal itself. Division means having two visions, from the Greek word 'di' meaning two. Two might be company, as they say, but three round the table is definitely a crowd.

You know, a prayer to see things God's way is the kind that gets answered almost before it is spoken and so it was that I began to see the lost, the last and least of the world and how God's plan for them included me. I started enjoying the sights, the stories and the students, that is until a certain Phillip said he was sure that I should come to Burkina Faso and talk to the ladies.

That was one fearful, unsafe step too far for me, but to keep up appearances, I said that if God provided three impossibly expensive tickets then we would come.
My Amen would have convinced no-one yet two weeks later the tickets were in our hands and I had to go. It was an eye-opener, so positive and safe that by the end even I was ready to stay forever but it didn't happen.

What did happen was that staying home turned out to be God's idea after all. That's because for us, the call of God has never been to any one nation but to the nations and in my case through thirty-years of prayer and intercession for people in mission.

You see, when I only saw home, God saw an embassy to the world.

Pilar.
It was Monday morning and the ever-punctual Swiss train was coming in an hour or so. There was time to pray together with our hosts. Reinhold is a leader in the radical and very modern, charismatic European house church movement. He moved to his grand piano and began to play. Regula, his wife of many years and a pastor with the ancient and classical Swiss Reformed Church, joined in with her violin.

As leaders from two very different church backgrounds expressed the same love for Christ, heaven touched earth and such a presence filled the room and our souls that tears came to our eyes. When we first arrived in Reinhold and Regula's home we said that we could sit there forever and never move again because of the breathtaking snowy mountain views. Now as we said goodbye we felt just the same, but this time because of the presence of God. In another age and in a long abandoned language when worship opened heaven and language lacked the words to tell the story, they recorded a 'Mysterium Tremendum.'

Which means exactly what you think it does, but let's not imagine that being high in the Alps brings heaven nearer. I will say that God is so pleased when differing expressions of his one Church worship together that He cannot resist making a visit.
MYSTERY TODAY IS HISTORY TOMORROW

Back in 1978 when life was a truly awful mess of my own making, the first word from God that I ever heard, improbably predicted three things. My work that I didn't like any more would be blessed, my wife who I had not yet met, would be a fruitful vine; and my children, who I cared for alone, would be like olive shoots. For me, these were three burning issues and Psalm 8 is the only place where they are mentioned together. It took some believing, a lot of patience and not a few changes but today the mystery is history. My work, my wife and my children are exactly as God revealed they would be. As our 66th years unfold before us, my wife and I are hearing that we are to press on, not lingering in the past but holding on to the progress we have made and looking forward to what lies ahead. Take the hope of these timeless words for yourself, will you; let God turn them into faith and believe Him. Thank him now before you see, hear or feel anything different and step aside, he is coming through for you.
NAMED: THE KILLER TEST

Over half a long lifetime of working with emerging leaders across all five continents I have observed that sooner or later God allows three great tests come the way of each and every would-be man or woman of God. The first test is poverty or insufficiency. Yet while a young leader stays focused, passionate, sacrificing and calling out to God for his daily bread, he is safe and Jesus gets him through. Next or perhaps even at the same time comes obscurity. This is when no-one notices you or your hard work. Lesser mortals often get noticed instead of you, yet while you serve from the shadows and persevere for the love of people, and do it all for Jesus, God keeps you safe from pride. Then one day the much desired breakthrough into prosperity comes your way. Trust me when I say fear this day, for on no other do men fall quicker, harder and further. In abundance and ease, with money in the bank and applause in the air, needing no more help from God or man, how many leaders and public speakers lose their way, by not understanding that what a man does with prosperity is the biggest test of all.
NEVER HAVE I WANTED TO SHOUT LOUDER

For an entire year I have been reading the sabbatical diary that the highly acclaimed writer Henri Nouwen assiduously kept throughout 1996. As we share similar ages and questions we have become very good friends, in fact apart from the Bible rarely have I found writing that is more like a mirror than a book. Today Henri is returning from Ireland to the USA on a day blighted by long queues, packed flights, bad meals and even worse films. He had been to Eire to marry two young friends, then to baptise the new born baby of another couple and he suspects that many more invitations will come his way over the next few years. Henri is anxious that travel takes him away from the unfinished writing that fills his soul. Now, we the readers know this, but what Henri is totally unaware of, is that he is just three weeks away from the end of his life and the clock is ticking. Never have I more wanted to run down the corridors of time and space to shout a warning, or to do something heroic or dramatic to save him. But alas, I cannot and God chose not to. I wonder how I will feel when I reach the last page and the diary closes forever?

If I knew that I had but three short weeks left to live, I wonder what changes I would make and how many wrongs I would right? I wonder why I would wait one moment longer than now to make those changes?
NEVER UNDERESTIMATE A QUIET MAN

The only thing we know about Elijah, that larger than life character from the Old Testament, is that he came from Tishbe. We know nothing else, except for what happened wherever he went, and we still talk about this 2,900 years later. In the same way all that we know about Thierry Anato is that he lives in Benin, West Africa. He leads a church and one of our affiliated Schools of Mission. This is a quiet man who in all the years he has written to us, he has never asked for money, only for friendship and encouragement. Earlier this month this quiet man took his students to four unreached and idolatrous rural villages where not one secret believer has ever come forward. These are way out places without even a clinic or a packet of paracetemols. With the students keeping meticulous records, Thierry quietly explained the good news of Jesus to 2,146 men and women. Of these 397 of them chose to leave their idols and follow the one, true living God. Thierry only asks us to pray for these new believers, no more. We should never underestimate a quiet man. For in that quietness he may be hearing God.
NICE TO MOVE TOGETHER

Even before the long flight home had left the runway I was wishing that I had checked-in my long legs and kept my bags. After a long journey I tend to arrive home at different times and in separate pieces.

My body is in bed.

My soul is catching up and my spirit is still with the people back there. Have you ever felt like that?

I feel at my best when body, soul and spirit all move in the same direction.

When my spirit pleases God, when my soul is happy about this, and when my body makes something good happen for someone, that is one wonderful 'got it together' feeling.

It starts only when I get the inner foundations right and after that, well - the tired old outside bit of me that can be such a troublemaker, is soon persuaded and gets in line.
NO APES IN MY FAMILY

I am sure that a horse can become a faster horse. For sure, a turkey can become tastier but when it comes to having higher apes, or worse lower ones, in my family tree I am not so sure.

Although it is true that some have looked at me and seen a resemblance.

We evolve, this is certain. We are not who we used to be and not yet what we shall be. However, it seems to me after evolving and sometimes revolving for six decades, that the art and the science of becoming the very best you can be lies in squeezing the maximum out of the lot and the portion assigned to us by God before birth.

We will never turn into another species however hard we try to be someone else. The fact is that the better you is already inside, asking to see the light of day.
NO BOW TIES AT THIS BALLET

The road to Aduku was a long and dusty trail to a place no-one goes to and even less people care about. Poverty filled the streets and hardship lined many a weary face. George, our driver took us to a simple shop where we sat on the shady patio, drank some water and waited, not knowing what to expect.

Suddenly a long line of ladies, young and older danced on to the patio in a swirl of bright colours, singing and shrieking and for ten minutes their smiles lit up the world. In modesty, they vanished as quickly as they came.

"George," we said, "Who were those ladies?" He replied, "These are all widows because of the war or AIDS and last year we gave them $50 each from your money as a 0% loan. They have been buying and selling things in the market and now every one of them has food, clothes and medicine, and sends their children to school. They have repaid every penny and the dance is their age-old way of saying thank you to God, and to you and your friends."

For sure, this was not the Moscow State Ballet, but no audience has ever been more satisfied than we were that day. You might like to buy a ticket to come with us for next year's return performance. In the grand theatres of the world, evening gowns and bow ties are expected but here, some insect repellent and bottled water might come in more handy for the interval.
NO CHAMPAGNE FOR ME

On the day that I was born way back in pre-history in 1949 one of the family bought a National Savings Premium Bond for me. It cost them one pound.

Once a month all the bond numbers go into a computer called Ernie which chooses one winner who receives one million pounds, and a host of others winners of small prizes.

From my infancy I have been waiting for the postman to bring my cheque but in 65 years not one single pound has come my way. This is surely some kind of record and the champagne, now a vintage, remains on ice.

I thought life would turn out better in so many other ways too, but it has not. Am I bothered, bitter or depressed? I am not. In fact, I am always expectant that today is my day and if it's not today then it's tomorrow. I choose to forget the former things and press on to get hold of everything I was born and born again for.

Because there is no future in the past.
NO FREE CURRY IN CALEDONIA

We are in the north of Scotland on the banks of Loch Ness to visit our eldest son James, who incredibly is now 43 years old and catching us up quickly. We arrived last night after eight hours on a train, which in the smallness of UK is akin to travelling forever. James has been unwell for many years, but life in the fresh air and solitude of the Highlands agrees with him. He thinks that living here will suit us even better, although the thought of horizontal rain, hail and snow takes our minds more towards the Canaries than Caledonia.

The last time I was on a train for so long was in India when after eight hours had passed there were still fourteen more to go. Indian Railways had impressed me by laboriously writing every passenger's name, maybe 1,500 in all, on a board by the side of the carriages. Later on, every time the train stopped at a railway station, men hurried on board with freshly cooked food wrapped in silver paper. It was not like that on the sleek Inverness train. Not one person was hanging on outside and chatting with us through the window with no glass. The white robed gentlemen with free curry, rice and cups of cha were missing. Nevertheless, you do see the spectacular sights of the Highlands and one sight in particular at journey's end was unforgettable. The remarkable sight of the grace of God working so beautifully in James after thirty-seven years of daily prayer.
NO MEDALS FOR REUBEN

It is no time to search your heart when the dictator's men in black are knocking on your door. One ancient middle-eastern epic story tells of the original Arab Spring long ago when the call went out to send the tyrant packing, dead or alive. Some villages sent fighters, others sent leaders and all of them risked their very lives.

Yet while the arrows were flying, over in Reuben's village there was much searching of heart and they were still sat there looking inside themselves when the battle was over.

History honours both the risk takers and the foot soldiers in battle or in business, but people who only search their hearts and never go near the front line always miss the medals.

So, if you have heard the same call from God as we have to fight for our families and for this world:

Are you coming or are you not?
NO OSCAR FOR THE ACTOR

Well-known actor and celebrity of his day, Charles Laughton was attending a dinner party with a family in London when during the evening the host asked everyone attending to recite a favourite passage from English literature. When it was Laughton's turn, with consummate skill and all the right gestures he recited Psalm 23 and everyone applauded his performance.

People took their turn until the last to participate was an elderly aunt, who had dozed off in a corner. Someone gently woke her, explained what was going on, and asked her to take part. She thought for a moment and then in her shaky voice she began to say, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, and so on until the end at which point everyone was in tears.

When Laughton departed at the end of the evening, the host thanked him for gracing them with his presence. He confessed his embarrassment about some rather contrary whispers from his family about Laughton's recitation of the Psalm after the second reading of the same lines.

Laughton responded, "The difference between us is that I know the Psalm; she knows the Shepherd."

With that he vanished into the night.
NOT ALL THAT GLITTERS IS GOLD

Engagement is when the flirting gets serious. The next stop down the line is a wedding day or if you are in business, a contract to sign.

Champagne follows both but engagement is a time to ask the questions, to search hearts and to check if we are all going in the same direction.

Or not. And if not who is going to change and how, and when.

Figures in wedding dresses and figures in the bank dazzle many eyes but not all that glitters is gold, or God.

In fact it is those whom God joins together in love or in business that are likely to stay together, engaged with God and each other forever.

Going places together.
NOT EVERYONE IS AS ENTITLED AS ME

Truth to tell I am entitled. I am entitled because my early life prospered the Scottish whisky industry to such an extent that they should give me a medal.

Because of all the unusual behaviour that this excessive liking led to I am fully entitled to an early death. Failing that a chronic illness or a prison record would be a reasonable entitlement.

Certainly to a lost eternity of endless regret I am surely entitled. It would be only fair and reasonable.

Yet in the middle of it all God came looking for me who had a glass in his hand at that very moment. He spoke sense to my soul, took me in hand and keeps things that way to this very day, thirty-seven years later.

The one that is entitled is Jesus. Entitled to my life and my love, and you know what - it's his.
NOT MUSIC IN MY EARS

Dr Kevin Dyson, 74, has been our friend and mentor for over twenty-five years. He and his wife Joy presently live in Australia and in fact, after God himself and the angels, but above Google, Dr Dyson seems to know more about everything than anyone else in the world.

Catching up with news, Kevin told us: "I am going to Cuba as a result of sending your 'Tree of Life' book in Spanish over there a few years back. As a result 4000 house churches were planted, followed by a BA level Bible College. Over in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia I am helping train some 20,000 new church leaders which is very exciting stuff and keeps a young guy like me awake at nights dreaming of what can happen next. The men there have already trained 900 pastors to BA degree level who in turn have planted 2700 churches and 5800 fellowships without pastors."

We said to Kevin that news like this is not music in our ears. It is an entire symphony orchestra playing in our souls. You can hear it as well, can't you?
NOW WE HAVE ALL GOT STATUS

Status is something that only the elite, the cream of society, ever had. If you were somebody by accident or achievement, you had status.

Most of us had none, but now Facebook gives us all our moments in the sun. Your friends can't wait to 'Like' your status and the advertisers can't wait to feed it. What Facebook asks is the first question that God ever put to man. "Adam, where are you?"

God being God, he already knew the answer, but he wanted the first member of his page to press the button, publish his status and tell his story. I believe that our status needs to move from none or standby, to ready. Like a TV, our tiny green light needs to permanently glow to say that we have a status and that status is ready. Ready to go, to change, to stay, to be, to do, to pray, to apologise, speak, write, give or forgive. You know, times have changed; now it is OK to have status. Stationary is out, and updating your page of life is in.

I am sure that in heaven and on earth fingers hover over the Like button. To 'Like' you that is.
ON A SPIRITUAL SARGASSO

Today I listened to a deep-sea sailor talking about the doldrums, which is a word that has crossed my own mind more than once when going through the endless hours of an empty day or two.

Navigators say you risk the doldrums in the fattest parts of the earth where the winds find it hard to circulate and once in their languid grip it might be a couple of weeks before you again feel a breeze on your face. Our ocean-goer talked about the need to have a good book to read, plenty of fuel in your motor and ways to occupy your mind with many small jobs until the sails ripple again and carry you out of the doldrums.

I have heard believers talk about dry times and seasons, even the dark night of their souls which leave them becalmed for ages in an sea of aimless wandering. Here's my take on a sailor's advice: First, if you have drifted into one of those fat and comfortable parts of life and living and life has just stopped moving, then set course for where the people are lean and hungry for love, mercy and justice and here your heart and hands will find much to do.
You know the good book and those that know say its whisperings are best heard in stillness. Neither is it a bad idea to keep your soul filled with the Spirit of God for the day any of us wake up on a spiritual Sargasso Sea.

Should that be where you are floating right now then obey God in one small act of love after another, raise the sails of your soul in faith and pray with passion for the wind of the Holy Spirit to blow.
ONE DAY AT A TIME
IS SUCH A SWEET FEELING

The sum total of our reflections after four days away is this:
Do one thing at a time. Take one day at a time.

Hold us to it please. A little silence and solitude on the river bank at St. Neots was very good for us. Inside our ageing caravan we were warm, dry and disconnected and on the outside we dodged all but one of the heavy April showers.

Jesus puts it this way: "Are you tired, worn out or feeling burned out? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me, watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace."

Matthew 11.28 The Message.
ONE LETTER PUTS THE WORLD RIGHT

Untied is the shoe lace that trips you up. Equally, it describes the human condition pretty well. I have examined the world from floor level more than once myself.

United is the same word with just the letter I in a slightly different place.

I being that unholy trinity of me, myself and I getting under my own feet and everyone else's.

However if I get me into the right place with myself and with God I notice very quickly how much easier it is to be united with other people.

Why, even my car carries me better when I am purring inside.
ONE OF THE ONES IS ME

Life definitely does not come on a plate. Nor does it come on my terms or yours. In fact life has a weird way of conspiring against every good thing you want to be or do. Unless . . .

In 1986 a man spoke to us about the lost, the last and the least of the world and asked people to go and change their lives for the better. Crowds raised their hands to say Yes but instead of a pat on the back we got a sober prediction that only one in a hundred of us would see our commitment through. Unless . .

No-one believed that we were so unreliable, yet even one year later it was hard to find even the one in a hundred. As one of the ones who saw it through I now know that if you are going to see life bend your way then every day you have to get hold of the dream by the scruff of the neck and by purposeful, prayerful and intentional living you point it in the way it has to go. That's the unless. In fact, nothing less will get us to where we know we were born to be.
ONLY A MONKEY NEVER LETS GO

Native peoples catch their lunch by placing something nice in an empty jar knowing for sure that before long a monkey will reach in and close his hand around what he sees. Now, the hole is only big enough for an open hand to enter, but too small for a closed hand to leave. Being unwilling to let go of what he has got, the poor creature not only fails to get his lunch, but sadly for him he becomes lunch for someone else. He is trapped by his own mind, his unwillingness to let go and his attachment to the little he has in his hand. This week we were guests at the absolutely brilliant gathering for charismatic Baptist leaders. Now you may ask, what do monkeys and charismatic Baptists have to do with each other? Not a lot, except to say one of the leaders said, "God has a new gift for someone here, but your hands are too full of the old gift for you to be to take the new." Memories of monkeys flashed into my mind while the presence of God hovered. I forced my hand open and let go of all I was holding on to and held it out to take the gift on offer. The only other thing I can say is for the rest of the day I avoided mirrors just in case my fur and a long tail peeked out of my clothing, and needed combing to maintain the dress code of the occasion.
ONLY ONE OF US WILL QUIT

Say the word tenacious and everyone has a dog story and so here is mine. In a pulling match our Jack Russell will win every time. At 1/20th my size she will hang on even with all four feet off the ground until I admit defeat and let go. Only my friend John, a young family man, is more tenacious. In the face of a terminal diagnosis which is measured in weeks, in all of my life I have never known anyone who is more tenaciously hanging on to life. John grips the promises of God and the hope of his power through every kind of prayer, involving everyone, everywhere who is willing to say Amen. Daily, even by the minute John chooses life and right now he looks good and he sounds good. He is working a full day, eating well, gaining weight, starting a third business and only winces with pain at the price of travel insurance. Being tenacious means that we insist on what is right until what is wrong loses its grip and quits.

So go John go, and you too. Go man - go. Go lady - go. As Churchill said in 1941, "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever give up."
ONLY TAKE THE CALL IF YOU DARE

We had to look twice, then look again and then look at each other but there it was: a £700.77 credit coming into our bank account labelled 'Anonymous.' Trust me, such things do not happen every day. From whom, for what and why were just some of the questions that we asked each other. Not two hours later we heard that Pilar's mama, 89, over in Barcelona had become seriously unwell and shortly afterwards she had passed away peacefully. Funerals in Spain generally take place the next morning but the weekend delayed things which gave us a day and a half to get there. At this point you fall into the hands of the airlines whose fares may be a bargain £25 each way six months before your date of travel, but when you book only hours before flying you discover the other end of the fare spectrum, and you weep. Anyway with two trains, two airlines, two airports, two motels and a fast and furious 400 mile drive in a hire car we made it to the funeral on time and were home again the next day. You will not need two guesses to know how much it all cost. £700 almost to the penny, and amazingly there it was in our hands before we even knew that we needed it. Jesus has a way of going ahead of you and I, and that is just what he does. Someone who was incredibly sensitive to His voice and his timing had the faith to take his call and to be obedient. So to you who are 'Anonymous' to us, but not to God, we owe you a thousand thank you's. To the Lord who spoke into your soul, many times more.
ONLY THE ONE WHO GIVES UP GOES UP

At the very beautiful wedding of Stuart to Abigail, the daughter of David and Kathy, our very good friends who work together with us in looking after the DCI family, it was my pleasure and privilege to conduct the wedding ceremony.

Afterwards I had these few words to say to the bride and groom, hoping my own soul would overhear the conversation.

