

Walking To Rome

Vincent J. Purcell

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ISBN: 978-60383-326-4

Published by:
Holy Fire Publishing
717 Old Trolley Road
Attn: Suite 6, Publishing Unit #116
Summerville, SC 29485

www.ChristianPublish.com

Cover Design: Jay Cookingham

Printed in the United States of America and the United Kingdom

Acknowledgement

I dedicate this book to Heart

I wish to dedicate this book to my friend and companion who consented to be my wife in 1985.

Her name is Pauline I used to call her sweetheart, but we got so close that now I just call her Heart and she calls me her VJ, very rarely, when she wants to get stern with me, she says, Vincent Joseph, trying not to break into a smile.

Since we fell in love, which seems a life time ago, yet only like yesterday, she has been a great encouragement and inspiration to me.

When she had the wool shop she heard a lot of customers saying that they were glad to get away from their husbands and couldn't cope having them around all the time.

'Vin and I are not like that, I really miss him when he's not here', she really meant it. We love being in each others company and chatter away losing track of time, we could quite easily live, content with our own company, on a desert island.

My happiest time was when she said that she loved me; I can still feel the explosion of ecstasy pulsating through my whole being. She was a beautiful, intelligent, mature woman who had set her love on me, something I could never have hoped for.

I tell her every so often that I am very fortunate to have married her, she only shakes her head and says 'no I am the one who came off best!' We are still mistaken for newly weds, even after 24 years of marriage.

One of the trying times in my life was when I experienced burnout and we were in jeopardy of losing our home and shop. Pauline was like a rock for me and we

weathered the storm together and came out the other side stronger.

I also thank her for the dedication and support she has given to me during the production of this book.

Forward

One night I had a dream – it took the form of a conversation with my wife – it went like this:-

‘Do you know, that goat could have taken my eye out?’

‘What on earth are you talking about? It’s after twelve o’clock midnight; and we are in bed trying to get to sleep.’

I was thinking, about when I was a kid in Ireland, I followed my two older sisters across a field, in the middle of it I was attacked by a Billy goat.

It knocked me over and I received a scratch to the inside of my nose. Mammy followed me out of the house and saw what happened.’

There was a local man by the name of Paddy Fitzpatrick nearby.

She shouted to Paddy. ‘Go and get Vinnie out of the field!’

‘No I’m not going into the field, the goat it will attack me for sure’ was his reply.

Mammy jumped over the style and ran across the field to where I was; she picked me up under one arm and fought the goat off with the other.

I remember receiving the scratch on my nose, but it never dawned on me until now that I could have lost my eye.

‘You’re fifty-two years old in October and you’ve never thought that you could have lost your eye during that event until now?’

‘That’s right’ – to which she said - ‘you know sweetheart, a lot has happened since then.’

She was right, in the best part of fifty years a lot had happened.

I know every one has stories to tell, but in 1981 I saw things that perhaps are not lawful for a man to see. Not in this lifetime. Not on this planet.

Thank you for purchasing this book I believe that you will have no regrets with your purchase. Perhaps I might suggest that you read it a second time, when life is becoming hard going and you find yourself with a heavy load, also think about a family member, friend or stranger who might be encouraged from a loan of this book.

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Introduction

Jack Devonshire a national sales representative was driving home one evening after a pretty mundane sort of a day. As he drove over the crest of a hill approaching his home town he saw a most beautiful sunset in all its glory. Spying a lay-by on the off side of the road he indicated and pulled in. With his eyes fixed on the glorious setting sun he got out of his car and resting his arms over the roof nestled his chin on his hands; his eyes were opened as wide as wide could be, and he felt a sense of euphoria. Yes, he had seen sunsets in the past, but never one to compare with this, it was magnificent! He was going to savour every minute because he knew that in a short time the wonderful scene would be gone for ever.

Carol Knight, a mother of three, was going upstairs to put some toiletries in the bathroom as the notion crossed her mind to close the bedroom curtains. She was thinking a thousand thoughts as she wandered into the bedroom when suddenly a rapturous feeling filled her soul. She was gazing through the window at this most beautiful sunset, the same one Jack had stopped to take pleasure in, and was fixed to the spot wondering if she should tell her family who were downstairs, but then again she might lose the moment for ever, anyway they might not appreciate it. This was like all the sunsets she had ever seen rolled into one and she could have so easily missed it. What an amazing sight she thought, I will take my fill of this wondrous moment.

Brian Reed, a local farmer, was looking at the exact same sunset from his tractor. He had seen many a sunset in his life time but, never one like this; it had taken his breath away, surpassing anything he had ever seen before. He remembered a recent Bible reading from the book of psalms

'the heavens declare the glory of the Lord'. Yes, he could see that! What a great deal of pleasure he was getting from this moment.

Within the space of a minute the glorious sight was gone forever, but Brian, Jack and Carol would never forget the remarkable sight, what a pleasurable event it had been for them.

If you had asked any of them to describe their experience they would not describe it in exactly the same way, we might ask 'why not?'

The answer is - there are a hundred and one differing variables which make them unique in their own right. For example: where they were geographically at that given moment in time; in the bedroom, on the road side and in a field.

All the compilation of memories that made up their own individual experiences would affect how they would describe what they saw, yet they were all looking at the same sunset - or were they. Think about it, go ahead philosophize about it.

I mention the above at the outset of my story, because this story is unique to me. The events explained in it are the way I saw them, from a perspective which I believe is honest and true. Some of the names of people and places have been changed for the sake of anonymity, but the events remain the same.

I saw such a 'spiritual' glorious sunset, and more, it did not fade away with the night, but became more glorious, this is what I want to share with you, the reader.

The book you are about to read is a true story. It's about one man's search for reality. It tells of a life changing

experience from a time when I was determined to commit suicide to this present time.

You are about to go on a journey, travelling through the valley of the shadow of death, over hills and dales, until we reach the glorious mountain summit where my life was changed forever.

An acquaintance asked me once if I missed the things of my past life, my spontaneous answer was as follows:

My past was like living in the sewer with the stench, darkness and fear of attack from rats at anytime, my life was totally messed up.

Then one day I was brought out into the light, with fresh air, blue skies and beautiful green fields full of scented flowers and mountain landscapes.

No, I would not want to return to the sewer. I think I painted the picture for him.

You might ask the question, why do people have to sink so deep before they reach out and ask God for help?

My answer is first, when we are so down, the only way is for us to look up, for this is where our help comes from.

Secondly, some people need to be desperate enough before they will reach out their hand and cry for help. There is nothing wrong with humbling our selves and reaching out.

Chapter 1

Beginnings

Born in Southern Ireland, into a strong Irish Catholic Family I am the oldest boy in a family of fifteen. The family was made up of Daddy and Mammy, 5 older sisters and 2 younger along with 4 younger brothers, an older brother, the firstborn had died when just a baby.