"It was just over two years ago that I was asked to 'give away' our own daughter Lizzie. For me those two tiny words 'I do' were probably the hardest ones I will ever have to say, yet I said them with a smile knowing that there is a supernatural law built into the fabric of the universe.

It is a law that simply works for everyone who makes it their own. In the words of Jesus the secret is: 'Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give determines the amount you get back.'
Many ingredients help to make a marriage happy. For example, the man needs to learn if he can still throw his clothes on the floor and get away with it. The woman soon discovers that where she squeezes the toothpaste tube is crucial to the male understanding of life.

If carrying a cup of tea up to the bedroom in the morning and bringing flowers home once a week works wonders, then giving works miracles. If you will give each other lots of time, as well as a bit of space to be alone, and never stop giving each other love, honour, understanding and patience, you will see how much more comes back your way.

In the same way, if you will give time and the same love, patience, cooperation and honour to God, he will give you back that full measure and even more. Give to Caesar or he will debit your bank account. Give to your family, especially on Father's Day and Mother's Day. Big presents, pressed down, running over, shall you pour into their laps.

Now the really big one: The one thing you never give - is any space for anger. Keep the arguments short and never let the sun go down on your fallings-out. You see, forgiving is - for giving. The more of it you give, the more you will get back. So let the only competition be to see who will give in first, because one more great secret in life is that the one who gives up, is the one who goes up."

Now, why didn't someone explain all that to me those thirty-three years ago, but then again, it is never to late to start.
There is a book that someone you rub shoulders with needs to read, but they will not be asking you or anyone else for it any time soon. Not even their wife, husband or pastor. It might even be the pastor and he has no-one that he can ask.

In our teenage years drugs were something that people did in China, Morocco or in Soho. We had illicit, under-age beer. The next generation had cannabis and heroin and as a two-for-one offer the devil threw in AIDS for free.

These days the social drug of choice and as mercilessly addictive as any other, is porn. Once upon a time it was top-shelf, wrapped in brown paper stuff but today porn is free, showing today on a screens of all sizes near you, and never further away than two clicks of a mouse. Writers in The Times say they enjoy it. Many a mummy leaves Fifty Shades of Grey on her bedside table as she dresses for church, and her kids already know everything there is to be known.
All the while the pathways of the brain are being rewired by every image until the body can't live without more. The truth is no-one sells their soul to the devil in one go, he buys it from them in instalments.

The book is Surfing for God by Michael John Cusick, who is a minister who went way beyond the free stuff, and found a way out. He has written a deeply spiritual, totally professional and wholly workable guide to freedom.

In computer keyboard language if you or someone you know is out of CTRL and no longer Fn Function as they should, they need to press Esc.

You can't ask and they will not tell you, but perhaps by passing on this little story to everyone you know, or by putting a line or two from it in a bulletin or on a notice board, that someone may quietly pick up the trail to freedom before that which is hidden is shouted from the rooftops.
OUT OF SIGHT DOES NOT MEAN OUT OF MIND

Abram and Isaac were walking up one side of the mountain with heavy hearts, yet at the same time on the other side of the same mountain and completely out of sight, the Lord was also making the ascent. He was leading a ram which he tied to some bushes at the top. He got to the problem first, because he always does, and he left his answer in place, ready for Abram and Isaac to find a little later on.

They plodded ever upwards expecting the worst, completely unaware that out of their sight, the need was already met. They could not see God's provision until the critical moment came when they discovered that they were not facing loss after all. Many years later Jesus intriguingly said to his friends who were facing a loss of their own, "After I have risen, I will go ahead of you." In order to keep his word, Jesus had to pass through crucifixion, death, hell, rise from the dead and move a ton of stone to leave an empty tomb behind. Knowing this, can you now imagine anything that is likely to stop Jesus being there for you?
PAIN IS PREDICTABLE BUT SO IS PROFIT

Some results are totally predictable, but all too often these are the ones that you do not want. Touch a flame and you will say 'Ouch.' Or like what happened in a Thai refugee camp when a lady lit a fire under her cooking pot, went away for a moment and forgot about it. Predictably, minutes later hundreds of bamboo refugee homes were burning furiously. Lives were lost, and 3,500 people are homeless in a scorched wilderness. Our friend Gareth was one of the many who took relief aid to the ashes of the camp. For predictable results when it comes to giving to bless or investing to gain, we follow the advice of an accomplished engineer, architect, farmer and economist of times gone by. He looked overseas and invested his money in seven or eight opportunities, hedging his bets. Some people might call it a belt and braces technique. He would say: "Don't look at the wind or the clouds. Get your wisdom by listening to God in prayer, then sow your seed morning, and in the evening. You can be sure that one or the other, or both, will do equally well." Just as predictably, Solomon became the richest man and the best fund manager of his day, by far.
HOW I READ TWO BOOKS AT ONCE

It has been said for centuries that God has two books. This week we have been spending more time in his first masterpiece and allowing the pages of his second best-seller to rest a little more than usual.

The title of his first book is 'Creation' which has always been available worldwide and comes ready translated into every language. One early reviewer, Paul, said that it leaves both the simple and the sophisticated without excuse. Since last weekend we have driven many miles along single track roads through the remote valleys of the Scottish Highlands and for long periods we did not see a single soul. Yet it was impossible to not hear God describing himself through the beauty, the colours and the immense grandeur of the kind that makes you wish for four pairs of eyes. Camped by the side of sparkling lakes surrounded by protective mountains one day, and on white far northern beaches lapped by turquoise seas the next, it is easy to sense the pleasure that God feels in showing what he has made for people to enjoy.
We were tired before we came this way but not a good tired, more of a really tired but not yet the dangerously tired. The chances are, that like us and most of our friends, you may well have grown so accustomed to feeling one tired or another that you actually accept it as normal.

It is not.

What we now know is that when Jesus says to come to me and I will give you rest, he means that there is an actual, attainable rest for spirit, soul, mind and body that he is willing to give which has nothing to do with cheap flights and package holidays.

We start the long drive home soon, stopping for a couple of days to camp near to Lindisfarne, or Holy Island. For centuries men and women of God set sail from here to carry the gospel to the far reaches of the known world of their day.

We are hoping that a trace of their passion and vision might remain in the air for us to breathe into our own souls.
PASSION NOT FASHION PLEASE

Last night we went to hear comedian Mark Thomas, a self-declared atheist and political activist from a family of vicars and pastors.

He was speaking about what he found and who he had met when he walked all 750 kilometres of the security wall between Israel and the West Bank. Mark spoke without notes, without multimedia or video clips, and gripped his paying audience for two hours non-stop. He made us both laugh and weep, and we knew exactly what he believed. As I listened I asked myself what had happened to the passion and conviction in the preaching of our churches. The fashion is increasingly for multi-media driven yet infinitely forgettable visitor-friendly 'talks' about a God in general and nothing else in particular.

In a previous century someone once asked David Hume, a well known unbeliever why he was going to listen to the famed George Whitefield, a gospel preacher. "You don't believe in all that," his friend said. "No," the man replied, "but Whitefield is no fool and he certainly believes. I want to know why."

It would be a shame if today the only man left who can move our souls is a stage comedian with a passion for justice.
PATRICIA'S VICTORY OVER MANKIND

As fate would have it, should there be such a thing, the nurse that dared me to enter the clinic was the infamous Patricia. I am certain she was specially employed to handle the miners in our community and for sure she could match their vocal reluctance with her own vocal belligerence and never give an inch.

There was no way that our Patricia was going to unblock my deaf ear after a mere seven days of self-help administering regular drops of olive oil. One penetrating look confirmed to me no argument would save me from anything less than half a litre of oil going down my ear over the next week.

Being the man that I am, I meekly agreed, said thank you and left head down to await her tender mercies. Sure enough seven days later my suffering was over and I was even given a smile without an ounce of warmth to celebrate Patricia's latest victory over mankind. The emphasis being on the word 'man.' Best not to comment on the second syllable: Kind.
If it is true that a large dose of warm olive oil softens our hardness of hearing how much more will the same golden liquid which is symbolic of the work of the Holy Spirit soften that far worse condition of our hardness of heart towards both God and the people around us?

Only the Holy Spirit can melt the hardness that no nurse can ever touch and unlike our Patricia, God is willing to give his healing presence immediately to all who ask.

My advice to you and to myself is that we saturate our hearts day and night with large quantities of heaven's own extra virgin oil until tenderness emerges, tears flow and the hardness that perhaps we alone know about, is gone forever.
With one look, I knew that the day had dawned brighter on the outside than on the inside. A cup of tea generally cures most things, so I took one up to my wife Pilar who was in bed trying to find a joint that did not ache. The time was 8 o'clock in the morning. "I'll bring the dog up to keep you company." Now, Sweetie was more arthritic than her owner, even less mobile and a little heavy, so Pilar said no. Wistfully she added, "If I had a small dog, that would be nice."

Paws, I mean pause, let 30 minutes pass.

Now, you know when someone hurries to your door before breakfast time it is not likely to be good news. An elegantly dressed lady enquired, "Would you like a dog?" Such a thing was not foremost in my befuddled mind at that moment so she turned to leave, but not before Pilar's words from half an hour earlier paraded across my mind. "Wait," I said and by lunchtime, Lottie was in our kitchen. "Oooh, so sweet," my daughter Lizzie whispered. "Aaaah, look at her" murmured Zack, her husband. "So small," said my wife. Sweetie moved her tail and that was that. They say that God knows our needs before we even ask, and he does. What I know is that some days he gets up very early and delights to meticulously arrange even small dogs. The only remaining question is the one that Jesus put to two men in Jericho, and still asks today: "What do you want me to do for you?"
PEGGY LEE SINGS FEVER

Contagious like nothing else, it burns like a fire deep down. Passion rubs off, it's better caught than taught. It invades you like the fever Peggy Lee sings about, and you pass it on the same way.

Once ignited passion has no cure. Neither do you want one. You never recover, in fact if you did you would only go back to where passion first found you and see if there is any more left.

Impervious to buckets of cold water and soakings of indifference, apathy and exclusion, passion always finds a way through. Or over, or round the side or it digs a tunnel under.

Whatever it takes to express its inextinguishable love.
Indiana Jones is rescued ten times an hour in his films. Dan Brown writes books in which his heroes never seem to eat, drink or visit the bathroom not once in forty-eight hours as they race to save the Vatican or even the world.

The only trouble with writing stories is that someone has to live them first so if you are Dan Brown that sounds quite exciting if perhaps a little demanding on the innards.

For me though, finding one more new and true story to tell is as probable as meeting a Yeti in our village. In fact, this Friday afternoon having a passer-by take my photo with a Yeti seems infinitely more likely to happen.

Because we can only give what we first receive, it is no surprise that artists, speakers and poets often turn to their muses for inspiration.

The original muses were the nine daughters of Zeus, ancient goddesses of the creative arts who according to one very well known writer of today, still return his call.
I would like my hands to be those of the ready-writer immortalised in Psalm 45. Hands that are ready to write. But this afternoon my hands are empty. My mind is blank. Pencils snap. Paper crumples. Six o'clock draws near. Translators are waiting. No pressure.

Then as often happens, either just before all is lost or frequently just after, my Muse is here. The fullness of Jesus fills my emptiness and from the storeroom of a life lived he brings out treasures new as well as old.

Only the mistakes are mine.

To my great envy, Pilar often hears the dictation of poetry no sooner than she wakes up in the morning. I find her in bed with tea in one hand, a pen in the other and the dog beside her being immersed in the atmosphere of the classic arts.

So there we are, that is how it happens for us, most days.
PENNIES FROM HEAVEN IS MORE THAN A SONG

We don't know who you are E A Nzeogu, and we really wish that we did. Every week, you send us 10 pence, 20 pence or 50 pence, and for a few weeks it has been £1. For us these are pennies from heaven and better by far than ones Bing Crosby sings about. E A Nzogue, you have no e-mail, no postal address and with the Data Protection Act hiding you from us at the bank, we have no way of giving you the big thank you that you deserve 100 times over. Walter Wriston, one of the most influential and honest bankers of his day said, "Capital goes where it is welcome and stays where it is appreciated."

So, to you our mysterious friend, to all our anonymous givers and to everyone who knows us and trusts The DCI Fund with their capital, we say far more than your gifts, it is you we welcome and greatly appreciate. Just lately your giving and ours has equipped leaders for mission in Bolivia, Brazil, Ethiopia, Germany, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Indonesia, Malawi, Mexico, Spain and Thailand. Any day now money will reach the unreached peoples of the Amazon and RD Congo. If we ever thought for one moment that your capital were not welcome, appreciated and really useful in all these places, it would not be leaving our shores. Not now, not ever.
In those days half a lifetime ago, a girl who got into a mess saw two doors. The first was the door to her home closing behind her, followed by the door of a railway carriage opening. Years might go by before she came home. Before we married, my wife who was barely surviving herself financially had not one but two knocks on her door.

Overnight her rented room in Barcelona became home to two young ladies each with a suitcase, shortly to be followed by two babies making life a struggle for all five.

Nevertheless, God has a gift for every newborn and that is potential. What we do with that potential becomes our gift and our thanksgiving back to him.

From that inauspicious beginning a generation ago, the baby girl, now a married lady in her late 30's, cares for child mothers as young as 11 years old, and their babies in Bolivia.

The boy has a family of his own and is a well-known musician and worship leader in Spain and Mexico.

The contradiction is that although we enter this world naked, we are richly if invisibly clothed with a potential that no amount of disadvantage can extinguish. Have faith in God, believe in yourself and now that you know what came with you, see what you can do to let it out.
It was one of those times when one person after another felt that they should tell you about an unlikely and uninvited thought which came into their mind with your name attached to it. "Deuteronomy 15.6," they all said, "the Lord will bless you as He has promised and you will lend to many nations but borrow from none."

It took years before those tantalising words even began to make any sense, but in 2015, almost four decades later, we take fund management very seriously indeed. By funds we mean your money and ours. By manage we generally mean repelling more pirates and boarders than Johnny Depp ever saw when filming in the Caribbean. The last few years have been strange and hard to understand as the world overseas slowed right down, and more than a few agencies and charities at home closed their doors.

Yet our own small circle of family, friends and supporters have given even more than ever. Older people share their pensions; businessmen stay committed in the face of unpredictable profits; and even the men and women who lost their jobs continue to make giving a non-negotiable priority. Only one or two people have withdrawn to give elsewhere. Every opportunity has been attended to, every bill has been paid and our tax is up to date.

To God be the glory, and to Him and to you be the thanks.
PLAYING A SYMPHONY FOR SOULS

Dr Kevin Dyson, 73, has been our friend, mentor and senior consultant for twenty-five years, he and Joy presently live in Australia. Below God himself and the angels but above Google, Kevin probably knows more about everything than anyone else in the world. Catching up with news this week, Kevin told us this: "I am going over to Cuba as a result of years ago when you gave me a copy of your book 'The Tree of Life' in Spanish. Our dear friend Dr Nahum Munoz took the materials to Cuba and as a result 4000 house churches were planted over the next few years, followed by a BA level Bible College. Now the leaders want a graduate level program from us. Over in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia I am helping train some 20,000 new church leaders which is very exciting stuff and keeps a young guy like me awake at nights dreaming of what can happen next. The Bible School there has trained 900 pastors to BA degree level and they in turn have planted 2700 churches and 5800 fellowships without pastors." We said to Kevin that news like this is not just music in our ears but an entire symphony playing in our souls. You can hear it as well, can't you?
PROPAGANDA AND POLITICAL SPIN

If you ask young people in a London street to name a Christian they admire you may easily get a 'dunno mate.' Yet gently insist, give it a few more minutes and you will begin to hear one name over and over again. Is it Billy Graham? Or Joyce Meyer or Benny Hinn? 'Never 'erd of em, mate,' they say.

You can guess who is number one for young people and for millions of us older ones too: It is Mother Teresa. They have never met her and the chances are that they can't even tell you a one single word that she ever said, but people recognise one thing when they see it: Genuine goodness. Weep tears of perplexity all you architects of PR, propaganda and political spin for your message is forgotten in a fleeting moment. Yet the unspoken words of an elderly lady still cross continents, enter hearts and speak volumes, even from eternity.
PRAISE THE LOUD IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

Get together with three or four highly trusted friends, but no more than this number. Sit quietly in a tight circle, close enough to touch each other. Make sure the room is in darkness and preferably with no heating in winter and no open windows or doors in summer. Now in turn, softly whisper a Bible verse that you have memorised and in a few quiet words explain what it means to you. Listen to what your friends say and go around the circle a few times. Then go home. One at a time allowing a few minutes between each departure. Try this for yourself. We did. This is the only way that believers in North Korea can meet for worship. If this secretive gathering is ever betrayed, most likely in all innocence by the children of the family when questioned at school, then sudden death or years of hard labour in a camp for their parents will inevitably follow the same day.

So if you come home from Sunday church deafened by the music, blown away by the flashing screens and frozen by the cool, there is an alternative.

Very unfortunately for some.
Many years ago I listened to John Osteen, an American minister, speaking about facing life-threatening cancer with a great faith that he gained from reading Psalm 27, 2-3

When the wicked came against me
To eat up my flesh,
My enemies and foes,
They stumbled and fell.
Though an army may encamp against me,
My heart shall not fear;
Though war may rise against me,
In this I will be confident.

These words were written before the advent of modern medical science yet they seem to precisely describe the five stages of the disease, and give hope and a way forward in each one of them.
First of all fear intimidates, then the disease advances which leads to the oft-mentioned feeling of being trapped and under siege. Finally comes the outbreak of all-out war against the person.

Having God's word to stand upon Osteen remained confident and demanded in prayer that it would be this flesh-devouring enemy that stumbles and falls, and not him. To this day I vividly remember reading how God had kept his promised strong hold on that life and through prayer, pills, physicians and patience the cancer was defeated. As it also has been defeated in some of our own friends in recent times.

Disturbing news is now all too frequent in our ageing group of lifelong friends and we choose to meet it by speaking out these same words from Psalm 27:2-3 as a prayer. We ask God to make this the Word that the Lord sends, the Word that heals. One way or another, by prayer pills and patience we trust to overcome and more times than not, that is the gift that God gives.
PROMISING PUTS ON THE POUNDS

Years ago I learned the weight of a promise made when my first mentor, Andrew, agreed to speak on a Sunday in his home town of Nottingham, in England.

He forgot that he was already booked to speak in Poland the previous week and the following week.

To keep his promise he drove back to the UK, spoke as promised for forty minutes and then turned round and drove back across Europe.

I looked, listened and learned that integrity means keeping your word even when it hurts.

The lesson has served me well.
PULL THAT TRIGGER WILL YOU

Last week our friend Claude invited us to dinner. Soon, he said, I will ring you. We know that we will never get to eat his fine food. We never do with Claude but he is a great guy.

Like people you know, Claude takes aim, he looks you straight in the eye, but he never presses the trigger to execute the plan. We will only miss a meal, but what a tragedy it is when people miss a real opportunity saying they will do it "mañana."

Tomorrow is always the most elusive day in the calendar.

So what have you and I been aiming to do for the last few days? Or weeks. Or months?

Isn’t today and even right now not the right time to pull that trigger?
RECIPE FOR BREAD AND FISH

Between the great writers, inventors, artists, thinkers, philanthropists and myself there is more than a world of difference. I envy their genius in design and the work of their words, brushes and music. I am awestruck by the way that some famous names give away millions of dollars to make the world a better place. At their side you and I have but loaves and fishes. Plural but possibly in the singular – one loaf and one fish. However, if you will thank God for his gift to the world that is you, allow yourself to be broken by what breaks God's heart and begin to give away what you have in your hands, what you will see next will shock you. Trust me when I tell you that on any given day, you and the gift that you are, however insignificant you may feel, will somehow invisibly multiply to be enough to satisfy everyone that God brings your way, with plenty left over for you and yours. Others may cage, control and copyright their gifts to watch the cash roll in, but the man who gives away his bread and fish feels richer than them all.

And sleeps better too.
RETURNS, REFUNDS AND EXCHANGES

The woman who was perspiring profusely waited patiently at the jewellery counter to return the cross she had so fallen in love with the week before. She said it was heavier than he thought, and her husband didn't care much for the colour.

With a sympathetic smile, the manager gently took it from her, and invited the lady to choose another from the selection of previously owned crosses, then come back to his desk. "Take your time," he said with patience. Turning to the display, the woman thought some of the crosses were too big or had splinters that would dig into her skin. Others looked worn, or stained, and according to the history attached to each item some had been owned by people who had been ill, disabled, divorced or unemployed, and in one case, the owner had been killed by people from a strange religion. However, there was one very small and inoffensive cross. It looked easy to carry and nice to wear at church but not so obvious as to draw attention.

"That one," she said pointing at it. The manager reached over, took it and began to wrap it nicely. "You do realize though, madam," he said, "this is the very same cross you returned a few minutes ago."
SCREAMS, APPLAUSE AND THE BUZZER

What does it feel like to be weighed on the scales and found wanting? Especially if the scales are on a platform, the judges are watching and the audience scents blood.

You expected screams and applause on Britain's Got Talent TV show but you got the buzzer. Three times. It can happen on a pulpit too and the Sunday audience is even less forgiving. Ouch!

Personally I have always thought it better to die to self in private than to have it happen in public. Find a friend who will be honest with you about your gifts and where you are at, and let God's word be a mirror to you.

In the Psalms and Proverbs you get to see yourself like never before from the inside out and hey - when the sight or the sound is not so good there's no buzzer and no cruel words from God's panel of three. What you do get is hope, help and a future.
SERGEANT PEPPER IS SIXTY-FOUR

In 1967 when the Beatles and half the world sang, "When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now," that day seemed to be a long time away for them and for me. However, on this, my 64th birthday, the words to 'When I Am Sixty-Four,' are all too true and the song must qualify for entry into the annals of prophecy.

In 1968, I came to Nottingham alone, the orphaned child of Gene Edels, from a Lithuanian Jewish refugee family, born in 1907, and Harold Norman, a genuine Victorian born in 1894, a Methodist furniture dealer. Today the 'one alone' has become a much-loved family scattered across Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, Spain, England and Scotland. Perhaps the family didn't like the cooking at home, but last night they surely missed the most astonishing paella. In 1978 when life was a truly awful mess of my own making, the first word from God I ever heard improbably foretold that my work would be blessed, my wife would be a fruitful vine, and our children would be olive shoots around the table.
Infinitely more prophetic than the Beatles, Psalm 128 is the only place in the Bible where these three issues are mentioned together. How do you explain that years later, here we are with everything just as God said before it happened.

Today as my 65th year opens, Pilar and I are hearing that we are to press on, not lingering in the past but holding on to the progress we have and looking forward to what lies ahead. That's probably a good word for all of us.

Take it for yourself will you, as God's gift to you and to us.
SEEING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Call it intuition, call it a second sense, call it a gift if you will, but it seems to me that perception is not a lot to do with what you first see about a person or the words that are first spoken.

Perception speaks on a much deeper, inner level where even the silence between words somehow tells you more than ears hear and eyes see.

Filtered through life, experience, prayer and a life lived in the Holy Spirit, perception may still be misunderstood without adequate time and reflection. Nevertheless, genuine perception as opposed to opinion, is rarely completely wrong.

Being able to 'perceive' is a great asset to every man and woman.
SEVEN AGES OF MAN SURVIVAL GUIDE

"All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts."

The final act of Shakespeare's perceptive Seven Ages of Man goes on to predict our life in later years: "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." Sans of course being French for 'without,' thus giving us much to look forward with increasing dismay.

There is however, a better way of moving through the ages of man and escaping the decline that is expected or forced upon us by others. We can continually reinvent ourselves.

Not in the gaudy style of David Bowie or Madonna, rather by prayer and faith we return ourselves to the hands of Jesus. We ask him to melt us and remould us in the precise shape and capacity to handle his chosen role for us in the next stage of life.
For instance, we have noticed that our friend Virgil in his fifties, no longer works at a printing factory, instead he writes the books.

At 90 years old, seventh-stager Eric Madisson became a best-selling author in Myanmar, and to look at him he was certainly 'sans nothing.'

We know several more reinventions, yet the Bard was correct to say that in our time we play many parts not just one in a long-running soap-opera. We just have to learn the new lines, change our dress, put on a little make-up, and ladies and gentlemen: the stage awaits.
SHIPWRECKS STILL HAPPEN

The sea was smooth for the time of year and the breeze was fair. The ship owner sensing money to be made said, "Risk it." The captain relying on experience said, "We go." The majority at the bar counter looked at the horizon, felt the wind and said, "Whatever."

Only one man fresh from time with God below deck and seeing neither the forecast nor the sky said, "Stay, it will be a disaster." All of them ended up in the sea with the ship at the bottom but one man saw it coming.

Is this the Costa Concordia story, shipwrecked off Italy in 2012?

Actually, it is Paul crossing the same Mediterranean in the first century. I am learning to ask for the same wisdom that Paul found and put into action what 'they say,' lest the next ship to be wrecked is mine.
SILENCE, SCENERY AND A SHEPHERD

Silence, scenery and the shepherd are the active ingredients listed on one brand-name therapeutic remedy for frazzled nerves that everyone has on the shelf.

Why is it that no-one opens it until too many days of running on empty finally brings them grinding to a halt with burn-out? Prozac may be today's quick fix but the three S's of Psalm 23 - silence, scenery and the shepherd when taken as needed restores your soul and trickle charges your serotonin level as well. Better still by far when taken regularly.

Works every time for me but then again, with 3000 years of good reviews on parchment, paper, pulpit and Trip Advisor this is no surprise.
SILVER AND GOLD HAVE YOU NONE

"Silver and gold have I none." For a lot of people today this confession would be taken to be a description of non-significance in this life. Yet when a Bible character named Peter admitted this particular 'personal failure,' he didn't stop there but passed on what he did have.

What he gave away so transformed another man's life that we still talk about Peter to this day.

So I take my hat off to the millions of believers and church leaders in the developing world who have little silver or gold. You who we know have great faith, depths of wisdom and impressive survival skills that we here know nothing about. I say to you, pass these gifts on and you will be men and women of great significance in your nations.

They say that Saint Peter the penniless made it to being the first Pope and who knows if you might do even better. I hope so.
SLOW IS THE GIFT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR

At first we thought it was a conspiracy but now we realise that it is a very welcome gift. For our 65th birthdays and to mark 30 years of serving in the middle of people and projects in world mission, our friends have done something for us that is priceless beyond words. By taking over many of our daily responsibilities and in the nicest possible way by closing and locking the office door to keep us out, they have given us the gift of several weeks of unhurried solitude and silence. We are given the gift of time to go slow instead of full ahead, to listen to God and to find new imagination, inspiration and revelation.

We have spent the first three weeks in the Highlands of northern Scotland, in the tiny village on the banks of Loch Ness where our eldest son James lives and works. As day was breaking this morning, on the outside there was only the sound of sheer silence and the swishing of a distant waterfall. Sheltered by our friends from the never-ending stream of e-mails bringing news of 'earthquake, wind and fire,' a similar quietness is also beginning to emerge on the inside.
Of course, you don't have to camp your way up to Scotland through rain, shine and more rain to create a 'sacred space' where the silence speaks louder and clearer than words. All you need is a place at home, a regular time each day, a corner in your soul for you and God to meet alone, and two Do Not Disturb notices.

One for the door and the other one for your mind.

It is said that a good journey begins with knowing where you are and being willing to be taken somewhere else. In that case, two tickets for the slow train please.

One-way not returns.
SMOKE, MIRRORS AND MONETARY MAGIC

It is a slow day in the little Irish town where times are tough and everybody is in debt. One evening an American tourist stops at the local hotel and lays a $100 note on the desk and goes upstairs to inspect the room on offer. As soon as the visitor is out of sight, the hotelier grabs the $100 note and runs to pay his debt at the butcher. The butcher takes the $100 note and drives to the pig farmer to pay what he owes.

The farmer kisses the $100 and pays his bill at the petrol station. The man at the garage uses the $100 to pay his drinks bill at the pub where the barman quietly passes the same $100 to the local lady of the night who slinks over to the hotel and pays her room bill to the hotelier by placing the same $100 note on the counter. The tourist comes downstairs, says the room is awful, snatches his $100 note back and leaves.

No one has produced anything. No-one has earned anything. Nothing has changed, yet the whole town has paid its debts and everyone says the future is bright.
You might smile but the Bank of England prints money and sees spending hit new highs. So the European Bank gets the idea, does the same and calls it Quantitative Easing, whatever that is. Greece meanwhile hands over 160% of its income for years to come and stays in debt.

Is it not simpler by far to hear Jesus saying: “Relax, don't be so worried about getting but respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, instead you soak your life in God's reality, God's initiatives and God's provision. Don’t worry about missing out, all your everyday concerns will be met.”

As God has met ours over a long lifetime without any of the smoke, mirrors and monetary magic that is better suited to Britain's Got Talent than to banking.
SOME PEOPLE ONLY COLLECT STAMPS

In 1984 my friend Miguel Diez took me through the back streets of Spain as he collected in the drug addicts, prostitutes, traffickers and AIDS victims and filled his own home with damaged boys and girls.

In 1985 I took him through the bush of Burkina Faso and not long afterwards he returned to collect in the very poor. Then he went and blazed a trail of compassion through Latin America, South America, the USA, Europe and Asia.

So far he has collected 60,000 of the worst, the poorest and the most neglected people in 67 countries. He gives them a home, community, meals, clothes, employment and his faith.

Hats off to a collector of more than stamps.
SOMEONE FETCH THE SHERIFF

Get a little overtired and some of those bad habits of yesteryear creep out of the woodwork uninvited. To relieve the stress we might just make them welcome if no-one is looking, but if they come, they come intending to stay.

Grace from God and some will-power will send them back into the past but that might take a while. So between now and then call in the law, put yourself behind bars and throw away the key.

Catch yourself in the act and arrest yourself. What I mean is put in some Internet filters and road blocks to bad districts. Tell someone you trust about the temptations, ask them to pray with you and check how you are doing.

Do this and it will not be long before law catches the bad habits and grace offers you some better ones.
Dear pastor, our beloved shepherd,

We don't really know what to say when we see you going into the Internet shop every day to ask for money from people in America and Europe. We always hoped that your first calling would be to us not to the building project, the board meeting, the BMW or the budget. Once you told us that Jesus, the good shepherd said, "Feed my sheep and care for my lambs." We like that. It bothers us when we see you so nervous on Saturday because you don't have any food for us on Sunday, and so little time to listen to us on Monday, or Tuesday. Even sheep know that you will feel better if you spend more time with God and less time with Google. So how about a little more feeding and a little less worrying about funding? A bit more giving and not so much getting. Luxuries we can live without, but we can't live without your love. Come and see how we are doing, call us by name, and always feel free to leave us to search for a lost sheep, rather than a lost e-mail.

Sincerely,
Your sheep.
SPOCK YOU AND I
HAVE THE SAME PROBLEM

Last week I e-mailed my friend Virgil in Spain and by the end of the e-mail that I had written, I said to him that I did not know which had clicked more: the mouse or my hand. On Christmas Day my hand decided it would no longer work. This is not the RSI injury caused by the overuse of a computer mouse. I know about that from years ago and use a flat mouse pad, with a gel wrist support and if I feel a twinge coming on, then my Dragon dictation software saves the day. This was different.

I could feel the tendons getting all tangled up and my fingers got stuck in the Spock position. That makes it very hard to carve the Christmas turkey when you have to use one hand to bend your fingers on the other hand. Injections, splints, surgery - everyone diagnosed their favourite cure but yesterday I read that when Jesus came across a man with a withered hand he said to him, "Stretch out your hand."

As the man did so he was instantly healed.

Today the ten-minute podcast which I cannot possibly start the day without, focused on the very same story. How strange is that? So, looking around to make sure no-one was watching, I stretched out my hand as well. You see, on Christmas Day it was not just my hand that withered, my writing withered as well.

And as you see, it is back again.
STILL SITS ALONE

I just wish it could go on forever.

I mean those occasional moments when the Blackberry goes to sleep, the Tweeting stops, the emails quit for the day, the children go to bed and a Christmas night stillness descends on my noisy world.

Still is a place. Still is the velvet darkness. Still waits for you in the early morning but often sits alone. Still walks by the sea with you and speaks silence to your soul at sunset.

In still you hear the whispers of God and your own replies.
Clothed with still you enjoy priceless, unashamed luxury.
STIR THE GIFT NOT THE MARTINI

When people of retirement age meet together, generally everyone has a story about their cruise, the caravan, the camper or last Christmas in Cancun. That's OK. They all worked harder than I did, for longer and they all did better by far. Enjoy all of it, because at our age my friends, today has no manufacturer's guarantee of tomorrow. Rest by all means but to be complacent, to call it a day, never. Complacency extinguishes the driving force that paid for the cruise in the first place and stifles creativity. Contentment is fine and gratitude is better. Yet best of all is embracing the call of God to leave the world a fairer, healthier, saner and safer place for our children and especially those of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Personally, I do suspect that when the ageing apostle Paul urged young Timothy to stir up the gift in him; it was only what he insisted to his own soul every single morning. After all at Paul's age, the Aegean is as good as the Caribbean, and a deck chair on a Greek island is as comfortable as a deck chair anywhere else.
STRANGE NAMES
AND EVEN STRANGER GODS

Air Afrique deposited the few passengers who dared to descend, into the prehistoric scene of straw huts, rabid dogs, donkeys and open camp fires which passed for an airport. Big men with even bigger guns searched every visitor as the DC10 swiftly departed taking the 20th century with it. My fellow travellers vanished into the gloom as night fell and I was left alone, unaware that my letters accepting the invitation to Burkina Faso still lay uncollected in the Post Office.

I had $50 and 50 kilos of things to give away, no address to go to, no language to speak, and no phone number to ring - not that the airport had a working telephone. At this point a mocking voice in my head hinted that any time now I would be dead or in prison and I didn't disagree. Then through the smoke from a hundred cooking pots, I saw a line of ancient taxis with every driver looking at the white man. 'Eglise,' I said, 'church,' any church!
We lurked outside one darkened mud building after another observing the very strange names and perhaps being observed by the even stranger gods inside.

"Non" I said, "Non, non, non," until incredibly we came upon a circle of white men, all lumberjacks from Alaska, who had come to construct village churches for their annual trip for a charity. At that moment, I felt just like Abraham's servant in Genesis 24.27, the one who crossed an unmarked wasteland to find himself knocking at the front door of people who turned out to be his Master's relatives.

The bewildered taxi driver took a few coins, wished me au revoir, looked at me strangely, shook his head and went home with a story of his own.
SUPER FOOD FOR STREET PEOPLE

Getting people off drugs is not necessarily a long job. Keeping them off though is much more demanding. What we learned on the back-streets of Spain thirty years ago helping hundreds of young people to come out of the drug culture of those days, is that treating the whole person is a key therapy to long term freedom.

Feed an empty spirit with the super-foods of love, faith, hope and worth. Feed an empty soul with friendship, acceptance, music, blue skies and green fields. Feed an empty body with good food and fill empty hands with worthwhile work. Do this and it will not be long before positive choices begin to be made as God's super-food for the soul builds a fullness which overcomes the gnawing emptiness that was the problem to begin with.

May I gently say that if you know someone who needs help like this at no-cost, ask Google for Remar or Betel and contact them.
SUPERSIZE YOUR ABILITY

Ability by itself tends to create a few winners and many losers, yet it is easy to multiply your ability by turning it into availability.

Have time, an ear and patience for someone, especially a stranger and this may be the most precious gift you can give. So go ahead, avail people of your ability and enrich them by what you can do or say.

We all know people who have more raw ability than we do and it is best to thank God for them because the world needs them. Instead of fretting, concentrate on your availability because if you do, you will have a lot of thank-you's coming your way.

Think about it, the knock on the door or the phone call that interrupts and irritates you so much might actually be the doorway into the best work you and I do today.
TAKE AIM, FIRE, FLEE

When Tom Okello, now Bishop Tom, was arrested and stood before Idi Amin's firing squad in Uganda's bad old days he neither flinched nor backed down in his faith.

He heard the word to fire, he saw triggers pulled yet the bullet that was heading for the spot between Tom's eyes was miraculously slowed down until Tom could observe its trajectory and move his head to avoid it.

More shots were fired and the same happened.

The third time the soldiers fled.

Courage, they say, is not the absence of fear rather it is keeping your head steady and maintaining your course. Courage is not quitting even when you are terrified.
TAKE CARE THE LADY BITES

One of the best things I ever did was way back in December 1984, when a man I had met invited me to visit him in Burkina Faso. He told me to fly to Ouagadougou, an unfamiliar word which for all I knew could have been a capital city or a recipe.

In the end I went by myself because no-one else would go with me citing mosquitoes and the white man's grave as the historical attractions worth avoiding.

What I saw, heard and felt in the following two weeks included arriving an hour too late to save a child who died for lack of 50 pence to buy medicine, kept me wide awake on the Air Afrique flight home. The desert sky was smooth but I was on an unstoppable roller-coaster of emotions that was then turbo-charged by arriving back into the frenzy of Christmas shopping and meal table excess. I never recovered and to this day I never want to. Never underestimate Lady Compassion. She has teeth and once they have bitten into your heart, life has to change.
TAKES THREE TO MAKE A PERFECT PLAN

Between any flash of genius and a full order book or completed project sits one niggling little word: How.

Only three letters but they have the curious power to bring out of this world corridor conversations right down to earth. Consider that before the How can be formulated a What must come – exactly What is it that you want to do?

Follow What with a Why is that, then say When, Where, for Who and with Whom alongside you.

No answer How and this will enable you to calculate How Much.

Trust me when I say that when you can answer all the five W and the two H questions honestly and diligently, you have got a perfect plan that will have the people reaching for their wallets to get behind you and to turn your genius into goods or growth.
TALKING TURKEY

The supermarket checkout line was so slow because everybody pushed a trolley that was overflowing with every kind of food and drink. Everybody that is except us with our "Reduced Items' that didn't sell the day before.

This was the first year back home from the mission field for Pilar, our two growing boys and myself. It was two days before Christmas, 1983.

Only Jesus knew that our cupboard at home contained no more than strawberry jam, flour, rice, a few tins and some tomato sauce.

We prayed, said nothing to anyone, and waited to see what God would do. On Christmas Eve the extraordinary happened. A young businessman brought a turkey to our door for no reason that he could explain.
The turkey was so enormous that it would barely fit in the oven and so from then, until the New Year we ate roast turkey, turkey pizza, turkey curry, turkey stew and even slices of turkey with jam between them.

Unbelievably exactly the same thing happened the next Christmas except to say that a neighbour brought us a Christmas cake which was very nice, with turkey of course.

These days we have the privilege of making every Christmas special for hundreds of poor men, women and children in the developing world, but back home the very same businessman, now not so young, still comes to visit once a year. He passed again by this week.

We talk turkey of course.
TELL ME AGAIN:
DELAY IS GOOD FOR ME

Delays make me think about airports, road works and waiting rooms of all kinds. On one occasion we arrived at Stansted Airport shortly after an ancient cargo plane bound for Korea had scattered a trail of its innards along the runway as it took off. Before long I am sure that the thousands of delayed travellers could be seen and quite possibly heard from the International Space Station.

Unlike the young man in the VW Polo advert of years ago who was so comfortable that he blissfully wished the gridlocked traffic in front of his windscreen could go on forever, on that day everyone saw things quite differently.

However, we mustn't give the word delay a totally bad press because there is another side to this coin. I have always told people that if you have doubts about something, then don't do it, don't be it or don't go to it until you are clear about whatever it is, and if your faith and patience allows it, until God confirms his mind to you. Over the years, with all the wisdom of hindsight, how many times have I kicked myself for not following my own advice, when a delay would have been a whole lot more sensible than the dithering decision which in the end really delayed things.

Pause then with me for a moment, just in case our hearts need a short delay to talk some sense into our minds.
In our first training school, there was one meeting a year that got everyone excited. The same words that Joseph spoke to the baker and the wine waiter, we said to our students: "Tell me your dream." Because as Solomon intuitively knew, "In the heart of man are deep waters, and a wise person draws them out."