I had just reached the age of five when my family travelled to England and Blackburn. I have vague memories of going onto what seemed like a massive ferry, we must have hired a cabin because I remember one of my sisters falling out of the top bunk.

The strangest thing, on arriving in England, was seeing the houses with smoke blackened stonework; some of the doors on the houses seemed so black that, to me, they looked as if they had been scorched in a fire.

We lived at number 53 Primrose Terrace, Mill Hill when we first came to Blackburn. A black fire range was the centre piece of our kitchen where the family spent most of the time when in doors. It was furnished with two arm chairs and a dining table surrounded by four stand chairs which hugged the partitioned wall that closed off the stair case.

Thoughts of this room brings back memories of my brothers and sisters huddled on the floor around Daddy's feet as he told his all consuming stories painting pictures with every sentence.

There was a knock on the door. In came Graham, who lived up the road, a tall lanky man with two rather large front teeth, coming in to accompany Daddy's accordion playing with his spoons and bones.

Beautiful music filling the air, a warm cosy fire, happy smiling faces, hot toast made on the open fire and smothered in real butter, what marvellous times we had.

There was always such a thrill of excitement at the approach to Christmas; it sent a quiver through my whole being. The small Christmas tree sitting in the middle of the Parlour window its coloured lights flashing on and off. Carol singing with my two sisters, receiving pennies half pennies and farthings, and very rarely a thrupenny bit.

Going house to house, not feeling the cold, beautiful trees in almost every home full of different coloured sparkling lights. Away in a Manger, Little Donkey or The Holly and the Ivy what shall we sing next?

Our carol singing money kept in a glove. What a grand childhood we had.

Daddy used to play an accordion in a Ceilidh Band when we lived in Ireland, I remember him playing the sweetest music that I had ever heard. He also made his own tin whistles which when played made a pleasant and yet haunting sound. I never knew that bones and spoons could be played as musical instruments, but I must admit when I heard them, accompanied by the accordion, they harmonised very well.

Our home life was full of story telling and music. Daddy was a very good story teller, and I particularly remember one of the many stories he told.

Although it is an Irish folk legend it highlights the fact that Daddy wished to impress upon us, his children, the need to care for one another. He used his story telling skills to do this and my life was impacted by these stories. Some were scary and frightening but he had grown up with them and felt

it right to pass them onto his children. Others like the one below gave an insight into right from wrong.

The story was about a family of seven. The father had died and the oldest son, called Brian, was 14 years of age. They were very poor and had little to eat, so Brian said that he would go out and find work in order to earn some money to buy food.

Early the next day he set off, not taking any provision for his journey. He walked all that day asking at shops, cattle, dairy, and sheep farms, businesses, anywhere where he might obtain work, but he received the same reply time and time again.

Times were hard and people had very little for themselves without employing someone.

Late into the evening, when the day was well spent, Brian was very tired. As he was heading home he passed an old mansion set in its own grounds, saw a sign on the large black cast iron gates which read, 'Man needed apply within'. The lad's eyes lit up giving him hope in his heart, he pushed through the large heavy gates, which took what little energy he had, Looking up through the trees lining the meandering drive leading up to the house, he could see only one dim light scarcely prevailing over the darkness that shrouded it.

The huge heavy door seemed as if it had received many coats of black paint over the years; and appeared uninviting, seeming to guard many secrets.

A grim looking man in his late fifties responded to his knock, looked up and down at the lad without saying a word.

A little unnerved Brian said 'Sir, I have responded to the notice on the gate'.

'Son, you are very young, you are just a lad' was the reply.

The man stood with a serious look on his face studying Brian long and hard, and then said 'come in and follow me'.

He led the way through the open hallway, up the wide staircase through a corridor with rooms off to the right and left. Finally he reached out turned the door handle to a large bedroom and directed Brian inside.

'I want you to stay here all night, and in the morning tell me what has happened. The last two men I asked to do this ran out of the room and left, never to be seen again'.

'Sir I can do it. I have a mother, four sisters and a brother and they are going hungry, please give me a chance'.

'If you stay until the morning I will pay you well' he was told. Lighting a candle he placed it in the room then walked back down the corridor.

The lad watched him until the light from his lamp had gone out of sight. Turning round he looked into the room then closed the door not knowing what was about to take place.

The next hour passed slowly, he had a million thoughts racing through his head, until exhausted from the day's events he drifted into a deep sleep.

At the stroke of midnight he was awakened by a loud noise, the room shook. In one corner a pile of bones came crashing through the ceiling the lad's head turned and he saw them land on the floor.

Then another pile of bones came through and landed in another corner of the room. He turned his head again as a third pile of bones come crashing through and landed in another corner.

He was petrified but the thought of his starving mother, four sisters and brother kept him going. He heard a noise and his head turned yet again to see the first pile of

bones come together as a skeleton. Likewise the second and the third did the same.

He heard another loud noise this time from the middle of the ceiling as a football came through and landed in the middle of the floor. Everything went quiet for a time, then without warning the football rolled across the room to the first skeleton. Suddenly the three skeletons started kicking it around the room, so Brian joined in.

They kicked the ball frantically for what seemed about half an hour when abruptly it ran to the middle of the room, stopped dead, then with a loud noise went up through the ceiling back the way it had come.

The first skeleton walked toward Brian and said 'you were not frightened, you stayed?'

The lad replied, 'I was very scared at first, but when we play football I realised no harm was going to come to me'.

The first skeleton pointed to the second skeleton 'this is my son', and then pointing to the other skeleton 'this is his son, and the man that let you into the house tonight is his son'

He went on to explain that in the past, for numerous years, he and his family had wronged many people and could not be at peace until the matter was settled.

He pointed to a wood panel at the side of the room and walked toward it beckoning Brian to follow. Indicating a wooden sculptured moulding in the middle of the panel, he said 'turn this clockwise'. It was stiff but it turned and suddenly with a jolt the panel came loose. Brian pulled it out and set it to one side against the wall. Inside he could see a medium sized chest coved in dust.

'Pull it out'.

Unquestioningly Brian caught hold of the handle on the side of chest and dragged it out onto the floor where it

landed with a crash, dust flying everywhere. He waved his hand in front of his face wafting the dust away, and coughing in order to clear his throat.

‘Open it’ the skeleton ordered.

Obediently Brian pulled open the latch lifted the lid and let it swing open revealing gold and silver coins. The dust rose once again and Brian wafted it away and with an amazed look on his face stared into the chest, seeing some ruby and emerald stones lying there gleaming, partially hidden by the coins.

‘Look in the lid and you will find several sheets of paper with names and addresses written on them. These are the names of all the people my family has wronged over many years’.