Nerves and tears mingled with beautiful far-sighted dreams that day, and the hearts laid bare always left everyone deeply moved and hopeful. We thought it was important for students to declare a dream that was their own because any time you see someone pursuing a midlife career change, you can be almost certain that they have been living someone else's dream, and lost their way.

It is never too late to lower the bucket down into those deep waters and pull it up full. I do it all the time. Patiently filter your words through the Cross asking for God's will and not your own and then follow your dream.

As the wine-waiter and the baker found out to the joy of the first and the dismay of the other, dreams of this kind have a way of coming true.
TEMPER TEMPER

It seems to me that nine times out of ten the people that get our backs up actually want just the same thing as we do. A better world, a better service, a better church or whatever. They just go about it a different way.

However, it is tolerance not temper that gets us closer to them. When that happens there is every chance that we will find a new friend. Even when the only agreement between us is disagreement, iron still sharpens iron on both sides.

Fighting is fatiguing but tolerance conserves our energy for the real enemy behind all anger, contempt and disunity. For him and what he gets up to there's no tolerance.

Zero.
THAT ELUSIVE BEST

Henri Nouwen was restless, terribly busy yet feeling that somehow he was on the right path. Pére André, his mentor told him to keep a careful eye on the difference between the urgent and the important, saying: "If you allow the urgent to dominate the day, you will never do what is truly important and you will always feel dissatisfied." He went on, "Henri, to be surrounded by urgent things is your character and your way of living. You moved from Harvard University to rural France to get away from a busy life, and now life here is as busy for you as Harvard ever was. The issue is not where you are, but how you live. Wherever you are. This means a constant choosing of what is important and a willingness to leave urgent things for later." I look into the mirror of Henri Nouwen and I see myself. I am also highly experienced in turning a solitary life as a writer into a wearying whirlpool of busyness. I also miss opportunities by allowing the good to be the enemy of the best. Today, I know it was important to write this for you. So, I will now go and deal with the urgent. Henri Nouwen and Pére André would be pleased for me.
THE BELL AND BICYCLE PASO-DOBLE

The bicycle was in the distance; it was coming but there was time to cross the road. My wife stepped out and the cyclist rang his bell. My wife stepped back yet there was still time to cross. She moved back into the road; again the cyclist rang his bell. She hastily retreated only to find that I had crossed the road. She moved to follow me but ringing became insistent so she stepped back. Then forward. And back again. Finally she dashed over the road after a kind of paso-doble two-step dance in an epitome of indecision that the cyclist will remember to this day. Her mind was not set. James, the first pastor in Jerusalem called this being double-minded and he said that this guarantees that you will go nowhere. Minds are funny things, more soul than body, elusive and invisible yet they can be open, closed, changed and even transferred from one person to the next. In fact, according to Paul, the apostle, the mind that was in Christ Jesus can also be in you. Now that is a mindset to die for as they say, but no need for drastic measures, all we have to do is to follow the instructions in the book.
THE BEST IS YET TO COME OR IS IT

Every journey whether across the world or across the day, consists of three parts:

The anticipation.

The adventure.

And the appreciation.

That is the beginning, the doing and the remembering.

For me the anticipation is by far the most enjoyable part. My imagination and hopes are loosed, admittedly not always to be fulfilled, but hey - let's enjoy the beginnings, take the doings as they come and makes some memories for winter nights around the fire.

Even if the only memory you keep is the relief you felt of finally coming home.
THE BILL FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

The bill came from Barcelona City Council for a fee to deregister Pilar's first car, an ancient Fiat 600 that reached the end of the road not recently but 33 years ago.

And then it got worse.

The bottom line included an eye-watering 11 years of parking fees incurred while the office prepared the paperwork.

After some weeks of serious prayer to the God of all justice asking him to act, Pilar's sister who lives in Barcelona went to pay the bill, expecting her next stop to be the bank to ask for a loan. However, and for no given reason, instead of taking the money, the cashier disappeared into a back room and returned a minute later to say that this once, there was nothing to pay.

From the heaven when cars go, a smile.
THE CASE THAT CONTAINED THE FUTURE

I pulled it, I pushed it and tried to drag it but move it would not. My face went crimson, sweat trickled, perplexity increased and time accelerated. I had just seen the man put his case on the ground. "Let me take it to the train, you get a ticket, quick, it goes in four minutes," I had said, and now the case was cemented to the pavement.

Etienne Zongo, the Minister for Sport in Burkina Faso sprinted back, leaned over, swung his case onto his shoulder and ran for the platform with a very embarrassed red-faced, weak, white man stumbling behind him.

Etienne jumped on the train and shouted, "See you soon." My wounded pride rather hoped not, as I waved farewell to this tall, handsome man from somewhere called Ouagadougou. He spoke Mooré and his tribal identity had been etched by knife into his face. He sang the songs of God and talked about thousands of poor Mossi people coming to Christ.
In no time at all knowing Etienne led me to Philippe, another gifted but penniless young man who today watches over 7000 churches and 70 schools for 7000 village children.

In turn Philippe welcomed Miguel from Spain who then wept every night for months at what he saw. Today he feeds, houses and clothes thousands of poor Burkinabe men and women.

Then a stream of Burkinabe men began to come my way for training, often carrying only a plastic bag with their few possessions. Later John Clements single-handed took his Academy of Mission over there, and Dr. Angel from Barcelona began to send teams of 40 medics to give free treatment to the poor.

Looking back to 1984, if that case belonging to Etienne was so impossible to lift, I now know why: It was so heavy because it contained the future.
THE CHOCOLATES THAT CHOOSE YOU

‘Life,’ as Forrest Gump in the film of the same name ironically says, ‘is like a box of chocolates because you never know what is coming next.’ For our friend Johnny Auguste in Haiti the box opened on January 12, 2010, as buildings collapsed like packs of cards when a massive earthquake devastated Port au Prince and the nation. By the end of that day, Johnny, mostly unemployed and living alone, became the father to twenty-one small children who lost their own parents in one catastrophic moment. Four years later they still eat at his table and live under his roof yet not one penny of the billions of dollars in aid and relief has come their way. Today Johnny sent me the latest photos of each boy and girl proudly holding their end of year school reports. The children look good. Johnny, you are a hero but just like the dollars, I fear that the medals will be a while in coming, but hear what Jesus says: "Whatever you do for someone overlooked or ignored, you do it for me.' And you do it for me, Johnny. In fact you do it for all of us.
THE CHURCH
OF THE KITCHEN TABLE

On Saturday night we visited our friend Peter Hamlyn, now 88 and still amazingly active. We stayed in Peter's 500 year old medieval home which once upon a time witnessed royal processions by barge along the nearby river when the nobility came to inspect their country manors which, sadly, are now housing estates in a dreary London suburb. Peter's home still stands resplendent in hushed grandeur, like a Disney castle among the endless grey streets framed by motorways, high-speed train lines and the never-ending flights from Heathrow which rend the sky at thirty-second intervals. Around the kitchen table under low, blackened beams we did church. It just happened and it wasn't Sunday. Seven people with a combined age of over 450 years, from five nationalities and three denominations, or four if you count the lady who would never go to a church. It was good. Allow us to encourage you not to wait for Sunday either but invite a handful of friends round and a couple of others who never cross hallowed doorways, and eat together. Put the kettle on, talk about good things, thank God, sing if you can, ask about their family problems, pray for each other, say a word of blessing on the neighbours, the nations and on us. It will be something like how the early believers followed Jesus, and you will feel so good you will want to do it again. Promise.
THE COUNTDOWN TO YOUR IGNITION

Five, four, three, two, one - ignition, and an eternity later we hear NASA say, "We have lift-off." Familiar words that are part of the experience of the millions of us who held our collective breath as the Space Shuttle emerged from massive flames and inched itself into the Florida sky.

Back in another century, John Wesley would say, "Catch fire for God and people will come from everywhere to see you burn."

It is the same thing.

Ignite a man with belief, enthusiasm and passion and what he says and does become very compelling.

A man asked his atheist friend why he was going to hear D L Moody the preacher. "You don't believe what he says," the man argued. "I do not," his friend replied, "but Moody does and so do thousands of others. I have to find out why."

So, who will press the button to ignite my quiet convictions and move me towards my God-ordained destiny? What will it need, or who will it take to ignite your ideas?

Five, four, three, two . . .
THE DAY BEFORE TOMORROW

It is not just the latest science fiction blockbuster on Screen 2. The plot that has me on the edge of my seat is all about the destiny of the six billion people who are alive and the next billion who are coming soon.

What I am seeing is that today not tomorrow is the time to send our hopes, prayers, plans and ourselves around the planet to take God's love in a hundred and one different ways to the lost, the last and the least on every continent.

I often think that the video player that projects this 3D wide-screen movie on the back of my mind has a replay button that is stuck in the on position. But that's me. Sometimes I need to watch a film a few times before I get the plot and understand the end.

Not this time, though.

Got it. Now to do it.
THE DAY THE CAT GOT AMONG THE PIGEONS

"If you get away with this, we will all have to do the same," said one of the church board members, anxiety and misunderstanding emerging through his normally benign expression. The cat was among the pigeons, as they say, and that day I made no friends.

I had just asked the church board to release us from the salary which had been their gracious gift to my wife and myself about one year earlier when we returned from Spain to the UK.

It was 1990 and we were leading the first School of Mission with students who came mainly from poverty-stricken developing world nations. In fact one pastor from Burkina Faso arrived with his possessions in a plastic shopping bag and went straight from passport control to the police cells.

How could we ever show these men and women a life of prayer and trust in God's faithfulness when we were receiving a monthly salary, something that would never come their way back home?
So we intentionally decided to be just like the least of our students and together we trusted God for his provision to live with, to give with and to pay the bills for the School. Did we get away with it? Yes, we did and still do.

In fact only recently Raquel from Peru reminded us of the lessons she saw, heard and embraced in 1990 that serve her well to this day in the Andes. Did our nervous church elder have to do the same?

No, he didn't. Because the truth is that where God guides, his grace provides in a thousand and one different ways for a hundred and one different callings.
THE DAY THE LIGHTS WENT OUT

There was never a time and motion manager like me. It must have been instinct because no-one taught me to target, set goals, prioritise, measure and evaluate but doing so made my business prosper. It will do the same for yours. I was 19 and they put me on TV. Then the miners went on strike for close to a year. Fuel was rationed, electricity came and went and my forecasts became dimmer than the lights.

So set your goals but hear Jerusalem's first pastor, James, say this to you and to me: "You who say we will do this or that, go here and there, do business and make money - why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow."

So, having a plan B is good but better still, take James' advice and add this to every goal: "If it is God's will." Because when it is God's will there is not a recession deep enough to sink your ship.

Or your shop. I know this.
The Edge is Nearer Than You Think

More than 1,500 years ago, Celtic followers of Jesus emerged from Europe's heartlands as Roman soldiers drove them and their faith west to the fringes of pagan Britain, Ireland and France. Modern Celtic believers are still comfortable when God takes them to the edges of life just as Jesus allowed himself to be pushed to the edges of first century society and found a welcome from the ordinary men and women there.

Often it is only when we dare to go to the edges that we truly get to talk to others heart to heart. This is because men and women who are on the edge of loneliness, anger, despair or more positively, an adventure seem to recognise another who comes over to them and for them.

Some you pull back and others you push forward, either way it is on the edge where truly precious things of life and faith are passed on.

At the edge, we see horizons that are denied to those who stay where they are comfortable.

From our own years with the street people of Spain and with the very poor of Africa, we know that the edge which is never very far away, is always a place of spiritual renewal. Theirs and yours. You come alive.
THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES

When in Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale, the Emperor wore his splendid new clothes, everyone could see the real man underneath.

Yet the Emperor believed the story that only the unfit, stupid and incompetent people would notice the truth. A child put him right.

Could it be that some of our secular and spiritual leaders might do well to visit an honest tailor and exchange their see-through white stage suits and crowns for the clothing of genuine nobility?

Who knows but a childlike friend might care enough to whisper some truth in their ears in private and save them, and us, from a red face in public?
THE FALL OF MARÍA CARLOTA

Filled with an overwhelming desire to reach the caller at the front door in the shortest possible time, Pilar's dog accelerated in such a blur of speed that all four paws lost their grip. Unfortunately the poor creature was on the very top of the stairs at the time.

It was with a growing sense of impending doom that I watched her fall head over heels from the top step all the way down to the hard wooden floor of the hallway without landing upright even once.

In fact, the scene froze into infinite slow motion; I even had time to visualise exactly how I would tell Pilar that her dog was dead. However this fantasy abruptly evaporated as Lottie, officially Charlotte, otherwise known in Spanish as María Carlota, and at other times called something far worse, landed upside down on her head with a dull thud that made even the portraits on the wall wince.

By telling you a story like this you will realise of course it is one of those weeks when no-one has been anywhere or done anything sufficiently noble to be worth mentioning.
This unwelcome quietness makes me think about Smith Wigglesworth, the brusque Yorkshire plumber of the mid-1900's who often raised the dead, including his own wife Polly when she died without letting him know beforehand.

He had a saying, "If the Holy Spirit does not move me, then I move the Spirit." So we were wondering if anyone might tell us how he did this and help us regain the kind of traction that Pilar's dog lost.

And Maria Carlota? - she shook herself and ran off into the kitchen.
THE FALLEN KING

But who will pastor the pastor? I don't know how many times over the years a well-known leader has fallen into the age-old traps of gold, glamour or girls. It has happened this month. People close to him saw it coming but no-one dared to say anything. The man who was once approachable is no longer teachable but who is to blame?

Success can make the top such a lonely place and in the end, applause can echo around an empty soul. I am sure that leaders long to have someone pull them back from the edge, but who dares touch the anointed? So, if by any chance you have more secretaries and security around you than a rock star, then allow me to very gently ask you this.

Would you consider putting a gate through those barriers and give the key to a friend or two and give them time and permission to say absolutely anything? Ladies and gentlemen, we need God, and we need each other. What do you think?
THE FINGER THAT POINTS AT YOU

Many years ago, I was a speaker at a youth camp held in the cool air of the Genting Highlands in Malaysia. Youth was an elastic word; you could be 40 years of age. One afternoon I was swimming in the outdoor pool but my mind was on the next session, and my heart was criss-crossing the world. A businessman shouted to me, "You know David Shearman, don't you?" I did. In those days he was my pastor, but how did this man guess that? He said, "I saw the way you were praying as you swam, and I saw you walking the corridor speaking to God. David Shearman does that. I met him in Hong Kong and now I do the same." That is influence for you. As powerful as any spoken leadership, the influence of one man had quietly developed two other men who lived at opposite ends of the earth. Not everyone can be a salaried leader, nevertheless at home, at work and through global social-media, we can lead powerfully for good through the influence of our attitudes, lives and words. In fact, you might be the best and maybe the only book on leadership that some people read.
THE FRUIT IS IN THE SEED

My wife is forever planting microscopic seeds some of which turn into tender shoots. I can see her through the window right now, she is in the garden. Soon the flower and vegetable beds will bloom, a tribute to her and to those infinitesimal, vulnerable specks which she planted. I think that gardening must be a passion in heaven, after all God put Adam in Eden not in Manhattan. Jesus knew all about seeds too and spoke about how they have to go into the ground, and die. He said that only the death of the outer shell can release the life that God alone has invested within, which then brings the blossom and the fruit. A gardener indeed. I have learned that a creative idea is also a seed which is best buried in God through prayer. Even I know to keep my hands off, to leave it alone, let it die, and not dig it up to see what's happening. Let the idea resurface when God knows that it is ready and then with patience and all that tender care which my wife knows so much about, you will have something beautiful to see. Tiny seeds planted in good soil bring wonderful displays of colour and splendour to gardens - and into lives, families, businesses and churches as well.
THE GIFT THAT YOU NEVER KNEW YOU HAD

On our DCI Monday evening together we talked about a rarely mentioned calling that is open to everyone and with no upper or lower age limits. Even when the apostle, the prophet, the evangelist, the pastor and teacher pass by largely unnoticed this quiet and unspectacular ministry has a way of succeeding. In 1 Chronicles 33, King David puts names to all the most important offices in his kingdom. Of these, only one man undoubtedly came and went with less pomp and ceremony than anyone else, yet what he did helped to make history. Hushai was the king’s friend. Precious to the giver and priceless to the receiver this gift of your friendship plays a major role in making us who we are. Not a day goes by that we do not try to be a friend to others and they to yet more people. In fact, when it comes to world mission, nothing we do is more effective than making time for people, listening to them, praying for them, believing with them and staying close by them to see what God does. You can do that over the hedge, over a cup of tea and these days over the Internet. You will never be more welcome.
THE HIGH NOTE THAT CRACKED HEAVEN

The meetings started on a high, and then went downhill at a breathtaking speed, not helped by an opera singer leading worship to the full extent of her range and volume, and a piano tuner who monotonously tapped every note during the sermon. The days which had been filled with promise turned as grey as the concrete suburb in Madrid and anticipated the colour of my own future. Except to say, one early morning the high notes from the previous evening must have finally cracked the walls of heaven and the dam burst. In an indescribable experience that lasted thirty minutes or was it thirty seconds, probably the latter but it felt like the former, I heard God's plan for the rest of my life. Did this really happen? Did I hear a 'call' to a lifetime of being thankful to God, to prayer and being occupied with telling nations what God had done and was still doing? There was no-one else present to say yes or no. Yet thirty-three years later on as I write, the experience is still as compelling, as vivid, and as directive as it was on that dreary Madrid morning when life made little sense. Two lines written in ancient times in a faraway land, leaped from the page I was reading as my disciplined selection of the day and began to lay rails before me to the distant horizon. To this very day I am no nearer discovering the end destination and terminus. I could never have done anything else. [Psalm 105:1]
THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN

For those of us who are trying to turn uneducated men and women in the developing world into trained leaders the search for authenticity and integrity is as difficult as finding the legendary Holy Grail. The adventure is as scary as any Indiana Jones story.

Character, communication, competence and 'chemistry' are the measures that we employ to identify the man or woman who is genuine.

Such rare qualities may initially be buried deep under layers of acting to impress but once detected they can often be dug out like gemstones.

Given time and dedication any rough diamond can be cut and polished to reveal a real jewel in the crown of servant leadership which comes to be admired by all.
THE JUDGE BEHIND THE JUDGE

The tension was unbearable, the future of two young lives were at stake and no-one slept well for days afterwards. The custody judge adjourned the hearing asking for reports on both the father and the Court’s more usual choice of the mother.

The father could only quietly promise that with help from the church he would balance proper care of the children with his responsibilities in business, whilst the flow of acid and irrelevant remarks from the mother's lawyer aimed primarily at the church caused the judge to frown, warn and then call for silence.

Everyone sensed the likely outcome would be that the boys would be taken into care.

In the following weeks one side plotted and the other side prayed. Late in the evening before the second hearing the telephone rang in the father's home and a lady said that God had given her his word from Isaiah 54:17 in The Living Bible:
"In the coming day, no weapon turned against you shall succeed, and you will have justice against every courtroom lie. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord. This is the blessing I have given you, says the Lord."

Of course, now you know exactly what happened, but although the judgement was astonishing, the occasion called for tears rather than champagne.

We shall see the younger brother who is now 41, with his family at our kitchen table this coming Sunday lunchtime, and the older brother who lives 500 miles away sent me a couple of messages not five minutes ago.

We are very close.
THE LADY BABY

A more hopeless looking woman you will not find. She would neither lift her face nor speak more than one downcast word. Her pastor asked me to pray for this poor lady because in her Mossi culture, a barren wife lives in unspeakable disgrace, and this was the problem.

The only bigger dilemma was that my own wife back home was in the same long-term predicament, living with the sadness but not in the shame. At a time like this to have faith for an answer or even to believe that God is listening is helpful. I had neither. The pastor had less than me, and the woman had long since lost hers.

So we prayed in hope with two unconvincing Amen's at the end, mine and the pastor's and then nightfall mercifully swallowed us. Ten months later, a scrap of a paper torn from a school notebook landed in my letter box overflowing with a joy that crossed the earth to announce the birth of a lady baby.

Never underestimate the power of hope when it is clothed with prayer because not long afterwards another 'lady baby' was born. We called her Elizabeth, which means God has kept his promise - as we hoped but scarcely believed that he would.
THE LADY IS NOT FOR TURNING

It was Margaret Thatcher, the Iron lady, who said in 1981, "The lady is not for turning."

She wasn't and she didn't.

The applause lasted 5 minutes and the echoes only faded away 9 years later.

The lady was of a certain disposition. Back then I would have been no different in my own way, but I think that I am finally learning that life has only a few non-negotiables.

Listening, yielding, being persuadable and flexible makes for a more pleasant life. Friends tend to stick around and return your calls.

To be honest if you don't turn when you should, your hand will soon be engaging reverse gear.
THE LAST MINUTE LINE DANCE

People with undisguised dismay were moving literally en-masse towards the departure gates, most of us having underestimated the marathon distance from the car park to the low-cost airline terminal. Eight flights were due to leave within thirty minutes and the boarding lines were almost indistinguishable in this cocktail of anxious clock-watching and highly-stressed humanity. We inched forward only to find we were actually about to board a flight to a town in the Balkans whose name I could not even pronounce. The indefinable mass of passengers to the right, sensing our likely defection into their space instantly closed ranks, hissed, muttered and sent us to the back. As the last people to board, we had the joy of sitting in the last remaining middle seats, widely separated from each other and worse still, from our sandwiches. All of which made me think that if we want to reach our God-given destination in this life and the next, we had better find the right line while we have time, and not leave it to the last minute, because for sure, following any other crowd will certainly take you to somewhere else you may not wish to go to.
THE LAST RITES AND WRONGS OF PATRICK

Irishman Patrick O'Bryan, was a well known handsome reprobate, embezzler, womaniser and much more besides. One fateful day one of his victims finally caught up with him and shortly afterwards Patrick lay on his death bed. The village priest hurried to him, saying with urgency, "Now Paddy, will you renounce the devil and all his evil ways?"

Paddy found the strength to open one eye and replied, " No, Father, I will not. This is no time for me to be making influential enemies."

Anon
THE LINE YOU SHOULD NOT CROSS

There is a line that you should not cross. If you do cross it, miserable things happen to you. Worse still, if you look over your shoulder and see the line behind you, you are definitely on the wrong side. The dark side.

Our friend and translator Georgina gave us permission to tell you what happened to her last Sunday morning. She wrote, "I had so many problems that I just broke down. For three hours I took refuge in a dark corner of a Catholic church and wept and wept until I felt better and comforted by God's assurance."

You can put weight on a spring and it will stretch. Take the tension away and it will return. However, apply too much stress and the spring will still expand but metal fatigue sets in and the spring remains extended and unable to return by itself. To save the spring the load has to be removed and heat applied to enable a rewinding.
Even less fun is mental fatigue which leads to the need for restoring our minds and souls. Yet there is an effective preventative vaccine in the four letters of REST:

R. Recognise the silent predator of stress who stalks you.
E. Enter into silence and solitude for a while each day.
S. Six days you may work, but choose a seventh and stop.
T. Take Christ's rest that is both given and found in Matthew 11.28.

Now, if the line is already close or crossed then this is what we know: God's remedy to restore your soul is time in green pastures and by quiet waters. Here, the Shepherd corrects you with his rod and hooks his staff around your aching neck muscles to pull you out of the shadows and lead you back into the sunlight on the other side of the valley.

More than poetry, Psalm 23 is God's prescription for a weary soul who is on or over that line. For him or her time off will definitely be better sooner rather than later.
THE LONELY CELEBRITY

The spotlight was on the Celebrity. They had given him centre stage and by the magic of lighting he seemed suspended in time and space.

The audience however was as fickle as crowds alone can be. They glimpsed a glamorous dusky skinned lady, beautifully dressed in gold watching from an upper alcove. They rushed the stairs cameras in hand, aspiring paparazzi each and every one while only one or two of us remained in our seats.

I felt for the real Celebrity. I silently mouthed my words to him as he waited patiently, displaying all the timeless and unassailable dignity that had made him who he was. I knew that he appreciated my sentiment.

We were in the great hall of Montserrat, perched on the jagged mountain peaks that tower high over Barcelona. The dark-skinned lady scarcely visible through the camera flashes was the acclaimed La Moreneta, a world-famous black statue of the Virgin Mary. The abandoned Celebrity in the arena below was Jesus, or at least his statue.
Touching the Black Virgin will bring you luck they say, yet touching the living Christ, not his statue, as the Bible says, brings healing and forgiveness.

The i-Phone and Galaxy ‘selfie’ generation seemed to be more entranced by an unresponsive twelfth-century idol and went home with only a photo, the memory of their unreturned kiss, and their needs unmet.

It was a curious sight in a sophisticated world.

I was only wondering if there was anything that you might like to say to the Celebrity. I mean right now while the queue to speak to him is so small.
THE MAN WHO HID TWELVE THOUSAND IN HIS CASE

We did not sleep well that night. The home in the Irish countryside was warm, the bed was comfortable but the least sound made our eyes open as if on springs. Our host had just recounted his days in the ongoing armed IRA struggle with the British. "How long does it take for the gospel to change a man?", we Brits whispered to each other in the silence of the night.

The day had begun at dawn as we headed for the Irish Sea Car Ferry driving a red Ford Transit van into which someone had shoe-horned a V6 engine. This was fine for speed in a straight line but not for traffic because this home-made contraption required a three foot long gear lever and the arms of a chimpanzee. The IRA man had already taken us to a Full Gospel Businessman's meeting to hear the personal preacher to Pope John Paul II, a Father Raniero Cantalamessa, who to our very great surprise spoke boldly about Jesus and was more Pentecostal than the Pentecostals.
Next day we went to Cork City to collect a young and very Irish John O'Donovan, who was leaving behind the idols of the faith he was born into, to explore a new life over the water in a different kind of church. Our final night took us to a Mrs. McCarthy's Guest House, forever remembered for the very Ireland-coloured green moss that lined the bath and extended its fingers down the sides.

Talking to John, who is now a well respected pastor and family man, he let it slip out in a very unassuming way that since that journey in 1979 he has recorded more than 12,000 hours in prayer. Knowing John as we do, this is not silent, contemplative prayer but serious spoken intercession through many a long night until dawn, releasing the presence of God into our city and beyond.

Just as well then, I thought, that we collected him in a Transit van with a big engine. When you consider the weight of all those hours he was hiding in his suitcase, that is.
THE MAN WHO MADE US WHO WE ARE

The occasion demanded that we unzip the fabric of time and space and step back into the early eighties.

We were among the many guests at a reception for David Shearman, our first pastor and mentor, to honour his retirement after an amazing 45 years of leadership.

People we had not seen for twenty-two years continued the conversation where we had left it, as if it were last Sunday. We smiled at faces that we recognised across the room only to discover that these were the sons and daughters of the parents we knew. Stories were told, memories swirled, and even critics were credited with having been more right than wrong.

It was David Shearman and his wife Dorothy, who in God's hands made us, and many others like us, into the people that we came to be. I don't think two days has gone by in the intervening years of separation when I have not heard David's voice echoing in my mind, usually quoting a Bible verse, and I have known what to do.
Our early years were filled with the wisdom of larger than life men and women of God who opened doors for us and pushed us through.

This makes us worry about who is guiding the young, cool i-Phone packing leaders of today who seem to have more image than inspiration and know more about salary than sacrifice.

Then again, I remember that more than a few people worried about us.

Maybe they still do.
THE MINCE PIE WITH AFRICA INSIDE

One by one, the apologies trickled in until it seemed that Pilar and I would be looking at each other over the turkey and cake. The Christmas before we had packed the village hall with music and happy people but this year it looked like our only company was going to be Charles Dickens's ghost of Christmas past.

Jesus, the invited guest of honour called by the next day to say, 'When you give a dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind who cannot repay you.'

So ten years ago, we held a first-ever Christmas Party For The Poor in Uganda, which created such a stir nationwide that our friend George soon had 32 new churches to watch over. And funnily enough, back home all the people who couldn't face one more mince pie, warmed to the idea of going without a few calories to give them to others.
This year, in Danane, 500 miles from anywhere in the Ivory Coast, 235 poor, the sick and disabled men, women, and children who are AIDS orphans, will have a day that they will remember forever. Our friend Albert will sit them down and serve them with good food, drinks, music and the story of what Christmas is all about, from the Bible. People will go home carrying gifts of seeds and young plants to grow for food and to sell.

So, as you eat together this evening, just for a brief moment look past your table and strain to overhear the distant conversation, for ladies and gentlemen, we no longer dine alone.
THE NIGHT THE LEAST LEARNED THE MOST

Hands with the texture of sandpaper shook mine and sat me down. Gradually into the gloom lit by oil lamps came unwashed men and women in rags. Walking in barefoot with open wounds from travelling by starlight across dry, thorny ground alive with snakes and scorpions. To the beat of hands rapping on a box and a man shaking stones in a can they sang their hearts out to God with smiles that illuminated the night. Contentment and thankfulness was written across their faces.

The 'nasarra' the white man, me, the reason for the gathering, wished the earth would open up and swallow him but it did not.

The apostle Paul once wrote, "I have learned to be content." Notice the word 'learned.' That night in Burkina Faso the one from far away who was the least content of all learned the most of all, and has never forgotten the lesson.
"Take the next slip road to the right," the lady in my Smartphone GPS said. "Go right now," she added a minute later, followed by an insistent, "Turn right now." Although we had never been in this part of Madrid before, all of my instincts told me that the place we had to find was on our left, so that was the direction I took. All the lady had to say before she was switched off was, "Route recalculation, when it is safe to do so make a U-turn." What did she know anyway, these free programs are never any good? Half a bewildering hour later, map in hand and going round in circles we stumbled upon Madrid's Barajas Airport. It was on my left to be sure and so far from our destination that it was on another page in the book. Apologies were mumbled to the digital lady who being a good Christian gave me a second chance, and promptly guided us to the exact doorway of where we had to be, on the right of the map. As I said to a lady only today who felt she was going round in circles, "If you choose to ignore the whispers of the Holy Spirit when he shows you the exit, he will let you to go round and round again until you admit that he knows best." What I know is that at best our feelings are deceptive and more changeable than the summer weather in England, but God is never wrong and what's more He knows not just the way, but every way.
THE ONE-WAY TICKET

I have studied it, prayed it, stood at the front to say yes to it, preached it, taught it, written it, given to it, sent people into it and believe me, paid a price for it. Yet when a teenager came forward to read a verse that appealed to her from the Bible in last night's church meeting, she turned to the final four verses of Matthew's gospel, chapter 28 known as the Great Commission.

As she spoke the Holy Spirit whispered in my soul, "You have forgotten all about it."

No-one else would know that, no-one would guess it, not even me, but it is true and I know it. In all the humdrum, everyday issues of life, church, health and holidays, sending funds and repelling frauds and charlatans how easy it is to be consumed by the what and forget the why of the Great Commission. Dust and ashes are the appropriate clothing for today. A one-way ticket to return to my first love is required.

We have missed each other.
THE OSCAR
FOR NOT ACTING

Not the Hollywood kind which are awarded for tremendous acting ability, on the contrary our OSCAR is awarded not for acting, but for being completely genuine.

Ladies and gentleman, put your hands together for Dennis Bull and his wife Evelyn. Not just because after prayer Dennis survived incurable TB in his teenage years. Neither because after prayer Dennis saw his paralysed daughter stand and walk away healed. Not even because after Dennis said, 'Keep it for us, Lord,' a highly desirable bungalow remained unsold for a year, until they had saved enough to buy it.

Dennis gets our OSCAR because in a day and age when the word commitment is no longer fashionable, he and his wife have been members of one Anglican church for 79 years, where they still actively serve 'hands-on' and would not be anywhere else. At 83 years of age they support mission from their pensions and their conversation overflows with the presence of God.

Ladies and gentleman, in DCI we give honour where it is due. In this age of flitting from one fad to another, the red carpet and our OSCAR for an incredible 79 years of Outstanding Service for Christ And Renewal goes to Dennis and Evelyn Bull.
THE PANTOMIME HORSE

To escape the swirling fog we followed the signs into the car park of a local charity that delights to put its facilities on display. Pristine walls display a roll of honour that names thousands of donors who have provided over £22,000,000 for this particular mercy mission and its outreaches in Cyprus, Spain, Italy and Ireland. The spacious and immaculate accommodation, the commitment of the staff, the special food and the round the clock medical care were all deeply impressive. All 400 residents seemed to be content, only molested by the occasional fly bite which they dismissed with a flick of their long ears or a swish of their tail. We were in a Donkey Sanctuary. Years ago, on a day when ends were reluctant to meet, the gruff Yorkshire plumber turned preacher Smith Wigglesworth who frequently healed the sick and raised the dead, said that if God could not provide for him better than he could provide for himself then he would leave the pulpit there and then. As we drove away we also decided that if God's people cannot provide more for hungry, ragged and sick men, women and children of the world than caring people provide for donkeys, then it is time for us to call it a day and climb into a pantomime horse costume. We will lie by the side of road in Devon until the sanctuary van takes us into a carefree retirement. Smith Wigglesworth never did leave the pulpit and may it please God that we never have to raid the wardrobe at our local theatre.
THE PIANIST AND THE PUPPET

Some years ago my daughter Lizzie aspired to play the piano and captivated by her enthusiasm, I signed up as well. Our teacher was the amiable and aptly-named Mr. Terry Toon and in his home, we steadily progressed from Pluto through Pacabel to Polkas. In the exuberant style of Liberace in the TV shows of my childhood, Lizzie would practice at home not even glancing at the music whilst giving me a dazzling smile. We both knew only too well that my playing, alas, was that of a puppet on a string plonking the notes of the piano.

Today I aspire to other less musical heights, not least finding that place where we bear the 'much fruit' for which Jesus has chosen us. To aspire may well make you and I perspire to acquire the potential hidden by God in our lives. Not to continually aspire is actually a self-imposed early retirement at any age with vegetation and stagnation never far behind. I am sure that David Livingstone knew this when he famously said, "Onwards, provided it be forwards." Yes, I aspire to this and I hope that you will as well.
THE PRETENDER IN THE PACK

In a matter of minutes, money was going to Mauretania to fund a project that looked great and would do good. References checked out - yet, yet? Yet - what? Moments before I pressed Send to make the transfer an e-mail arrived from an unknown American resident who told me this: "The man you have been enquiring about is not who he says he is. He stole from me, he lies, the woman he is with is not his wife and - he smokes." I saw the smoke as well; from my locked wheels and burning rubber as the brakes slammed on. Sure enough, the man was right and so was the absence of peace that was shouting deep within me. John Maxwell warns that the strategy in some places is: "Fake it till you make it and sooner or later people will accept you for who you are not." Let me tell you what saved us then and has saved us many times since is this from God's word. "If you are off the track to the right or the left, you will hear a voice saying Stop." If we are listening that is. If we want to hear. Just as well then, that it is not just cars that come equipped with brakes. Do you know what I mean?
THE POISONED CHALICE

The chalice was a poisoned one. The smiling professor at the University in India graciously invited me to speak to several MBA classes and the faculty staff to coincide with my one-day visit to his city. Only ten minutes before the assembly the professor whispered, "By the way, this is a fundamentalist Hindu campus and they know you are a Christian. One word about Jesus, just one, and we are in big trouble. I will lose my job. They may beat me." They say that courage is not the absence of fear; it is doing what has to be done in spite of fear and it continually replenishes as you rise to the challenge. All I know is that for sixty minutes, I used one Bible principle after another about management and integrity in professional life without mentioning the source or compromising either my faith, their faith or the heavily perspiring professor. The assembly thought it was magnificent stuff. Courage of course is a thing of the heart, happily for me the podium hid my knocking knees and trembling hands. Bon courage to you my friends, God is there when you need him.
Polperro, in Cornwall, England is a quaint, picturesque village by the sea, where in 1984 we were loaned a rustic fisherman's holiday cottage down by the harbour. That week I walked the cliffs but I saw neither sea nor sky. Why, because I had found the story of George Muller or more truthfully, the book had found me.

Two centuries earlier when smuggling was the name of the game in Polperro, not far away in Bristol, George Muller was feeding, clothing and educating thousands of orphans without once asking for money. Over a long lifetime and in a thousand and one financial trials, George Muller relied on God alone and recorded every answered prayer.

It was in Polperro that I dared to put an impossibly wild, unanswerable prayer of my own before God, and just as quickly dismissed my words as wishful thinking.

Indeed, 30 years later I am no George Muller yet looking back I realised today that in all this time, the bank account that we use to continually bless the lost, the last and the least of the earth has never run dry and not one appeal for funds has ever gone out.

I can't explain this but I think George Muller would smile knowingly.
THE PSALM OF FAGIN

I have always been taken by what I call the Psalm of Fagin in the musical Oliver Twist. It goes like this: "In this life one thing counts, in the bank - large amounts. Charity is fine, subscribe to mine; you got to empty a pocket or two, ooh."

Avoid Fagin like the plague and every arm-twisting prosperity preacher that sings his song, but charity is actually fine.

Charity changes us, and adds dignity and nobility to our lives, it makes our faith visible. Yet with so many appeals and emotion-stirring sob-stories coming at us from all directions, how do we ever choose who to give to?

For me, the key is to engage with opportunity rather than to simply meet need. Serious giving into a God-given opportunity will change a life or many lives and is far better than throwing a few coins into every bottomless pit of human misery that is expensively marketed in full-colour and costs more than you will ever give.

This is what I know for certain:

If you ask God in Jesus' name for enough for yourself, and a very great deal more to give to others, then you will find that this prayer seems to have an automatic answering service at the other end of the line.

A delivery may be expected forthwith.
THE RAT RACE TO THE TOP

The 'day off' may no longer be a law except in Israel, but if you are struggling to live in this fast moving and exhausting world where cutbacks at the office mean that two people now do the work of five, think about this:

Having a day off is still a good principle given by God for a good reason.

If the corporate rat race to the top and the fight to stay there leaves you driven to the nearest bar to calm down why not try putting the brakes on.

Every day take two 15 minute walks away from your work station and you will think clearer and faster. Take a real day off once a week and give the i-Phone a holiday as well. Then book a weekend away every two months or so. Put a full week or two in the diary once or twice a year to give your body, soul and spirit some real recreation.

If you schedule it you will do it and if you don't, you won't.
Recreation means re-creation, and how good does that sound?

Why bother?

Because God who designed the human template knows that you will feel better for it and be more effective afterwards.

Even Jesus' own team couldn't always handle the crowd of waiting people, in fact on one day of all days Peter wrote in his diary, "There were so many coming and going that we had no time even to eat."

Doesn't that sound strangely twenty-first century? Now you know why Jesus said, "Come apart into a desert place, and rest for a while," meaning 'Come apart guys, or you will fall apart.'

Take it from one who knows all about falling apart, it is not nice. So how cool does that old-fashioned idea called a Sabbath sound to you now?

God made it for you.
THE REAL ISRAELI QUESTION

As I see it, there is one ever-present and insistent question that hovers over Israel, superseding all others.

There is no question that Jerusalem is a world-class tourist attraction, and it is unquestionable that Israel is a treasure of history like no other.

There is no doubt that as a political power Israel provokes many questions as it seeks to defend its people. You might question the differing theology of the one hundred and one different groups that simultaneously tour Israel, the Biblical nation.

As you stroll amongst the sights of prophecy fulfilled, who does not silently question when the outstanding words to Israel will happen?

Yet there is one penetrating question that is put to the soul with echoes from the time that Jesus stopped Peter of Galilee in his tracks.

Jesus asked him, "Who do you say that I am?"
That is the big question which is asked if you apply to become an Israeli citizen. Give the wrong answer from the Jewish perspective and you may as well tear up the application right there and then.

However, write that Jesus is a historical figure, a prophet or the reincarnation of an alien and before you know it, Tel Aviv is your home.

Peter knew better.

"You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," he declared. This truth may never endear you to your Jewish family and friends, but these words unlock far more than a home in Jerusalem.