Brian took the sheets of paper, which were turning brown with age, and saw the names and addresses written there.

‘I want you to tell the master of the house everything which has taken place tonight. Tell him that all the people on the list or their descendents must be paid the amount stated’. Brian looked up at him solemnly ‘yes sir, I will tell him everything’

The three skeletons returned to the corners from where they came, their bones fell to the floor and with a loud noise went through the ceiling one by one just as they had first come down and everything became calm and still, not a single sound.

The lad lent against the wall, slid to the floor thinking of what had taken place, then he fell asleep, exhausted. In his dreams Brian heard a voice it seemed to be coming from the end of a long corridor. ‘Young man, young man,

wake up, wake up'. Coming out of his deep sleep he realized he was a little disoriented.

The master of the house was standing with the door open looking down at him, 'you're still here?'

He seemed to be quite surprised as he turned his head to see the chest on the floor at the side of the room and the panel of wood which had been removed from the wall.

Quite overcome he said 'my, my, what has happened here?'

The lad was so excited and tried to tell him everything at once. Quickly he put up his hand and beckoned him to stop. 'Please wait, you must be hungry and exhausted, do not say another word, follow me'.

Brian followed the man along the corridor and down the staircase. Bringing him into a large drawing room, he pointed to a leather arm chair. 'Sit here son and make yourself comfortable'.

Brian felt so privileged and was bursting to tell the gentlemen everything.

'Forgive me my manners, I'm as eager to hear everything you have to tell me just as much as you want to share it'. I have been waiting to hear what you have to tell me for many years', but first you must eat'.

He pulled a cord by the door and a servant came.

'You rang sir?'

'Yes Matthews, as quickly as you can go to the kitchen and tell cook to prepare a hearty breakfast for this young lad'.

'Just one, breakfast Sir?'

'Yes, yes', 'I'm too excited to eat!'

Matthews face lit up, he could sense something exciting was about to happen, there was a skip in his step as he scurried off to the kitchen.

The gentleman turned to Brian and looking at his face observed he could not contain himself from sharing all he had seen and heard the previous night.

Getting an armchair he pulled it towards where Brian was sitting, and when he got close enough put his hands on the chair arms and sat down, eagerly staring at the lad.

'Alright son, speak slowly, start at the beginning, tell me everything, do not hold anything back.'

Down in the kitchen there was excitement and anticipation; something had happened that had caused immense joy for the master and the young lad had something to do with it. The cook got busy making a sizeable breakfast while questioning Matthews, 'what did the master say?'

'Well, it isn't what he said it's how he looked' was the reply.

'What do you mean, how he looked?'

Well, I asked the master if he wanted breakfast too, and he said 'I'm too excited to eat'. You know how he has had sadness on his face for many years'.

'Yes' said the cook 'I know it all too well'.

'I'm telling you his face had a look of anticipation, like the lad was going to tell him some good, and I mean really good'.

Meanwhile in the drawing room Brian was in full flow describing every scene as it had happened. The master of the house was astounded, with his eyes wide and mouth open he listened to every word.

Matthews came with the lad's breakfast. The look on their faces conveyed the same message; they could not be interrupted.

'Put the tray on the sideboard, and pull the door closed on your way out'.

The expression on Matthews face changed from one of cheerfulness to mysterious curiosity, but moving quickly he did as the master had ordered him shutting the door as he left.

It wasn't long before Brian had finished telling everything he'd seen and heard.

The gentleman, who he was to come to know as Mr. Thorncroft, sat back in his chair with a short gasp 'my, my!' Then as an after thought he looked at the breakfast on the sideboard, then at the lad, jumping to his feet he quickly set a coffee table in front of him, brought the breakfast tray and set that in front of him too,

'Please eat, you must be rather hungry'.

Brian looking wide eyed at the delicious meal nodded his head.

'Thank you Sir', and tucked into the scrumptious meal. Mr Thorncroft sank back into his chair deep in thought. When he had made up his mind about what he had to do and how he would do it, his thoughts turned back to the lad.

As he watched him finishing off his breakfast he thought, this young man has done more for me than other grown men have ever accomplished. In doing this he has demonstrated his love for his mother, sisters and brother in a way I have never seen before. As for me I have behaved selfishly, thinking only about resolving my own problems, I have heard things this day which have affected me down to my inner core. He then resolutely decided in his heart, that whatever else he did in his life, this young man and his family would want for nothing ever again.

'Young man', and as an after thought he said it again, 'young man, yes you are no longer a boy because last night

you did a man's job. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart'.

'Why thank you sir'.

The master went on, 'You must please forgive me; I've never asked your name'.

'My name Sir?'

'Yes, what is your name?'

'My name is Brian'.

'Well I'm pleased to make your acquaintance Brian, my name is Mr Thorncroft, and I have a proposition for you'.

'A proposition, Sir?'

'Mr Thorncroft, please call me Mr Thorncroft because if you agree to my proposal we will be working together'.

Brian looked enquiringly at him 'working together Sir, sorry Mr Thorncroft'.

'Yes, as you know I have a great deal of work ahead of me repaying all the outstanding debts and I want you to help me accomplish the task, will you assist me Brian?'

'Yes Sir Mr. Thorncroft' with a beaming smile on his face Brian knew that this was the beginning of a great friendship.

'First things first Brian, I want you to take food and money home to your family'.

Matthews was called again and given orders to get provisions from the cook and have a carriage readied to take Brian home, which he did. After sharing with his family the wonderful news of all that had happened since leaving home and telling of future plans, Brian returned bright and early the next day.

For the next two months Mr. Thorncroft, and Brian, travelled the land, near and far, talking to families and

individuals who had dealt with the Thorncroft family over the years.

At first some of the people were shocked and some were angry hearing how they had been cheated, but when an offer of reimbursement was mentioned they became very grateful.

Most families were the beneficiaries of a small fortune. It was so gratifying to see the looks on their faces, without exception they were appreciative and more importantly, forgiving.

When all the debts had been paid and the work was completed Brian and Mr. Thorncroft returned to the mansion, ordered tea and cakes and talked about what was to happen next. Over the past months they had spent a lot of time together, and whilst working had laughed and talked, sharing their life stories.

‘You know what you have to do tonight Brian’.

‘Yes Mr Thorncroft, I’m really looking forward to it, I believe it will be an agreeable meeting this time’.

That night Brian had to return to the room upstairs where he had encountered Mr Thorncroft’s forefathers.

At half past eleven as Mr Thorncroft looked on Brian made his way up the large staircase carrying a lantern. There was an air of accomplishment and anticipation, and as he walked down the long corridor there were hundreds of thoughts running through his head.

He reached for the door handle and walked inside the room closing the door behind him. Looking to where the wooden panel had been moved he saw that it had been replaced.

It seemed like ages since his first visit, just being back in that room brought back memories of the previous events.

How terrified he had been and how the skeleton had complimented him for not running out of the room.

He smiled to himself thinking I was too scared to run if the truth be known.

At the stroke of midnight the same loud noise which he'd heard that first night shook the room once again. Yes there was that element of fear but not as intense as before.

The first pile of bones came crashing through the ceiling, this time Brian knew which corner of the room to look at first. Just as before the three piles of bones came into the room one by one and then came together as skeletons.

As Brian was about to speak the loud noise came once again as the football came crashing through, landing in the middle of the floor, it stayed there for a moment then rolled over to the first skeleton. Then just as they had done on their first encounter, they frantically kicked it to each other.

Half an hour later without warning, as before, the football ran back to the middle of the room, and went crashing through the ceiling.

This time Brian waited for the oldest skeleton to speak and not before very long he did.

'Well done young man, you did everything we asked of you. After tonight we will never be seen again because we can now go to our final resting place'.

In turn each of the three skeletons thanked Brian, returned to their corners, fell to the ground then one by one the piles of bones went back through the ceiling never to return.

He felt a real sense of accomplishment as he picked up the lantern left the room heading down the corridor to where Mr Thorncroft was sitting on the top step of the staircase waiting anxiously.

Seeing Brian he jumped to his feet put his arm around his shoulder and looked into his eyes. The look that passed between them told the story, all was well. When they reached the comfort of the drawing room Brian calmly told him everything.

Mr Thorncroft had Matthews bring a hot milk drink for Brian, he drank it, and then they both retired for the night.

In the morning everything seemed fresh as if a new life had started for them both. Mr Thorncroft had a serious talk with Brian.

‘I am the last surviving member of the Thorncroft family, and have no one to pass my estate on to, I have thought about this long and hard, I want you to inherit all that I have’.

Brian couldn’t believe what he was hearing, he didn’t say a word.

‘Over these past months I have, well, began to love you like a son, and if you are willing I will teach you to manage my whole estate and all my business affairs’.

After a brief moment of silence ‘well what do you say? Oh I forgot to mention, you will move into this big old house too’.

Brian’s face changed from a big smile to thoughtfulness.

As if he knew what Brian was thinking Mr. Thorncroft said ‘your mother, sisters and brother will come and live here also, there is plenty of room for us all’. A reassuring look and big smile came over his face, he nodded his head as if to say come on Brian say yes!

Joy filled Brian’s whole being, looking at Mr. Thorncroft he smiled, and cried out ‘oh thank you, I would love to come and spend the rest of my life with you’ and

spontaneously reached over and threw his arms around his neck.

Mr. Thorncroft was somewhat taken back by this and didn't quite know how to respond, but then said to himself 'you old fool don't be so ridged, relax and accept the lads love', so he did and returned Brian's affection.

'My, my, you had better get used to calling me William, for that is my Christian name'.

They both laughed heartily and needless to say lived happily ever after.

Daddy told so many stories like these, and others which were true, about the adventures he'd had, and about people who were known to him. Some of these were funny stories, but the best ones were those he made up.

There was a gentleman called Mr Mynahan who had a garage in the village in Ireland and Daddy would tell stories about the mouse, who lived in Mynahan's garage, that would come out at night and have all sorts of adventures.

He also told stories about the fox and hare, how that fox would sneak up and chase the hare across the fields then the hare would turn and run up a hill and spin round on himself deliberately wrong footing the fox.

One day the hare ran straight for a stone wall, leaping over the wall he landed on a narrow ledge at the back. The fox followed him over with a flying leap, thinking he had caught the hare for sure this time, but he went soaring past and landed in the farmer's greenhouse smashing through the glass. The hare jumped back over the wall and escaped from the fox once again.

These stories Daddy made up as he went along, having a vivid imagination he could see the events happening as he told them.

We were intrigued, spending many a happy hour next to the open fire, our eyes fixed on Daddy's animated expressions.

However, I believe that my favourite stories were from Rupert Bear Annuals, and when as a child I was going through a difficult time, and couldn't sleep, I would dream of Rupert Bear and his chums.

The majority of Daddy's stories had a moral behind them, especially the Bible stories – because he was a man of principles and good moral standing, who would not go against his conscience and wished to instil in his children an understanding of right from wrong.

Chapter 2

Growing Up

At the back of our house, at the top of the grassy hill, was Saint Peter's Roman Catholic Church, with Saint Peter's School, where I was a pupil, off to the left hand side.

A diamond patterned wire fence fixed on concrete posts divided the bottom of the hill and the back yard walls to the dozen or so terraced houses, with enough space between for the back lane.

The women loved the high fence because they used it to string out their washing, I know, because along with my friends I ran through them enough times, I can hear the ladies now shouting, 'I saw you Vinnie Purcell, I'll tell your mammy on you'.

At the bottom of our street was some spare land and another part of the hill which wasn't fenced off. We called this the Catholic Hill because it was a short cut to Saint Peter's Church.

To the right of Catholic Hill was a lot of different plots of land, one was a chicken pen belonging to the Gallagher family. They owned one of the garden fronted houses on the corner across the road from our home; there were three of these on the whole terrace.

Our road ended where the Gallagher's lived, and a black dirt path meandered up past the side of their house, going off to the left, and it stopped at a short cobbled street lined by about half a dozen terrace houses, then came out at Chapel Street at the side of Mill Hill Train Station.

There were a lot of lads that lived in the area and we would all meet on the spare land at the bottom of Catholic

Hill. There were some big lads, certainly big in comparison to me, and Jake was the toughest of the lot, his brother was called Tom and the younger brother who was around my age was called Joseph. Then we had big Boggy, as the name would imply he was big and had long black hair.

One time he rode along the terrace and said to the young lads, this included me, 'whoever keeps up with me I will give him a thrupenny bit'. He rode up and down the terrace around the spare land until the other lads gave up, I got the money.

There was a pecking order amongst the lads and I was down at the bottom being one of the youngest. I was timid and reserved as a young lad and very impressionable, especially where my dad was concerned whatever he told me was absolute; I would not be swayed from it no matter who told me differently.

One of the lads was called Adam; he was a little older than me and had a brother called Callum who was a few years younger. The older lads barracked Callum into having a fight with me but Daddy had sternly warned me never to fight, and also Callum was a spoiled selfish little lad and I would not fight him.

Every time he swung his fist at me I would step back, then when he got too close grab hold of his neck swing him round and throw him to the ground.

This happened several times, each time the lads would say 'go on Callum, get him', to which he replied 'he keeps choking me and won't fight', eventually he gave up. This incident only happened once, he never came back to fight again.