These words unlock eternity in your heart.
THE REAL THING IS NOT ALWAYS BOTTLED

What makes close to 100,000 young people travel from the four corners of Europe and sit on the cold winter floor in silence? Walking in Barcelona, Spain, we literally stumbled across their gathering and after a while we sat with them. The teenagers began to sing haunting melodies in one language and then another accompanied by simple acoustic music, until an 80-year-old monk rose to speak to everyone. So gently. For three days, Brother Roger, the founder of the Taizé Community in France, assassinated not long afterwards, pointed the young people towards Jesus. You know, for all the billions of dollars that we spend on mega-churches and TV ministries, what happens if you ask Europeans in the street to name three influential Christian leaders? The answer is invariably Mother Teresa, Billy Graham and Taizé. I think this is because young people perceive them to be the real thing, Men and women that pay a price because they know what they believe and live what they say. Of course, by that definition, you and I can also be influential, no caffeine, dollars or hype required.
THE ROAD RUNNER

‘One’ is a very appealing word which gets you round all kinds of complications and conflicts around the table. Just do it as the Nike brand says. However there is truth in an ancient African proverb, "If you want to go fast, then go by yourself, but if you want to go far, take others."

Years ago, my youthful patience ran out so rather than wait my turn and the eye of my boss, like the Road-Runner from the Looney Tunes cartoons I pressed the pedal, went through every gear in the box and made it to the horizon in a cloud of dust.

One did it. All by myself.

I have regretted that journey ever since. Just like the infamous Esau, I also discovered that no amount of tears can get your place back once you choose al-oneness over togetherness.

These days I understand the advice that Paul, the apostle, gave to young Timothy when he said to take what he had learned and give it to reliable men, and tell them to pass it on to other faithful men and women. If any One could make it alone it was Paul, but he knew better than to try. I do now.

What I do know is that if ever a Road-Runner becomes a team player, effectiveness goes exponential, and anything less really is a Looney Tune.
THE ROPE THAT PULLS YOU TO THE TOP

Commitment is the friend that ropes himself to you and pulls you up the mountain of reasons to quit. Commitment is the machete that hacks a path through the jungle at the foot of the mountain. It is the spade that digs a tunnel under it. Commitment is why we keep our word to God, to partners, to people and to ourselves even when it hurts.

Often trampled underfoot by shallow celebrities and characterless politicians, nevertheless being committed by our words makes us solid and dependable. It defines our character and proves our worth in marriage, marketing and ministry.

When you are committed you face that mountain that was not there yesterday and you say, "You move or I start to climb, trek or dig. Either way I am coming through."

See you on the other side.
THE SAFETY NET FOR THE INDECISIVE

First, we were going, then the dates changed, and we were not. Not long afterwards, the travel dates were restored, and so we were going. Then we were not, but now the conference in Israel is on again, and we are going. We think. We hope. Maybe it won't happen after all. Was James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem writing about indecisive first-century tourists, when he said, "Double-minded people end up with nothing, at least not from God." These days air tickets increase in price by the hour so it is very easy to dither and dither until you can't afford to go anyway. However, if you are a believer who struggles to make a decision, God has a safety net for you. You gather the facts, you pray and you decide. If you are wrong, God's promise is that you will hear a voice behind you saying, "No, you are off track, walk this way." The only decision you then have to make is to follow that quiet, unhurried voice, one that has saved me from imminent folly more times than I remember. The same voice that may be trying to save me again, and you too, right now, but are we listening?
THE SECRET I HID FOR YEARS

The e-mail was from a lady who seemed to think that we were related, and that point you wonder what is coming next. Google, who knows all that can be known, had presented the lady with one of these stories of how Gene Edels, my mother, from Manchester had married a Harold Norman of Doncaster in the 1930's.

We explained how it had taken over sixty years to get behind the deliberate curtain of silence which hid my mother's origins. When a young Jewish lady marries a Methodist, from that day on the daughter no longer exists, not even it seems, in her own mind. Reading the name Edels had rung a distant bell, and although her own father, who was adopted as a child, had passed away without ever knowing his background, the lady felt there was a connection. Then the story becomes improbable, because for this lady to be my second cousin, it meant that early in the last century, an unmarried aunt who was a favourite of all and never indulged a wrong thought, had to have given birth to a child in let us say, unusual circumstances.
There were understandably no volunteers in the Edels family for a DNA test but nothing ventured, nothing gained I agreed, and a kit duly arrived from the USA. From millions of sophisticated samples held on file, it promised connection to every known relative however distant. Several nerve-wracking weeks later the result came through. As unlikely as the story seems, the evidence is indisputable: I am the closest family relative in the world to Gillian, and her sister Sue.

Many years ago, when my only known family was Pilar and our children, I noticed a verse in the Psalms with the appealing promise that God sets the solitary in families. As nothing defeats God and his word, prayer, patience and our friend Sally's genealogical skills have now restored hundreds of relatives on my father's side, a history on my mother's side which reaches back to Palestine in the second century, and a long list of DNA matched people scattered across the earth.

As exciting as this is surely is, my wallet is already wincing at the cost of next year's Christmas card list.
THE SELECTION PROCEDURE

There was a knock on the door. It was late and at first glance there was no-one there.

Then I looked down from my dizzy 6 feet of height and noticed a diminutive lady in her middle years measuring in at 4 feet something carrying a suitcase nearly as big as herself.

"I'm Christine," she said. "My husband died and I had a stroke. I got over both, sold up, gave stuff away and flew in from New Zealand today. I asked around till I found you because I heard you needed some help." We did.

We quietly expected the young, tall, dark and handsome to come our way but God sent Christine. She became an incalculable blessing.

You see, God looks at the heart, not at our outward appearance, be that stroke-affected, ageing or whatever. That was the day that we learned a different selection procedure altogether.
THE SILENT BIRTH OF WORDS

Someone once found George Bernard Shaw looking downcast and asked why that was. "I have only managed to write six words all day today," was the reply, "and I can't even put those in the right order." We writers are funny people. When it comes to solitude, we are in there with the contemplatives and the hermits except that we come out in the evenings. Like them, we work with words, in my case words spoken to God, followed by words written to people.

Solitude is where we hear our muse, find our inspiration and rendezvous with creativity. I listen for the One who makes my hand the pen of a ready writer. In solitude, even the pitter-patter of the dog puts timid concentration to flight, and the ring of the telephone is akin to nuclear obliteration.

Jesus knew that public ministry is birthed in private silence. He only entered the clamour of human need in between the serious business of time alone. Jesus got it right. Solitude is intentional. Like a pearl of great price, solitude, once discovered is to be forever treasured.
THE SILENCE OF OUR LAMBS

This highly acclaimed film is not one that we have seen as we prefer our cannibals to be far away and not in our dreams later on. Nevertheless the title has a certain appeal and relevance.

You see, when one of those normally talkative and hungry 'lambs' that Jesus asked Peter and the rest of us to take care of, goes silent we can predict with a 99% certainty that it has wandered so far away, we can't now even hear a bleat.

So should a shepherd really leave the other ninety-nine sheep to go after the lost one? You can almost see all the Judean hill farmers moving their heads from side to side, but this is exactly what Jesus, the chief shepherd, does do. Which explains how all of us came to be found by him in the first place.
This week, we have three lambs of our own in different parts of the world whose present silence contains more words than any email. To go and find them would cost thousands of pounds in airfares, yet there is one way that we can be at their side in the next five minutes.

This is what we know, whether you pray for light and truth to dawn, or for whatever is hidden to be shouted from the rooftops, it will not be long before God reminds them to call home. If they need to spit out their news, this is very good because when a lamb comes out of silence, he or she takes the first step to healing.

Now, by any chance, is there anyone waiting to hear from you, or perhaps someone you would like to hear from. Wait not a moment longer.
THE SLOW ROAD TO SUDDENLY

Between Galilee and Jerusalem, nothing happens very quickly. You think it does, because in the Bible, and other contemporary ancient texts, Galilee and Jerusalem are frequently mentioned in the same line.

We suppose that Nazareth is just down the road. We never imagine that Capernaum where Jesus lived is 193 kilometres away from Jerusalem and even driving quickly on good roads the journey takes three hours.

Jesus walked.

The prophets walked. In fact, in Bible days, everybody walked at the pace of the elderly and the ladies with babies.

For Jesus and his family, to go to the Temple involved walking for a week with a lot of hills on the way.

This means that in total contrast to the pace of life today, people had time to think, to pray and to calm down.

There was time to get over things, time to change your mind and time to get ready. There was time to find a better way and find peace.

There was no 'beep beep' and a Reply button followed by another 'come on' beep a minute later.
It may be annoyingly true that as J John says, "God has two speeds, slow and very slow," yet it is also heart-warming to know that at journey's end when time has been spent and silence has worked on the soul, the Lord has a way of suddenly being there.

Suddenly is a God word. Even so, for all of us who feel pressured on every side, to go slowly, to enjoy or even see the scenery and be patient as we travel towards God's sudden coming may be a personal Via Dolorosa.

Our Cross can be heavy but fear not, Jesus is on the way, but remember, he walks slowly not because our need is not urgent, but to give us time.
How can one tree give good and bad fruit at the same time? Worse still, how can people including me, be both decent and dreadful within minutes? A while ago, we bought a young Salix tree which blossomed well until several fast-growing branches from another kind of tree indecently emerged from the trunk and overpowered it.

It turns out that the original Salix sapling was grafted onto a stronger root which had returned to life, so a gardener was called in to do some serious cutting.

You know, Jesus calls his Father the gardener and if I call him, this Gardener will come by to cut off all the disorderly shoots that spring up uninvited from my old life that caused me so much heartache years ago. Moreover, this Gardener regularly clips away at all the unruly 'good' ideas that I graft into life, which have a way of overwhelming the real person that I am called to be and what I am supposed to do. He even prunes the good stuff for me so it gets better, and at the end he says, “No charge.” Life stays focused.

This splendid gardener is not in Yellow Pages. You have to find him under prayer. Just look his way, ask or leave a message, and before long he will be along to see you.
THE STING

For sure no writer likes the rejection slip. Maybe no 'Likes' on Facebook is the same bitter pill for ordinary mortals.

When it is your CV, or your application for University or a Members Only club or even for church membership that they say No to, then the rejection hurts like a hornet sting and the pain lasts even longer.

Yet why look for acceptance where you do not belong? God's ointment for the sting is coming to see that some doors are closed by his hand and locked by his key to save us from being where we do not need to be.

Rub that in gently, several times a day until the pain goes.
THE THREE BOUNCE TUMBLER

It was unintended but these things happen even in the best of families. The tumbler was caught by a passing arm and fell from the table to the hard and merciless red tile floor. There was a pregnant silence as we all waited with gritted teeth for the inevitable noise of breaking glass, but to everyone's amazement the tumbler bounced and remained intact. It bounced again, and a third time still without shattering into ten pieces and a hundred splinters. Hopes were raised but just as quickly they were as shattered as the tumbler itself, when on the fourth landing it cracked and broke into pieces. God says in Jeremiah 23.29 that His word is like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces. Seeing the bouncing tumbler helped me to understand that when we speak the word of God against a problem that is as immovable as a rock, every word hammers an invisible crack until sooner or later that hard rock will resist no more. Like the tumbler it shatters into pieces. We should not be surprised therefore that when Jesus found his path blocked he chose a verse from God's word, lifted up his voice and said, "It is written . . ."
THE ULTIMATE PERSONAL TRAINER

Between teaching and training, there is a world of difference. For three years my friend Philip listened to good information and made copious notes, which he memorised for examination time, and graduated from Bible School. One day later, with growing horror I watched him filling the waste bin with his notes. Philip was not convinced that repeating academic criticism of Biblical texts to demon-worshipping, illiterate, poverty-stricken villagers in West Africa would do a lot of help to them. On the other hand, a trainer shows you what to do. He explains everything and afterwards he says, "Now, you have a go, later come back and tell me what happened, and we will talk about it." Jesus, the ultimate personal trainer did it this way and so did Paul. They called it discipleship, apprenticeship, or coaching, and the learners changed the world. Why is it then that these days almost everywhere, any Bible School you go to, chooses to teach rather than train. When people clearly need revelation and not more information, I wonder why we think that we know better than Jesus and why we favour our methods over his?
THE TRIP TO JERUSALEM

The Trip to Jerusalem is an Inn close to our home, where in 1189, the Crusaders took their final drink before leaving these shores to stain the image of Christianity forever. Our own trip to Jerusalem took place 824 years later. Now late was the word of the day because the train to the airport was delayed by almost two hours and the flight from Manchester to Tel Aviv left without us.

This would have been the end before we started, except for a rescue mounted by the travel insurance company and the ever-optimistic help of Jacob, a Jewish man who works at the airport and extraordinarily lives in the same street where my family had their home fifty years earlier. In the end I am sure that he would have taken us home with him but instead we drove a long way south in a hire car to catch a flight to Israel the following morning.

On a day like this when everything is up in the air and your hopes are on the floor, you lean upon the promise: "The Lord watches over your goings out and your comings in, to keep you from all harm. His faithfulness reaches to the skies." These words that once calmed nerves at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport 30 years ago in tense days of hijackings and bombings lose none of their power with the passing of time. Once believed, they are the best travel insurance of all. We would never leave home without them. Neither should you.
THE UNFINISHED PORTRAIT

The unexpected happened. The most unlikely young man hesitantly stood up and apologetically said, "God wants me to tell you that you have unfinished business in Spain." Four days later, as if to underline the announcement, six young people from Barcelona descended upon us without warning, on their way to a concert by the Rend Collective.

Ismael designs jet engines for Rolls-Royce; Keila is developing art, drama and music in Germany, Mark and Ana are learning to lead worship in London's famous HTB church, the home of the globally acclaimed Alpha Course and Marc's brother, David and his wife Esther already follow Jesus in Barcelona. One and all, they are passionate believers.

Our bi-lingual daughter Lizzie, and my wife Pilar used her gift of being Spanish to make sense of seven excited people all speaking at once. That God has unfinished business in Spain is 100% certain.

The tourism posters that smile with Christian familiarity belie the fact that only 0.1 to 1% of the population are actually committed believers.

What is just as certain is that it will be young people like our six visitors that complete the unfinished portrait.

Who knows, but perhaps our unfinished business will be to take care of them.
THE VICTORIAN AND THE RUSSIAN

My father was born in 1894 which made him a genuine Victorian. My mother came from a large Jewish refugee family that fled Kaunas, Lithuania, then part of Russia, five years later. Sadly I never really knew either of them.

Knowing the story though makes me really appreciate how the Bible patriarchs travelled life together as one big family of all ages. Many African peoples still do this and we who abort unwanted babies and put unplanned elderly relatives into care homes, dare to call them primitive.

I don't think so.

I worry though, when I see so many preachers and businessmen wandering the airports and hotels of the earth all by themselves.

I fear the wolf is never far behind.
THE WAY TO STAY ON TOP

When she was at University, our daughter Lizzie joined a charity fund-raising team to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. At dawn on the third day she was the first girl to the top with an icy river of tears frozen to her cheeks. Her nose was bleeding, she was frozen half to death and shaken by seeing stretcher cases being rushed down. When I asked if she was frightened, she replied, "Only one thing scared me, and that was the night before when we camped near the summit under a clear night sky. We could see the universe lit up from horizon to horizon and it was terrifying." The lesson is this: Up on the pinnacle whether that is on Africa's highest mountain or in business, career or ministry, it is good to fear God who got you there safely through the costly ascent. By walking with him, and being forever thankful for the privilege, you can stay on top for a lifetime, but lose the awe, the wonder and the responsibility of living in rarefied air, then as many a one from ancient days to now, has found out, and every step will lead you down. Now, after such a long climb how sad would that be?
THEOLOGY, DO-OLOGY AND KIDOLOGY

What makes a busy lady drive miles every month to visit an 88 year old lady who no longer knows who she is or who has come to see her.

Why would a man drive the length of France to pray with another man who is dying of cancer even though they have never even spoken before?

This is love with nothing in it for the lover, emerging from deep inside with an irresistible compassion. Yet even this 'agape' love is paralysed unless lips, hands and feet complete what the heart starts.

In fact, I am long convinced that any theology that cannot become a do-ology, is no more than a kid-ology. And the person that I am kidding or fooling the most - is me.
THERE’S A PLACE FOR US

We pastor many but we never trained to be pastors. We have been in missions for over 30 years but we were never missionaries. We look too much like shepherds for the sheep to sit with us yet we are too 'sheepish' for the shepherds to be friends with us.

With our split personalities and permanent identity crisis we have slipped through the local fellowship net times beyond number. Knowing how this feels makes us go the extra mile to welcome everyone whom God sends our way from around the world.

Sheep and shepherds the same.

In West Side Story they sing, "There's a place for us somewhere a place for us .." So you go find yours, wish us well as we look for ours and hey - perhaps we will meet down the road somewhere.

You will be welcome, the kettle is always on.
THEY KNOW WHAT YOU ARE THINKING

Back in 1999 BG, Before Google that is, when Yahoo was a new born and Twitter something only birds did, we were stuck. Prayer for what might be next only brought the 'Internet' word.

Back then this was hallowed ground for academics, common ground for porn stars and holy ground for no-one. So allowing God to win, we put 12 pages from our School of Mission on a website and considered our obedience, a better word would be ignorance, to be complete.

The funny thing is that more people came our way in the next week than we had seen for years, and 100,000,000 page visits later they are still coming. Superficial it is, limited for sure and make of social media what you will, but Facebook by population is the world’s 3rd biggest nation. Think about this: With a click of your mouse people all over the world get to know what you think and believe.

Is that opportunity or what?
THICK FOG HAS A WAY THROUGH

When the writer Thomas Merton didn't know where he was going, when he couldn't see the road ahead and when he was struggling to know himself and was uncertain of God's will, he found the path.

He did this by reducing every choice and uncertainty down to one desire alone: To please God in everything.

This gave him the peace and the confidence that God would get him on the right road even if he knew nothing about how he got there or where he was going.

I know that eerie lost in the fog feeling. Merton's way out sounds good to me.
THREE TOGETHER STAY SANE

For me community happens (but never enough) when I get to be part of a small, wide-open group. People who are patient and know me by name. They bear with my failures, never elevate me for my occasional successes and better still, they allow me to care for the other people in the group who I also know by name and story.

People go to a church for a thousand reasons but they generally stay because of just one of them. That reason can be summed up in one word: Friends.

Not being alone, because beyond the church is community. As Eugene Peterson said, "A private, proudly isolated life cannot grow. The two or three who gather together in Christ's name keep each other sane."

And we do.
TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Where I live they will not let you be yourself. I tried it and they said no. You must be either employed, self-employed, unemployed, a corporation, a trader, a partnership, a non-profit, a prisoner, unemployable or one of the Royal family. The last one seemed the most attractive but they said not.

Instead I signed up to live my vision through a charity or NGO, a non-profit outfit in the language of the Americas. I thought that I could be more myself and see if anyone else wanted to be the same as me. We could follow the call of God together. It is very hard not to be put into a box by officialdom and not to be labelled because society works by valuing what you do more than who you are. Be a sovereign, be a servant, be like Jesus, be all of these things but above all be yourself. Be true to who you are made to be. Be as unique as you are, wherever you are, and be sure that out of your being will come a doing that makes a difference. As Shakespeare said through the lips of Hamlet, "To be or not to be, that is the question." If indeed it is, what is your answer?
If you ever visit Barcelona in Spain, do walk down one of the famous streets of the world, Las Ramblas. You will be entertained for hours by a parade of sights, sounds and stalls. A crowd speaking a hundred languages conveys you past artists, musicians and human statues to leave you at the feet of Italian navigator, Christopher Columbus, who is pointing west towards his accidental rediscovery of the Americas. Even though he thought it was India.

Every voyage of discovery begins with anticipation and the expectation of creating a sensation at the destination but did you know though that Columbus' diary for that epic voyage in 1492 reveals a secret that any man or woman with a vision will do well to learn. Columbus writes time and time again, "Today, we sailed on."

What he means is that his day was one more grey day on empty seas, when nothing happened. On days like this Columbus chose to maintain his disciplines and sail onwards and forwards, until one day a sailor shouted that he could see a faint shadow on the horizon. Before that night Europe was reconnected with America and the rest, as they say, is history.

So, if you didn't reach the goal today - sail on, because your future is always in tomorrow, never in yesterday.
TO OWN IT IS TO FIX IT

You can circle round a problem and examine it from all angles. You can hope that someone else will fix it for you. You can paint over it or even pray that God will take it away. In the end though, it will not be solved until you bite the bullet and take ownership if it.