Primrose Terrace was divided by Hawkins Street which ran down by the side of Saint Peters School play

ground. To the left, the bottom row of terraces was raised up about 10 feet with a reinforced stone foundational wall, and five foot iron railings fixed to the end of the end terrace, this ran out about 10 feet and then parallel to the terraced row back to Hawkins Street.

This row of terraces was built on the side of a hill where Hawkins Street joined onto Marsden Street which ran uphill to what we called the wooden bridge that went over the railway tracks.

One of my greatest childhood memories was seeing The Mallard steam train pass by, with smoke billowing and people waving.

On the other side of the terrace the road ran down a sloping hill to the brook side, then it changed into a path, swung around to the right and went more or less straight through to Witton Country Park.

November fifth was a monumental occasion where all the lads worked together to build the biggest and the best bonfire around. The bigger lads would head down to the spare land at the brook side with their axes and saws. This land was full of over grown trees, bushes and foliage. The younger lads, along with the girls, including some of my sisters, would scurry back and forth bringing the hacked off branches and logs to the spare land at the bottom of Catholic Hill. We would leave all the wood to one side until the bigger lads came back to build the bon-fire because, those were their instructions to us, and that's what we did.

A 'Religious Life'

As a young boy I would sneak out of the house to see the special missionaries coming to our local church, St. Peters,

Mill Hill, Blackburn. Mammy and Daddy often went to hear these speakers but did not ask the children to accompany them, so I would wait until they had set off then sneak out of the back door, wait until they were out of sight and take a short cut up Catholic Hill to get to the church.

I would wait outside until I saw them enter, then go in and sit at the back making sure I left before they did. I think I went to these services because it seemed the right, religious and good thing to do.

The family moved from Primrose Terrace to Scar Street, which was near to Griffin Park when I was eleven years old, and I remember my feelings on seeing our new house for the first time, and 'wow!' it had a shop attached to it with a separate entrance.

All the windows still had the original leaded glass with a theme of fruit in beautiful colours. Even the door had a round leaded window, with the same stained glass fruit design, it was beautiful and I just loved the coloured glass, and to see so much at one time, I must have had a glow on my face - and to think it was all in our house too.

As I got older, when the teacher during lessons at school, spoke about the different orders of monks, I had a desire to be one.

Just before leaving school I decided to become a priest, and at the age of seventeen had to make the choice between becoming a priest or helping my parents with my wages, which were needed in such a large family.

Not telling them I attended a type of open day at Belle Vue in Manchester where some monks from different orders talked with the visitors, showed display boards and gave out literature.

I was very shy and didn't ask too many questions.

Some weeks later I went to see an Irish priest from the Church of the Sacred Heart, who after speaking to me for some time, asked some very pertinent questions, one being did my family, which was a large one, depend on me for help with the finances.

This made me really think as I realised that they did. He pointed out that in his opinion, at this point in time; my family needed me more than the church. This helped me to make my decision to stay at home and help my family.

On reflection I later realised that my original decision to become a priest probably came from the influence of my Daddy who was a very religious man and would frequently direct us in prayer and the saying of the rosary.

I was particularly impressed watching him make the sign of the cross and bless the house, north, south, east and west, praying protection over it each night. I think I also wanted to be a religious person like him, and more than that, I thought I could achieve it by becoming a priest.

Chapter 3

Working Life and Friends

Life changed after this, I started playing snooker on my own table kept in the empty shop property which was part of our house, then I began to go into pubs and clubs to play and I got a taste for drink.

I seemed to be searching for something in life, so I tried snooker, darts, kung-fu, motor bikes, even philosophy lessons and lots of other things, but as I was not very well educated my understanding was limited.

Witton Mill

I spent eight and a half years working at Witton Mill which was a textile mill in Blackburn with approximately 80 weaving machines. This was my first job after leaving school and everything seemed so strange for the first few months.

I learned a number of different jobs including looking after twelve weaving machines before training to be a textile technician or Tattler as they called it.

I had left school with no qualification and could hardly read and write, therefore my spelling was atrocious. This planted an inferiority complex into my mind for most of my life, and because of this I struggled when training to be a Tattler. I had the strangest notion that if I qualified I was going to be trapped in that job for the rest of my life.

I spoke to the foreman of the weft department who was in his sixties, a man for whom I had great respect.

'If you're not happy cock you'd better tell them and if you want I'll support ya' was his advice.

Looking back this was a silly way of thinking and a wrong move to make on my part, but perhaps it was my pathway in life.

When I first started at the mill I wouldn't say 'boo to a goose' but a few years later I wasn't shy at all, and I mention the following incidents in order to show you my humorous and perhaps mischievous side.

Water Falls

During the hot summers, along with one of the lads from our department, I would fill a bucket with water and take it up onto the roof.

We would wait for one of the other workers to be passing below before tipping the water out, and more often than not we would be right on target hitting them with the full blast of water right on their heads.

It seemed an awful long way down so the water must have hit them with some force.

We would then run as fast as our legs would carry us precariously sliding down a stone slab at the edge of the roof and clambering through the window into the weft department where we worked.

There was an occasion; I had just barely got back in when one angry man stormed into our department.

'Have you seen anyone come in off the roof?'

I was on my knees unpacking boxes, and it looked as if it couldn't have been me, as it would have been impossible for me to get back in from there that quickly.

I don't know what I was thinking about choosing to throw water on this man as he was a fighter, a real scrapper

but I must have looked so innocent and I wasn't about to ask the obvious question 'how did you get wet?'

So I said 'have you seen the ginger haired guy who works upstairs?'

Immediately his eyes lit up 'right, just wait till I catch up with him!'

I wasn't too worried as it was half past eleven and I knew that the ginger haired guy wasn't in work at that time, he was on the late shift so wouldn't be in until two o'clock in the afternoon.

Some times I did skate near the edge, not thinking of the consequences of my actions.

Is it Raining?

There was a worker who was nick-named Selwyn Frogget, one day he was walking home with his two mates when unexpectedly a torrent of water hit him right on the head.

His two mates got splashed but Selwyn copped for the lot, and it pushed his bob cap down over his eyes.

'I can't see, I can't see!'

'Pull your bob cap from over your eyes and let's get out of here fast' his mates said.

Apparently when he arrived home and walked in wet through, his wife looked at him a little puzzled 'is it raining?'

To which he replied 'I'm the comedian in this house, not you'. The reason being it had been sunny weather for the preceding few weeks, and the forecast was also good.

Believe it or not, these instances were all light hearted, with a tinge of mystery as to the identity of the water thrower,

turning into a real buzz, especially in the canteen where all sorts of stories were flying around.

There was a concrete boundary fence which separated the mill from Griffin Street; this was the route Selwyn took to work.

My friend wanted to keep the whole thing going so he went up the hill behind the fence, which was camouflaged with trees and bushes. He then waited for Selwyn and his two mates to pass by and threw a small bag of water over.

He had also put a big piece of cardboard in the tree saying WE'RE GOING TO GET YOU SELWYN!

The bag of water missed them completely, it was never meant to hit them, just to carry on the camaraderie in the canteen.

'We are not walking to work with you any more Selwyn because you are on the hit list!' was the comment from his friends.

You should have heard the stories that were voiced around the canteen.

Selwyn said that someone had thrown a bin bag full of water over the concrete boundary fence and just missed him.

Others responded by saying how could anyone throw a bin bag full of water over the concrete boundary fence, that would have been impossible.

'I'm telling you they must have swung it around about ten times before they let go!'

There were laughs heard all around and some of the women were wiping the tears from their eyes, others were still laughing as they were leaving and walking back through the weaving shed.

It was like one big happy family, people enjoyed coming to work to catch up on the next episode.

The Mask

Another time I brought to work a rubber mask of one very ugly man, he was a bit frightening to say the least.

One section of the weft department was used to empty the boxes which came back from the weaving shed full of used cones. These empty cones were collected by three workers, stacked together, and re-packed ready to be sent back to the suppliers.

During a lunch break I got into one of the large empty boxes which had contained the used cones, and lay down waiting for the workers to return.

Two out of the three knew what was happening and were asked to avoid this particular box, leaving it for the remaining worker, who was called Bert, to deal with.

He walked directly to this box, opened it and reached in.

As I began to sit up, wearing this frightening mask, with a terrified look on his face he seemed to jump up off his knees and land about three feet away.

He couldn't speak but did his best to signal to his two work mates trying to draw their attention to what he had discovered, not realising they were in on the joke.

He backed away until he hit the stone wall pointing his finger at me making the strangest noises but by this time I was stepping out and with one hand pulled off the mask.

All of the workers, including the foreman, were in tears laughing, apart from Bert, who when he had assessed what had just taken place began to call me every name he could think of.

Later during the afternoon break in the loading bay we were all, including Bert, able to laugh about the prank.

Unhinged

On another morning I arrived well before any of the other workers, and decided to start the day with a laugh.

I took all the hinge pins out of the locker doors and went down stairs until I saw the other workers arrive. Coming back up after two of them, it looked like I had just arrived too.

Bert was the first to open his locker door sending it crashing to the floor.

‘Hey what’s going on here?’

Barney smiled at this as he opened his, sending it crashing onto his foot, whereupon he got red faced and became really annoyed.

‘Can you two not take a joke?’ said the foreman with a wry smile.

He reached up to open his and it came off in his hand; he had to grab it quickly before it fell against his head damaging his glasses. He was very indignant, it was alright for pranks to be played on the workers – but he was the foreman!

I didn’t have a clue why, but they all looked at me ‘is this your doing?’

‘I came in just after you, how could I have done it, I squeezed past Barney to get to my locker, ‘have you never thought of the big ginger haired guy upstairs’.

I opened my locker and the door fell off too, causing them to think well it can’t be him.

Again the guy upstairs was on a two to ten shift and wasn’t even in the building.

Some time later I was walking towards the lockers when I heard someone come through the swing doors and open his locker door sending it to the floor with a crash.

It was kung-fu Bill, he was late for work and I could sense he wasn't in the best of moods so when I saw the door come flying through the air and sink into a cardboard box right in front of me. I promptly about turned before he noticed me, and rounding the corner headed out of his way for the rest of the day.

I might add though that the above events didn't happen every day, just once in a blue moon.

Reflections

There was another side of me which did a lot of deep thinking and the question arose am I going to be in Witton Mill for the rest of my life.

There was some sort of an award ceremony taking place on the floor above our work area and it was for Fred who was retiring after working at the mill for fifty years.

I was twenty years old and could not imagine what working at Witton Mill for fifty years would be like.

That afternoon my greatest dread was realised. Fred came walking through our department and after speaking with the foreman he walked toward me and stopped to talk.

'I have worked here since nineteen twenty, that's fifty years ago, and today I retire'.

I stared at him and said nothing because I couldn't envisage spending the rest of my life here.

Showing me the gift he had received from the directors and workers he said, 'wait until you have been here fifty years'.

I think it was from that point in time I started planning to get out of Witton Mill.

I do not want to make it sound like getting out of Colditz, would you believe it when I look back at my time working there, they were some of the happiest days of my life.

Friends

In a group of friends there always seems to be one who is 'the tough guy' – my friend Daniel was the original tough guy – a nice lad, but tough. He lived on Cavendish Place with his parents and younger brother called Kenny, his house faced right across from Griffin Park.

One day Daniel came to visit us at the shop premises adjoining our home. This was a meeting place for all the lads, especially when it rained. There was no electricity connected to this part of the property which meant Daddy didn't have to pay rates for it, so to accommodate us he had rigged up a lighting supply powered from a car battery.

If anything needed organising especially regarding football Daniel did it, but as far as outings, making films and adventure days went, well I was the guy that organised these. Daniel mostly organised the football if he was around.

He was apprenticed to be an architect, whilst I worked at Witton Mill.

On this particular visit he shared with us that he had been told he would soon be made redundant, the firm where he worked was closing down.

He went on to tell us about enquiries he had made relating to the Army, especially the regiment called Q.L.R.'s –

Queen's Lancashire Regiment – and how they were soon to be going out to Germany.

He made it sound like a holiday saying that we would get paid for participating, so we talked about 'joining up'.

Later that week we went down to the army careers office where Daniel had a friend who held the position of Corporal - we discussed this and that about army life, and before I knew it we had 'signed up' for nine years.

Then began the awful task of retuning home and telling Mammy and Daddy what I had done.

Needless to say Mammy was very upset and Daddy really angry, especially at Daniel who he felt had encouraged me. He wasn't allowed to visit for a while until Daddy calmed down. Realising it would be better for us to be friends if we were to be in the army together, he relented and visiting rights resumed.

Then came the day when travel tickets arrived for us to go to Sutton Coldfield – I had never heard of this place but discovered it was near Birmingham.

We were going to a training camp to spend three days receiving information about the training we would have to undergo, and also to make up our minds what regiment we wished to sign up for.

I remember the first night in the barracks which consisted of quite a few storeys in height, the sergeant shouted up for us to quieten down and go to sleep when one of the recruits came out with a smart remark.

The result was that he got the non-commissioned officers to bring all the lads out of the barracks and into the yard where we had to stand to attention for about an hour or more, then we were released to return to our beds – by this time we were much quieter.