Own the problem, take personal responsibility for it and you will fix it just like the people who own a dream tend to get to live it. Ownership is a great word because it changes everything. People listen to an owner but often disregard a tenant because ownership says you have given your life to something. You are serious. Your money is in it, your weight is behind it and you believe in it. Ownership means you are committed.

By a quiet decision you have become formidable, irresistible, implacable and strangely attractive.
TO WIN IT’S COMPLETE NOT COMPETE

In my first ever game of schoolboy Rugby I got so hurt and frightened that I never played it or watched it again until fifty-two years later, our daughter organised a charity event with the local Rugby Club. On the day, two of her volunteers stayed home and our phone rang. After collecting the money I got to see the game and do you know, I enjoyed every minute.

I saw that without teamwork this game is nothing. Our team worked and won 48:16 which made me think. For me teamwork begins with my wife, involves my family and extends into the people who support our work. It flows on into our partners in the developing world and expands into their own local teams. Without teamwork I am one man as alone as I was in my schoolboy Rugby match facing a horde of grim faced men intent on crushing me, but with teamwork we do the business.

God himself is a team of three working together in harmony and when I see what he can do, I wonder why anyone would imagine that he or she could do better by working alone?
TOUCH TELLS ALL

The eyes and the fingertips of the cashiers in the banks are trained to detect counterfeit notes through the monotonous training of handling an endless stream of genuine notes.

So we also come to truly understand the priceless value of loyalty by the painful texture of disloyalty when it happens. Eventually, like the cashiers I guess, you can feel it coming like Jesus surely did with Judas.

Yet Jesus never humiliated or rejected his disloyal friend even to save his own life. He suffered the ultimate betrayal but he never compromised his own loyalty to the friend that he had chosen.

Something for me to remember next time one of the people we support goes walkabout.
TRY THE RIDE IN THE BACK

Did you know that the Chief Executive of a well-known name with over two million followers hanging on to his every word, still takes care of every last detail, personally? How long can that go on? No worries, his father-in-law, a sheep farmer, came to visit and made him realise that working non-stop all day, every day is a bad idea. Worse still, having people waiting instead of working, makes even less sense. "Choose leaders," father-in-law said, "train them, organise the people and delegate the jobs. You handle only what others cannot, but have some leaders learning at your side." The company was Exodus Inc. The CEO is Moses, the father-in-law is Jethro, no MBE from Oxford but plenty of common sense instead. Yet the oldest management problem in the world is still with us. Leaders feel good about being busy, I am what I do is the mantra and they feel indispensable until the chest pains hit. Like Moses, someone also told me that the fastest way into the promised land is to release the gifts in the people around you, and then allow the people to drive the company there. You never know, you might like the ride in the back.
TURBULENCE AND THE NERVOUS FLYER

If you are one of those people for whom a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, then landing at Spain’s Bilbao airport is never going to be relaxing. The runway is short with a cliff edge at the end and hills and sea all around. You have apartment blocks to one side and if you are really in the know, the remains of a Boeing 727 that did not make it are just below. When unexpected turbulence sent us sideways seconds from touchdown, I got to see the TV in a lady’s apartment and my friend Richard who was on his first flight, and for whom ignorance was definitely bliss, leaned over and took a photo. In my heart I heard the words, “My hands are under this aircraft,” and a moment later we landed with loud applause from rows 1 to 35. Let me pass on to you the gift that settled the turbulence in me from that day to this: “The Lord watches over your coming in and your going out now and evermore.” This is from Psalm 121 and, “Your faithfulness reaches to the skies,” is Psalm 36.5. Unlike airline tickets, the promises of God are fully transferable, just change my name to yours. Believe what you have just heard and grip that coffee cup when the wind blows. You will be OK.
TURN OUR WORLD UPSIDE DOWN PLEASE

Many years ago BC, before computers that is, we were the first people in England to sell used cars that came with a free 12 month warranty. We turned the car buying market upside down and it made us.

On that first Saturday we sold every car in the showroom and buyers waited in line down the street. In 1999 when the Internet was still in its infancy, we were among the very first to put some free Bible studies on the emerging web. We turned the world of expensive Bible Schools upside down and saw more students in one week on-line than we had seen in all the previous ten years on-site. Then along came Google and Yahoo and the world became our parish.

In today's world, when China churns out millions of identical fashions and every High Street looks the same, uniqueness sparkles. People will go a very long way to have what no-one else has, or to hear words that no-one else speaks. Producers, politicians and especially preachers please take note and turn our monotonous world upside down please.
TWO WORDS THAN EVERYONE CAN PUT TOGETHER

Consolation is a beautiful word. It comes from 'con' and 'solus', two words which when put together mean to be with the lonely ones.

To offer consolation is one of the most important ways that we can care. Life is so full of pain, sadness and loneliness that we often wonder what we can do to alleviate the immense suffering that we see. We can and must console the mother who has lost her child, the young person with AIDS, the family whose house burned down, the soldier who was wounded, the teenager who contemplates suicide, the old man who wonders why he should stay alive.

To console with words whether spoken or written does not mean that we can take away the pain, but it does say,

"You are not alone, I am with you."
UMBRELLA KINDNESS

The Vineyard churches did some serious research and discovered that the average man or woman in the street needs to have six positive encounters with people who follow Jesus before they will consider hearing why that is and maybe doing the same.

So, being courteous can give a passer-by or a casual shopper one of those six 'feel good' moments that they think about, remember and act upon.

Be kind and the chances are that one day someone will see a new face in church because they found their way there by following the fragrant trail that you left behind.
WAS IT SOMETHING I SAID?

Very few of us like to confront others, and we feel even worse if the confrontation comes our way. We English hide behind niceness and we will do almost anything to avoid biting and being bitten. In fact we can be nicer than God himself who never sweeps things under the carpet.

Yet looking back how much do I wish that good people had bitten the bullet and confronted me with my imminent mistakes instead of being so 'nice.' Instead I learned the long, hard way.

This is what I know: To tell me is to bless me. These days I will lower my heart, bite my tongue, soften my words, hang my tail between my legs, listen, say thank you and then go and ask God in case you are right.

God tends to answer that kind of prayer pretty quickly. In fact you might have been his messenger, Gabriel being so busy these days.
WE NEVER WON A RAFFLE UNTIL NOW

A while ago, one of our family gave another the gift of an exquisite Oriental tea set made in wood, and now before our eyes, there it was. It had become a prize in a raffle at a fund-raising event! Believe it or not, we bought five tickets and after a lightning prayer one of them won back those cups and saucers and we gave them a good home. That's redemption. It means buying back what is lost. When two youngsters that we know in Cuba sold their wedding rings to keep themselves going in the call of God, we bought them from the money shop and put the rings back on their fingers. What a fantastic feeling that was for the young couple. And for us too! You see, years ago when I sold myself into a life of total loss, there was no way back, it was Jesus who bought me just as I was. An unlikely purchase indeed, at a terrible price yet he redeemed me, forgave me and put me on the right path. In gratitude then, if I can ever redeem anything or anyone from loss, and return him, her or whatever to where they rightfully belong, well - you don't think twice about these things, do you? It is a ticket that always wins.
WHAT DO WE HAVE TO LOSE?

Three cool young men in their twenties, two with guitars and one with a Bible, walked in to a small semi-circle of men and women in their retirement years, one lady so fragile that she lay across two seats. Instinctively, the ageing turned their hearing aids off while the cool young men realised their free holiday had just come with a price.

This was a retreat centre in France where we had been their guests for ten days with no television, no radio, no internet, no mobiles and no newspapers, just lots of silence, sunshine, sea-views and services. Unbearable to begin with but unforgettable in the end.

We arrived so drained that we said it didn't matter who spoke or sang, or about what, as long as the phone didn't ring and God was there.

After a week we felt a lot better but suddenly the pride of the pension age betrayed itself in face after face including ours, wondering what these cool young men could ever teach people who had already been there, done that and outgrown the T-shirt.
Sixty seconds later the presence of God filled the worship and never went away in a week. Five minutes into the Bible study and we knew for sure that the gospel has safely passed in the hands of the next generation.

What we learned from Dave, Josh and Joe is we have nothing to lose but our own prejudice, and everything to gain that is called, gifted by God and cool in today's world.

The lady who was in such pain walked back to her caravan leaving her crutches behind. We did the same with our pride.
WHAT DO YOU SEE?

If you want people to follow you then you need to know where you are going yourself. They will need to be convinced that you have both a destination and a benefit in mind before they join you on your journey. They will want to know how you intend to get there.

"What do you see," was the question that God put to a young Jeremiah a long time ago. It was the vision in his heart that God was trying to draw out. Jeremiah had the right answer.

So, what do you and I see?

By looking straight ahead, we only see what everyone else sees but now raise your hands to ear level and wiggle your fingers. You can see them - yes? This is what I know. It is right there on the edge where you are not looking that you might well see something new. Somewhere to go, someone to be, something inventive and innovative that no-one else has seen. Vision, you see, is wider than most people imagine it to be.
WHAT KODAK AND MY HEART HAVE IN COMMON

Waiting upon God is vital in order to see him, to hear his quiet words and to receive a vision from him. The amount of time spent before him is also critical, for our hearts are like the Kodak films that we used to buy for our Brownie cameras. The longer the film is exposed and the more light that we let in, the deeper is the impression.

In the same way, for the vision that God wants to impress on our hearts, we must sit in stillness at his feet for quite a long time. Without a vision, that is an impression from God, the people perish, insists Proverbs 29.1, and actually the first one to perish and that usually through boredom, is the one who has never been quiet enough, long enough to hear the call to follow Jesus and serve him.

Just as the troubled surface of a lake cannot reflect a clear image, it is only when we 'calm and quieten ourselves' as David learned to do and tells us how in Psalm 131, that we begin see the picture developing before our eyes.

Now, if you will, say cheese and I will select f2.8, open the shutter wide and get you into our hearts for all time.
WHATEVER HE CAN DO I CAN DO BETTER

In the vivid imagination that I am gifted with, I am the hero of a thousand scenarios, any one of which would make Bruce Willis green with envy. I save people from imminent disaster on land, sea and air and follow that with a maestro performance on the stage. Naturally, everyone who ignores me in real life is written into the screenplay or into the audience so that no-one misses my true value. Now, hand such an imagination over to God and you give him a blank canvas on which to paint his portraits of you and your calling, and his hopes for the people that he brings your way. While it is true that eye has not seen, and ear has not heard and neither has mind imagined what God has got prepared for those who love him, he does reveal himself by his Spirit. So not everything you imagine is fantasy. Some of what you see in the back of your mind is actually prophecy. You just have to learn the difference, otherwise you get a really unholy mixture of Die Hard and the church, and that really is a Mission Impossible.
The speaker stopped in mid-sentence and was now slowly pacing up and down the stage muttering words in a foreign language. After a couple of minutes I whispered to my friend who was more scholarly than I, “What is he saying?”

The speaker was Gerald Coates, the well-connected pastor to stars, politicians, all the movers and shakers of the 1980’s and the leader of a radical house-church movement that was incurring the wrath of the established churches. We were there incognito, at the back and enjoying every minute of it. However, competing for attention at the back of my mind was an imminent deadline to give a name to a charity that we were forming.

Nothing would ‘click’ and mind could not rest.

My friend Ged Kelly whispered back, “It’s New Testament Greek. He is saying Doulos Christou Iesou over and over again.” As the only Greek I know is the manager of a restaurant my eyes appealed for help. “It’s Romans 1.1,” said Ged, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.” In one instant we had our name, and no sooner than we exchanged a knowing look, the speaker resumed his talk as if nothing had happened.
The truth is that we were hiding in that conference because we didn’t like all the theological nonsense that was crossing the Atlantic about shepherding and submission. The idea of serving sounded has the ring of heaven on earth about it, which is exactly what it is. Serving keeps you in your place and our title of The DCI Trust has been a continual reminder for almost 30 years, meaning everything to those of us who know this story, yet nothing at all to officials of other religions who happily stamp our visa applications and say welcome.
WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE IT?

The young man was panic-stricken. He was cutting down a tree when the axe-head flew off and went straight into the river. "It was borrowed," he said aghast. Elisha, his mentor, took it calmly, "Where did it fall?" he asked, knowing that hidden within this particular question was the answer to more than the loss of a borrowed axe-head.

When we lose it, go back to where the blessing, the inspiration or the provision was last seen and face up to why it vanished. Locating where it fell and admitting why that was, is always a great first step to getting it back again.

Where did you last see it and what happened there and then? Elisha listened and prayed, and the axe-head floated back to the surface.

I have found more than few lost things this way and only lost a little unwanted pride in return.
WHEN IT FEELS WORSE THAN IT IS

It makes me smile to hear people saying that they are losing their mind because that assumes they had one to begin with. Worse still when I say it, imagining that I have some sanity left to lose. Why are you looking at me that way, I'm the normal one!

You know, on those days when fear gets in the driving seat, predicts the worst and the world wobbles, what has saved me and brought me back from the edge a hundred times over the years is knowing that, "God did not give me a spirit of fear, He gave me the gifts of power, love and a sound mind."

Yes, a sound mind, capitals, bold, underlined, and highlighted. This is one gift I don't intend to lose.
WHEN IT'S A MILLION-TO-ONE AGAINST YOU

When the baby that your wife is carrying is, in the words of an eminent consultant, 'a million-to-one against miracle baby,' the hospital takes no chances. With no sign of an on-time arrival the staff were getting nervous and preparing to induce a conveniently timed birth. Somehow this didn't seem quite right given that the pregnancy was the result of a promise from God from years earlier. With less than half a day to go before surgery was scheduled, the Bible fell open almost by itself to these words from Isaiah 66.9, "Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery? says the Lord." We thought not, we said not, we prayed not, we hoped not and sure enough it was not. Within hours, the peace of that sunny afternoon was disturbed by the first pains which announced the arrival of Elizabeth some twenty-seven hours later. The name Elizabeth means "God has kept his promise," and for sure, 26 years later God has done just that. Dr. Liu, that very eminent consultant told everyone he had a miracle baby. The newspaper sent a man to take a photo. On reading the notes and seeing the baby the midwife returned to the lost faith of her childhood in Ireland. So, if the betting is a million to one against you receiving the miracle that you need, provided that One is Jesus and you hang on to his word, then even with that many bets against, the winner is still very likely to be you.
WHEN NOTHING HURTS ENOUGH

To know what 'On Top of the World' means listen to the Olympic gold medal winners being interviewed one minute after crossing the finishing line. What you saw in the final seconds tells you that when you are winning nothing hurts enough to stop you.

I bet it did hurt though, and more than once in the previous five years, or for the London 2012 canoe guys, the previous 15 years of training, 7 days a week.

Winning takes a moment, blink and you miss it. Yet becoming fit to win and staying a winner means daily discipline and a perseverance to rise above the average and the mediocre.

Winners learn to get past the pain and to be extraordinary in whatever life we are given.

With God's help that's a race we can run and win.
WHEN SEEING IS THE KEY TO HEARING

The wind and the rain blew us into the doorway of the school hall where the first meeting of a new church for our small town was being held. On the other side of the entrance the first face we saw recognised us, and immediately began to tell us all about the new church. He spoke about how much they had done for the people of the town in the past three months.

He mentioned the football coaching class for children, and remembered the summer festival. Only last week, he said, the church members had been out in force at a Christmas event in the shopping precinct, mingling with the people and providing hot beef stew and fresh bread. His enthusiasm left us open-mouthed and we quietly took our seats, we in our corner and the man with his family on the front row.

The man was not the pastor. He is Mick, in his mid-60's, a former miner and the political leader of the town since the 1960's, recently retired to make way for his son.
In fact every member of his family serves on the local council and if there was ever a 'man of peace' who can open every door in the town, it is Mick.

He also happens to be our next-door neighbour, a very nice man but so resistant to the idea of following Jesus before politics that we had not even invited him to the opening.

Now you know why we took our places rather quietly.

The meeting went well but what we learned most of all was that for the people in this town seeing good news in the street is the key that opens their hearts and minds to hearing good news in the church.
WHEN YOU NEED SOMETHING TO HANG ON TO

It is 33 years since we promised that for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, we would love each other until death us do part. The worse, the poorer and the sickness has all happened and we have kept our promises. We married in Barcelona in a tiny Iglesia Evangélica in the days when I knew twenty words in Spanish and Pilar knew even less in English. So, when all went quiet and every eye looked my way, I said ‘Si’, not knowing whether I was saying yes to Pilar or agreeing to pay the church mortgage. Promises can be risky. Solomon, the wisest man of 3000 years ago, always said that two are better than one, and a three-fold cord is not easily broken. How many times in 33 years have we have gripped that third cord, the presence of God, as if it were a strap in a swaying bus, lest the sudden jolts knocked us off our feet. You know, the third cord has a way of wrapping itself around your hands and holding you safe. This is what we know, it is never too late to ask for a third cord in your marriage. In fact, would asking right now be a good idea?
WHEN SUNDAY LEAVES YOU WORSE NOT BETTER

In marriage they used to call it the seven-year itch, and scratching it could bring you some infinite regrets. But if like Mary and Joseph after 12 years with Jesus you lost him in church, and you reach 12 o'clock on Sunday with more relief than renewal, how do you scratch that? Back in 1977 when I first went to church, although it never crossed my mind until now, the people there had actually prepared a place for me. Men and women had actually built the building, others had bought chairs and many a one welcomed me. Not a few of those people had been there for years, and while I discovered a whole new world, they had heard it all before. More than once. Just as you and I have now. Nevertheless maturity means it is now our turn to prepare a place for those who are to come. Church may not change a lot on the inside but you and I can. Maturity also means we understand that no gathering will ever meet our needs, because only God can ever satisfy the longing of our hearts and only in his presence do our restless souls find rest. And he is there in every meeting.
WHERE IS LIFE AFTER FIFTY

Philippe from Burkina Faso, our friend since 1984 who has some 4,000 churches under his care along with development projects worth hundreds of thousands of dollars came to visit.

He was accompanied by his fellow post-graduate Francis, who leads 45 churches in Kenya. Both Philippe and Francis who are final year Ph.D students at Oxford wanted to ask why it is in the UK so many believers over the age of 50, including themselves, have no role in church whilst youngsters just half their age are loosed to preach half a gospel through a haze of smoke, lights and flashing images on giant screens? Neither Philippe nor Francis could even begin to understand why all the gifts from God and lessons from the School of Life which are resident in the over-fifties are left dormant. Faced with my silence, because the same question torments my soul even more than it torments theirs, both men became unusually and uncharacteristically insistent that we gather teams of mature men and women and bring them to Africa. They promised that in both Burkina and in Kenya, a different group of men and women would come every day for 3 weeks or even 3 months to sit at the feet of their visitors and listen to their words with deep respect.

So, perhaps, church life does not end at 50 after all. Not everywhere.
WHICH WAY WITCH DOCTOR

The troublemakers placed big sharp thorns across the door of the mud and straw Church for the Poor in Pader, Uganda and stood there menacingly as the boss man demanded $200. The village elders feared to help, and with no money between them, the believers put the matter into God's hands and met under a tree. On the third day, two dogs belonging to these men died instantly, so they consulted the witch doctor who ordered blood to be scattered on the church land. As they did this, a swarm of African bees came out of nowhere and killed all their chickens, hurt their goats and seriously stung three of the men.

The witchdoctor said to sprinkle more blood to appease the gods, but then the wife of the boss man turned yellowish from head to toe, and was rushed to a distant hospital. At this point the witchdoctor declared the cause to be the big God's displeasure with what the men had done.

By now in great fear, the entire family turned to God, brought the yellow lady for prayer and removed the thorns. The lady was quickly healed and the former thugs were welcomed in the church not as enemies but as forgiven friends.

Meanwhile, the meeting under the tree had attracted twenty eight new people and their children, who stayed right there and made the shade of the tree their second village church.
WHO PAYS THE BILL?

It is like inviting old friends to a reunion in a smart restaurant of their choice, yet with every exotic course you increasingly fear the bill at the end. When it comes you find the words 'Paid In Full' written across it. Evidently, someone else in the party enjoyed the occasion that they said, "Charge it to my account." It has happened to me.

Grace is something like that only a million times bigger. The believers of yesteryear declared grace to be: God's Riches At Christ's Expense, or in other words, a lifetime of supply from an inexhaustible treasury of spiritual and material riches. The expense voucher is signed every time by Jesus who does not want us to work for his blessing or try to earn it, repay it or deserve it. True, not every one of us finds it easy to accept this extravagant giving by God or to live with the humility that it commands but know this, the trickle of God's provision that is sufficient for one person becomes a torrent for the man or woman who will take God's grace to the waiting millions.
WHO WOULD SOW POPPY SEEDS TO CHANGE A DESERT

We travelled to Barcelona for the official launch of Pilar's very lovely book of poetry titled 'Poppies In the Desert' from which every penny goes to help children in Africa.

The occasion demanded an elegant setting inside the world-famous Sagrada Familia Cathedral but instead we enjoyed a welcome right next door to the Cathedral in the rather more modest church building where we were married in 1982.

Our friend Virgilio, magnificently presided over everything and everyone. Keila Olmo gave us a live mini-concert. Marc and Ana, two of Spain's best worship leaders also had the stage and afterwards the buffet table was full to overflowing, as were the glasses of Cava.

Pilar told her story, read her poetry as did Virgilio, and answered questions from the guests many of whom had not seen each other since the 1980's. Coincidentally we also celebrated Pilar's 65th birthday.

According to Operation World, Spain is unbelievably still a spiritual desert of between just 0.1% and 1% evangelical, no better than when we walked around the unreached villages of Aragon back in 1982, talking about our faith to anyone who would listen.
Today, there are still 345 significant towns and 7,500 smaller communities of 5,000 people or less, that have either no gatherings of believers or no believers at all. Spain smiles at tourists with a benign Christian face but behind the sun, sand and sangria, society is actually deeply secular and quite dismissive of its historic heritage.

People in Spain tend to change the subject when God is mentioned yet almost swoon over poetry. One way or another Pilar's writing will find its way into many homes quietly carrying the voice of Jesus and his love through the silence between the lines.

To change a desert and see it blossom, plant poppy seeds. We did.

E-mail us and we will send you a free e-book of the poems.
WHY DOVES SIT ON BRANCHES

"Lord," sang the man as he walked up to Jerusalem, "my heart is not proud." Good for him, thought I, because mine is. We had returned from Spain with an exclusive tax demand designed especially for their world-class football stars, and everyone else who lives out of the country, like Pilar. A sort of help Spain out of its economic crisis tax complete with penalties, interest charges and a direct debit from your family's bank account if you don't pay up. In our case by next Monday. They must have learned that from Cyprus where the government helped itself to 10% of everyone's savings.

I expressed various less than holy thoughts about the tax office in Madrid who admitted that they never answer the telephone, letters or emails. I had very similar opinions about one or two of their rather unhelpful people. After all, we wouldn't behave like this.

We are better than this.
Are we not?
Now, if you have ever observed doves, or even pigeons, you will know that when they hear noise they fly into the nearest tree and look down at you until silence is restored.

So it is with God's dove, the Holy Spirit who disowned my verbal clattering around and fluttered out of the way, leaving God's Word to read me, instead of being read by me. It was not long before God's truth scored against my prideful defences and the fluttering of wings was heard once more as the dove of God returned and began to make a way where there was no way.

Nineteen e-mails, several faxes and two hours of phone calls later to Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona and the crisis came to an end. Now the only sound to be heard is the Dove's gentle cooing of pleasure over seeing lessons learned and the right thing done.
WHY I SOLD OUT FOR A FEW SHEKELS

My companion at the dinner table overlooking the Mount of Olives confided his pleasure at having been able to borrow twenty million Euros at a time of severe reluctance in the banks to loan anything at all.

He will use the funds to balance the cash flow of a number of small and medium-size businesses. Very uniquely, each company releases its profits to care for poor children in the developing world.

The next morning, I was a back-seat passenger in a car taking my dinner companion to catch a flight. On the way, he asked the driver to make a detour in Jerusalem to visit an out-of-the-way currency exchange agency.

He returned with a knowing smile having gained an extra twenty Shekels over the usual rate. Even with twenty million Euros waiting to be spent, this man took my breath away by being concerned to gain a few more banknotes for his Israel director.

Where I was born, aged men understood why this man took the detour:
"Take care of the pennies, lad,” they said, “and the pounds will take care of themselves." Jesus put it this way, "Be faithful in a few things, and I will put you in charge of many things."

You know, being faithful with little is not really so hard, but it takes a genuine greatness to remain equally faithful at the top.

As we shook hands at Tel Aviv airport to say good-bye I quietly did another exchange transaction.

My values for his.
WHY HIS HOW MUST BECOME HIS NOW

The lady asked, "Now, how many of you have a bread maker in your kitchen?" Maybe twenty-five hands went up. "How many of you know how to use it?" Nearly everybody kept a hand up. "Now, how many of you have made bread this week?" Only three hands remained in the air.

Do you get the idea? The knowing did not translate into the beautiful smell of fresh bread rising from the kitchen.

The people following Jesus did not say, "Teach us how to pray." A thousand and one books, CD's and conferences can do that. They actually said, "Teach us to pray." Instead of a ‘how to’ they wanted a ‘now do.’ As John Maxwell says, "If you learn, then you can earn and in the end, you can return." Return benefit that is, to society. On the other hand when we only learn and never do anything with it, there are no returns for anyone. Procrastination is a habit that is long past its sell-by date. Let's learn now. Pray now. Do it now. Change now. When the knowing of how becomes the doing of it now, you smell the fresh bread cooking. Mmmm, nice.
WHY I GOT TOMATOES NOT CUCUMBER

Language-learning tapes tied my tongue in knots and grammatical tenses left me feeling like a time-traveller lost between the present, the distant past or some dim future. To me, even the beginners in the language school sounded like eloquent orators. I was haunted by schoolboy memories of being expelled from Latin, German and French and sent into the girl's typing class.

If I said 'buenos días' followed by my three words, I would end up buying a kilo of tomatoes instead of a cucumber and leave with a face as red as the produce. Worse still, when we first met, Pilar spoke no English and the only way that we could talk to each other was by finding verses in our different language versions of the Bible and pointing at them.

Now, I had heard the stories of missionaries who allegedly woke up one morning speaking in the tongue of the local Orinoco tribes so with more frustration than faith I put this to the test and prayed.

Needless to say, nothing happened.
Or did it? Because later that day and for the first time I could actually distinguish what people were saying. Instead of a waterfall of sound, I could hear individual words. When a man said, "Quiero un café" and got a coffee, I repeated what I had heard and I got a coffee as well. Three months later I spoke to a group for a full twenty minutes.

People were very kind and some even said that they understood. We smile but there are times when a really wild, it has to be God-or-bust kind of prayer is all you have left.

And at that point it is all that is needed.
WHY I HAVE STOPPED READING THE BIBLE

Last week I was asked to talk for 15 minutes to a small group about how I read the Bible. The truth is that I have long since stopped reading the Bible. I said so and an embarrassed silence followed. Women looked away, the men looked down. The leader looked annoyed.

The other half of the truth is that these days I allow the Bible to read me and I listen. This is a very different experience indeed and if you will let me, I will tell you what we talked about.

For almost 30 years, I have read one Psalm every day because of the unique way the Psalms slowly draw prayer and worship from my soul. I like to add a chapter of Proverbs, for example for today June 20 I opened chapter 20 and found the timeless wisdom that I certainly need more than ever before.

After worship and wisdom, I turn to the word of God and to avoid getting stuck in the books that do not appeal to me personally, I vary my spiritual diet, like this:
On Monday I read a chapter or two of Bible history beginning with Genesis and continuing weekly until I reach Esther.

On Tuesday I read Matthew, Mark and Luke's account of Jesus.

On Wednesday it is epic Poetry and Prose from Job to Song of Songs.

On Thursday I follow John through his gospel, letters and Revelation.

On Friday I go into the prophetic books from Isaiah to Malachi.

On Saturday I open other people's letters from Romans to Jude and read them.

On Sundays Acts shows me what a live church with a mission looks like.

We would not want you to think that we manage to follow this plan every day because sometimes tiredness gets in the way, distractions come and journeys have to be made. Having said that, if all else fails we keep the Word for Today in the bathroom.
WHY I LOVE THE MIDDLE SEAT

Most airline passengers really dislike the uncomfortable ride you get in the middle seat. I am different because I like to sit in the middle. You see, for over 30 years we have been training and equipping leaders, mainly in the developing world. We like to get them going with their vision but we never provide a life-long cushion. For sure, the gospel is free, but to do what the gospel asks you to do for others costs a man everything. So what we do is put together trusting people over here with trusted people over there. I am the man in the middle seat. I make sure that the spenders on my right intentionally honour the givers on my left. I make sure that the givers on my right hand don't get taken in by the big talkers on my left hand. I used to be one man in one place doing one thing, but by joining hands with the man on the right and the lady on the left I become the con-du-it which means they can-do-it. I have seen the world change for the better one person at a time and this is what I know: Someone is looking for you as much as you are looking for them. Two together can make history but allow me to be in the middle, please.
WHY INTELLIGENCE IS LIKE A DIAMOND

Twenty years ago I watched as a young man, who had been one of my most envisioned and passionate students in the very first School of Mission, was sidelined for church leadership because one or two others were quietly considered to be more intelligent. He took the disappointment well and the disappointment took him closer to God. Over the years the ones who were chosen were also noticed by others and they moved on. Now, intelligence is always thought to be a measure of the intellect but I have learned that like a diamond, intelligence has many faces. My friend did what he could do: he maintained his integrity, he never complained and he took time to sharpen his intellectual intelligence. However, in silence, God also did what only he can do and caused this young man to grow in spiritual, prophetic and leadership intelligence which made him the perfect choice to carry the responsibility that he had surrendered to God's will all those years before. You see, there is more than one way to be clever, in fact, just one way is never enough.
WHY LIFE AT THE BOTTOM IS NOT SO BAD

For many years our friend Sue had a beautiful painted terracotta pot in her garden. Gradually though, it lost its shine and last winter it finally cracked. So she took a hammer and smashed it into little pieces which now provide the essential drainage at the bottom of new pots holding tender new plants. That lovely terracotta pot is no longer seen, just like many of us who have also lost our shine. Yet in the background it is still fulfilling a crucial role in the garden by supporting new life, again just like we can do.

We have felt that hammer more than once because no amount of our glue, repairs and polish pleases the eye of the Gardener. He just swings his arm again. In later years we like life to be in order, but as always Christ wants it broken so the accumulated treasure within can be released.

Actually, thinking about it, a hidden life at the bottom under Jesus, and under people who are going to grow and do better than we did, is a pretty good place to be.
WHY WE UNFURLED THE WHITE FLAG

They called us illegal. They called us illegitimate. Men who occupied pulpits on Sunday, called us 'Mongrel Ministries' on Monday because of our way of collecting some of the misfits in churches to see if Jesus could make disciples of them. It was all true, and the preachers were right.

One nationally known pastor telephoned and asked to visit me the next morning. This made me think that having offended the church leaders in my city, the whole nation was now in uproar.

That night I unfurled the white flag. I practised explaining my reasons for calling it a day, and started looking for jobs in the newspaper.

Philip Vogel, who is now 81, came early. He looked around, heard the story, met the misfits for mission, and then gave me his considered opinion: that God was present. That being so, Philip was staying and stay he did, and for years.
All thought of surrender other than to God, instantly evaporated and we burned our bridges behind us together with the white flag.

Ignominious beginnings indeed for a movement of the grace of God that has stood the test of time. Yet how near we came to quitting on that day twenty five years ago. It felt just like the old Western films when John Wayne and the US Cavalry ride to the rescue at the last minute.

In fact just the one man sent by God and God riding with him was more than enough.
WHY YOU SHOULD BEWARE OF DOGS

Last week whilst I was cleaning the house windows our dog came and quietly stretched itself out across the floor. I stepped backwards to admire my newly sparkling window and stumbled over the creature. The bucket of water went in the air, turned over, emptied its contents on the dog which by now was running to save its life. One of my toes hit a chair leg with all the appropriate sound effects from the era of a silent 1930's Marx Brother's film. It was funny at the time for everyone who was watching, but not so hilarious an hour later when my toe had turned every shade of purple. A week later I am still limping. It is even more annoying how everyone who sees me in such distress only asks about Sweetie! No wonder the Bible says to ‘Beware of dogs,’ even if these words of warning in Philippians 3.2 from the older versions of the Bible actually refer to that far more dangerous two-legged variety of canine, the legalistic preacher in a suit. Never be arm-twisted by him you into believing that loving God means keeping man-made rules instead of loving Him above all else, and enjoying Him and His love forever.
WINSTON CHURCHILL’S BLACK DOG

Winston Churchill called it his black dog. It was his way of handling the ever-present gloomy feelings that followed at his heel for a lifetime, yet millions would never have guessed this from his words.

The dog that has kept me company for a lifetime is nearly as black as his, and although optimism may not be exactly me by nature, or you either, nevertheless we can still choose to be optimistic. We tell no lies. We don't fool ourselves and it is not hypocrisy.

With God's help and with good people listening to us and keeping us balanced we can keep a grip on our mind, control our tongue and make positive decisions. When we deliberately speak words that are hope-full and not hope-less it is only reasonable to expect the best outcome.

Now, I have just told that miserable dog of mine to go away. Why don't you do the same?
WOMEN, WHO NEEDS THEM?

My first pastor would often say that he had nothing against women in roles of leadership. He was just pro-men.

In my organisation most of the 'men' that I looked out for, advertised for, prayed for and hoped would come in fact turned out to be women.

They came ready-made with God's gifts, skills and with extraordinary abilities to care, to suffer and to go that second or third mile with difficult men like me. So, will I celebrate International Women's Day once a year? No, I will not.

What I will do is celebrate my wife, my daughter and my lady colleagues around the world every day of the year.

Who needs them?

I do and many more like them.
YES, IT'S APPLAUSE AND IT'S FOR YOU

I am a volunteer, everyone in DCI around the world is a volunteer. We pay no salaries, no expenses, pay for no buildings, cars or pensions.

It's been like this for 30 years now. I can tell you for sure that we could never have achieved even a tiny fraction of what has been done for the lost, the last and the least of the world without our incredible, amazing men and women volunteers of all ages, colours and backgrounds.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have gone the second, third and fourth miles for Jesus and for us with no reward other than God's smile and our hugely insufficient thank-you's.

Today, for volunteers everywhere it's applause, shouts, whistles, chocolates, high fives and hugs all round.
YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION

The postcode that we had been given to put into our GPS took us turn by turn and with increasing disbelief and head shaking to a locked gate in a National Park. The tiny lady behind the GPS screen confidently announced, "You have reached your destination." "I don't think so," I said to the machine which remained unconvinced.

Then Rui, all the way from Portugal came running, unlocked the gate and said, "Follow me." At the end of rural lane we saw people that we had not seen for years.

Our friends Miguel and Maria Carmen from Spain, the leaders of a work that homes over 50,000 people worldwide. Rosa, who in 1984 was captivated by the way we followed Jesus, and her husband Joaquin, and Anna who came to Spain with us in 1981 and stayed.

There was Jason from Liverpool, who remembered our conversation word for word 12 years ago, before he went to India.
After 18 long years and many hostile objections, everyone had gathered to open a rehabilitation centre. The Remar mission from Madrid had finally gained 32 acres of the most beautiful green English countryside.

Perhaps it was worth the wait because the property was not 30 minutes away from the drugs and red-light district of Nottingham, yet in atmosphere a million miles distant.

Even as we walked around the farm, a man from Ireland who had definitely known better days was welcomed. They had flown him over that morning, no charge, and it looked as if this might be his last chance in life. I remembered all the opposition and I understood two things.

One, our friends had finally reached their destination.

Two, for 18 years the unsympathetic words 'No, not on my doorstep,' had been the wielding of the power of life and death to the sick, wounded and dying.
YOU IRRESTIBLE FRUITY YOU

Did you know that our lives which are observed by hundreds always speak louder than our words which are only heard by a few? It therefore follows that instead of inventing ever more ingenious ways to bring the conversation round to your faith, you might be more convincing if people saw the fruit of an ordinary life that is surrendered to the Holy Spirit? There might be an unwritten taboo in the office against talking about Jesus but as the New Testament says, there is no law against loving somebody, giving them some joy, bringing them peace or being patient with them. You can't break anyone's law by showing kindness, doing something good or by maintaining your self-control when things don't go your way. When your life is a fruit bowl of colours and flavours like these don't be surprised if people take a bite out of your faith, like what they taste and come back for more.
YOU. THE GREATEST STORY NEVER TOLD

We grew up on stories, how many of you would not go to sleep without a story being read to us. Now our children do the same to us. Libraries are favourite places, and Amazon sells Kindles by the million so we can take all our stories with us. The holy grail of the advertising industry is to compress a fairy story into thirty unforgettable seconds on TV that sends us running to the shops. Jesus is never without a story, in fact, he uses everything from a lady sweeping the house to collapsing buildings to get people like me and you to stop, listen and learn.

Now seriously, there is no story like yours and no-one knows it better than you do. Nobody can tell the tale with more feeling than you can. Facebook, Blogger and You Tube are two clicks away with an audience that can't wait for something new.

But hey - don't wait for an invitation to tell your story, begin with me because when it comes to a story, I am all ears. Write me soon please.
YOU OLD TIME TRAVELLER

The strangest of things. Yesterday I drove past a road in a part of our city that I never visit although I used to work in that area 44 years ago. Waiting for the traffic lights to turn green my eye was drawn to the name of a side road where I visited some people once or twice all those years ago. I remembered two of their names. The lights turned green and I drove on.

Later that memory came back to me in vivid Technicolor with cinema-style all-round stereo and 3D reality. I was 'there' again and for maybe 20 minutes I relived all the sights, sounds and words until I asked Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever to re-enter 1970 and switch it off for me.

The event that I relived was of no importance at all. Neither have I met the people since so how can glimpsing a street name trigger such a powerful memory? Where did it come from and how is it possible to almost feel long lost sensations?

What complicated and complex creatures we are with depths that no man can measure. Fearfully and wonderfully made as the Bible says. The fact is that God has put eternity, where time and space stand still or are no more, into the heart of man. That is until someone clicks Play Again.

And you are back to the future in no time at all.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

I began my working life at 18 as a self-employed businessman and by my 22\textsuperscript{nd} birthday I was driving a Rolls-Royce. However my private life which was greatly affected by being orphaned as a child, did not match the more visible public success and it was not until 1977 when I chose to follow Christ that life took a turn for the better. In 1980 I left the business world behind to see what could be done for the lost, the last and the least of the world. By 1984 I was one of the founders of The DCI Trust which to this day facilitates a global network serving unreached people, untrained leaders and uncared for men, women and children. Our Schools of Mission have no walls, no frontiers and no fees and are the fruit of a Masters Degree, and an earned Doctorate in Theology. Pilar has enjoyed a considerably less complicated life with none of the anguish that accompanied my earlier years. We met in Barcelona in 1982 and were married weeks later. Pilar is a first-class teacher of her language, a brilliant cook, fine artist, expert gardener and one of the favourite poets on the Internet. Her book of poetry in the Spanish language ‘Amapolas En El Desierto’ was published in 2015 but if you ask we will give you a e-book version free of charge. We live quietly in Nottinghamshire, England and enjoy a simple life together, with good family friends, and best of all knowing the presence of God and his love in our lives.

\[\text{Les y Pilar}\]

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For some years on an almost daily basis, I told a story to encourage or amuse a growing number of readers worldwide who came our way through a shared interest in reaching the lost, the last and the least of the developing world.

My plan was to be able to type the story in less than a minute and for a reader in a hurry to be able to get the idea in just the same amount of time. Of course, it might have taken half-a-lifetime to live the story beforehand. We had so many requests for the ‘Minutes’ to be retold in a book, that now in my 66th year, with 30 years at the same desk, I have made the time to put together the stories everyone liked best, one for each day of the year.

So, if like me, you are always saying you never have a minute to call your own, now you have. My minutes are now yours.

Les Norman