The following day a group of officers came and spoke to the recruits asking which regiment they would like to go into – I applied for the Queen’s Lancashire Regiment and he gave the instruction ‘sign here’. I told him that before I signed I wished to check with the friend I had come with to make sure we would be together. He said this was most irregular, but gave his permission.

I went out and found Daniel telling him I was signing up for the Q.L.R. – he shrugged his shoulders and said ‘yes, OK’, so I went back and put my signature on the form.

Daniel then went in to sign up, but coming out told me he had joined the Paratroopers.

I thought what! he has joined the Paratroopers after persuading me to give up my job and join the Q.L.R.’s.

So eventually he went down to Aldershot near London whilst I was sent to Strensall near York City.

We began training using SLR rifles weighing about 45 lbs and carrying a 3.3 bullet. We were amazed at what these rifles could do having seen them demonstrated on the firing range where they went through bricks and metal plates, when hit square on.

Sergeant Blood, who was a tough guy, asked which of us felt we would be safe behind the brick wall that had been built. Having seen the previous demonstrations we didn’t think it would be safe, and he proved this by firing his Thompson machine gun at the wall and blowing it to bits.

We were also shown films about parachuting, explaining that this was something we would have to do – also about jungle warfare, how soldiers could get ambushed and be killed.

I thought this isn't for me and began to get disillusioned – in truth the only reason I had joined up was to be with Daniel, but he had gone elsewhere.

I made enquiries about getting out and found that there was a fee of £20 to be paid – I thought well its worth it as this isn't for me, so paying the money I came out having served for twelve weeks, and returned home.

When Daniel came home on leave we met up and he asked 'why did you do that, it's a great life' – well it probably was for him because that was what he wanted.

He talked about the training he went through telling how he had been put into a large aircraft hanger and the group had been given gas masks but not enough for everyone. Then they threw some gas canisters in, locked the doors, and the soldiers had to fight for a gas mask with eyes streaming and noses running until the doors were eventually opened and they were let out into the fresh air.

He also told of how they were chased with tanks etc. and one of the statements he made was 'you know, I'm going to live forever'.

A Tragic Accident

We had joined up at the age of 17 and then when I was 21 years old I answered a knock at the front door to find my sister Kerry standing there with an opened newspaper. As she walked in she came out with a statement which seemed so matter of fact.

'Have you heard the latest, Daniel is dead?'

It felt like I had been shot with an arrow – I thought - what, Daniel - dead.

She went into the kitchen with the newspaper and I heard her telling Mammy and Daddy what had happened.

Apparently there had been a training exercise over Turkey where 2,000 paratroopers had been dropped – two had broken arms, one had a broken leg, but the man from Blackburn – Daniel – was a fatality – his first parachute hadn't opened properly and when he opened the emergency one they intertwined, he came down to earth, and was killed on impact.

I remember hearing that his body was never shown to his family, probably due to the extensive injuries he had received when he hit the ground. He left a wife and a son – he hadn't been married long.

All of his friends were devastated, as for myself I never spoke to anyone for two weeks until one silly man at the place where I worked implied that I shouldn't be mourning him but celebrating his death by going out drinking, and that I should be drinking to him. I felt his remarks were very cynical and they made me so angry I could have kicked him, but it made me realise that indeed people don't live forever.

I was surprised that one of my brother's who had been very close to Daniel hadn't said anything and I thought 'wow' is he not bothered. Years later I realised that in fact he had grieved deeply, in his own way.

Biking Holiday

I had another good friend called Arnie and he was like the number two in our group of friends. We decided to go on holiday together to tour the south coast on our motorbikes. Meeting mid morning we set off and rode most of the day just stopping off for the odd break and drinks.

We followed the signs into London and when we arrived found the traffic to be really fast – travelling at about 50 MPH in inner London. When caught up in it we felt like we were on a roller coaster so we were not able to participate in sight seeing.

I saw a quieter road ahead of us off to the left and quickly indicated and turned off followed by Arnie.

When it was possible to do so I pulled over and asked him if he had seen any of the tourist attractions to which he replied that he hadn't as he felt he had to keep his eyes on the road as the traffic seemed to be passing so quickly.

I pointed out that I had seen a sign for Rochester, which might be a little village outside of London and suggested that we travel there and find somewhere for bed and breakfast.

So we rode on and followed these signs only to realize later when we looked at the map that Rochester was a large town east of London.

We had been travelling east when we should have been going south.

By this time dusk was settling in and the light was going, so when I saw a sign for B & B I pulled over and stopped, remarking to Arnie that I was 'done in' and suggesting that this was where we should stay. He thought that it was a good idea as he too was shattered.

We made enquiries as to the cost and decided that even though it was a little expensive it was worth staying, so we booked in then went out for fish and chips, returning to watch TV and relax.

The following day after eating a hearty breakfast we looked at the map and decided to head south to Brighton going through a place called Royal Tunbridge Wells in Kent.

As we approached it I felt we had got a little bit lost, so stopped to enquire from a passing gentleman where it was. Opening my mouth to ask, the name went right out of my head. Turning to Arnie I asked 'where is it we are heading Arnie?' – He looked at me like I was stupid then he said Royal Tunbridge Wells – suddenly I remembered and got the right directions. My goodness, talk about memory loss, it was a weird kind of feeling.

Eventually we arrived at this beautiful place but didn't stay long then we continued on following the signs to Brighton.

Arriving in the early evening and booked in for B & B – the following day we spent quite a bit of time looking around the shops. I bought a T shirt – it was an 'Old Oban' memorabilia – brown coloured with patterns and pictures.

I wore it the following day when we caught the ferry to the Isle of Wight where we spent a couple of days touring round. We saw some beautiful flamingos by a lake as well as many other lovely sights.

The next day we headed back to the mainland passing through Bournemouth and taking in the sights. Riding west we passed through a place called Puddle Town – this name intrigued me as I thought it rather a strange name for a town.

At some traffic lights I managed to pass through as they were changing. On checking my mirror I found Arnie had missed the lights and was still in the queue of traffic.

I thought this is a good place to stop as my helmet seemed to be coming loose. I was adjusting the strap as he went past, so I let him go a little way in front, as I had the larger and faster bike and could easily catch him.

Trouble Ahead

We went onto the main road called the Dorchester Flats – each side consisted of a single lane, but they were broad.

I took a position just to the left of the centre line in my own lane preparing to overtake him. Ahead of us in the opposite lane a row of cars was approaching and one was preparing to overtake a vehicle in its own lane – I looked down at the gear peddle on my bike for what seemed no more than two seconds and then looked up again.

In those few seconds the approaching car had accelerated to complete his overtaking manoeuvre before reaching me, but unfortunately he couldn't make it and was on my side of the road.

When I saw the high-speed car approaching I realized I had only a split second in which to apply my brakes to slow down from 70 MPH to 50 MPH but the car was travelling faster than I realized.

I heard a crashing noise as the car hit the right hand side of the safety bar protecting my feet and it was bent back. My right foot was hit and felt as if it had been flattened and I went sailing through the air.

Arnie, who had been looking back at me through his mirror, described it to me later – he said I saw your motor bike sliding across the road with sparks flying from it and you soaring through the air. My experience was not as some would say having been in similar circumstances, with the thoughts of my life passing before me in an instant; no in fact my only thoughts were that our holiday was ruined, can you believe that?

I hit the ground and started rolling – for a few seconds I tried to brace myself and clenched my right fist.

As I braced myself, I could feel my right forearm scraping along the road, I was wearing the 'Old Oban' short sleeved T shirt, my jacket was packed away.

'You fool you are supposed to relax if you are in a bike accident, and just roll out of it' – so I did. It seemed to be over very quickly, but not before I had received abrasions on my forearm and blood blisters where the skin had ripped off.

I remember rolling onto the verge and laying there face down in the deep grass – I had heard that after an accident one wasn't supposed to move so I lay there and waited for what seemed like ages.

I could hear the voices of passing motorists who had stopped to see how I was, and also that of my friend Arnie.

Then an ambulance arrived – when it did I tried to get up but the ambulance man put his foot on me saying 'stay there son, we are going to check you out to make sure you haven't broken anything'.

I heard him talking to Arnie 'you'd better move your bike son or there is going to be another accident'. He had parked it in the middle of the road in his hurry to reach me.

They checked me out and there were no broken bones but the top of the middle finger on my right hand was hanging off so they temporarily bandaged this up and took me to the hospital. Medical staff cleaned my wound, which was full of dirt and very painful, as the nerves were naked. My side and right forearm had extensive abrasions so I was suffering pain there too. After stitching the top of my finger back they bandaged it up, also bandaging my side and arm before putting it in a sling.

My 'Old Oban' memorabilia T shirt with its lovely pictures and patterns was ruined.

Travelling Home

After leaving the hospital I thought I could go to find my bike and travel home, but it needed serious repairs as the handlebar was bent up at a right angle and couldn't be ridden.

That meant that Arnie had to return, all the way to Blackburn, on his motorbike by himself, I returned by train, arriving that same evening. Approaching our house I took off the sling which was around my right arm and threw it away, as I wanted to play down the seriousness of the injuries and not to distress my family, especially Mammy.

The following day I was having a wash in the bathroom when Mammy walked past and saw the bandages on my arm and side.

'Oh son, I knew you were hurt more than you let on'. I could see the concerned look on her face. She didn't like me having a motorbike at all. I did not realise how much stress this put my parents through.

Looking back on this incident I realized that God's hand was upon my life as I could have been 'wiped out'.

The impact of the collision was estimated at one hundred and eighty miles per hour. I could have been killed, passing from this life to the next – but that wasn't the case.

Chapter 4

Home and Marriage

I spent a lot of time at Witton Working Men's Club which was at the end of Pleasington Road; it was a cul-de-sac and had to be entered by coming down Garden Street.

I noticed a home made leaflet in one of the houses saying 'House for Sale, Four Hundred and Fifty Pounds, apply within'. I became very interested because I was into martial arts and wanted to get some weightlifting equipment, but needed the space to store and use it.

I began to think of ways to raise the four hundred and fifty pounds but knew it wouldn't be easy because I was not a saver. I decided to sell my Honda 250cc motorbike, but the highest price I was offered was two hundred and fifty pounds. I was disappointed but I took the money anyway. I do not remember how I raised the other two hundred pounds, but I did.

I called at 49 Garden Street, and knocked on the door, it was answered by a tall stocky man in his mid forties. Pointing to the sign in the window I asked if the house was still for sale. There was a look of astonishment on his face to see a twenty four year old lad asking to buy his house. In bewilderment he said that I had better come in, brought me into the living room and introduced me to his wife Eileen.

His name was Bob and he looked at me saying 'do you know that the house costs four hundred and fifty pounds?'

'I have it here', I pulled the money, from my pocket, and held it out.

Bob's eyes opened wide to see the cash and he seemed a bit befuddled as to what to do next. He got the deeds to the house, with a large red wax seal on the front page.

'These are the legal deeds to this house', and he pointed out the address 49 Garden Street, 'and all I need to do is sign my name over the seal and give them to you, this will make the house yours'.

I thought he must know what he is doing so I agreed and we set a date when they were going to move out and hand over the keys.

As always I didn't tell my parents until after I had bought the house, this was typical impulsive Vin.

I now owned an empty house, a 2 up and 2 down property with flagged floors to the ground level. No furniture, until I managed to get a sofa and other pieces of furniture, bedding, cutlery and crockery from various family members – not a lot, but I managed and I moved into the house as soon as the negotiations were completed.

I thought that owning my own home would bring me answers to the many questions that I kept asking myself about the meaning of life.

I had thought that leaving school and going into paid employment would give me the answers I sought, but it didn't.

Then I thought that owning my own home and having freedom and independence would give me an understanding of this, but I discovered it didn't.

Searching

I would often go down town into Blackburn on a night out with friends and family, finishing up at a club called The Starlight Club.

On one occasion I went up onto the balcony overlooking the dance floor, although this was an area which was out of bounds to the public. I spotted a fire hose and turned it on sending a gush of water over the dance floor. I heard some of the girls screaming, and my friend shouted for me to come away before the bouncers arrived.

I could be very foolish at times especially with drink in me, and from time to time would do some stupid things like this.

There was another time when I went to the same club with some of my sisters.

During the evening I suddenly became so disillusioned with who I was and what I was doing. I walked out of the club not telling anyone that I was leaving, and I believe I still had my sister's cloakroom tickets in my pocket. I remember walking down St. Peter Street and taking off my check jacket and throwing in somebody's garden.

I arrived at my home took off my four inch healed platform shoes and burnt them on the fire. I was wearing some brown pin striped oxford bag trousers which I threw in the dustbin.

When I think now, of how I looked then, I have come to the conclusion that all in all, I must have looked like a clown.

I was like a man searching for something, but not knowing what it was. There had to be more to life than this.

Picking up my old blue hard backed Bible, which I never really read because what I did read I couldn't understand. I went out into the back yard fell on my knees and cried 'God help me'.

I opened the Bible rather like a lucky dip and looked at a passage of Scripture which was roughly in the middle. I remember it was the book of Isaiah but for the life of me I cannot remember what verse it was or what it said. I do know that it spoke to my heart; way off in the distant dark blue sky God had heard my pitiful cry. I sensed that there was a God but he seemed so far away.

My First Marriage

As I wrote earlier I was a member of a private working men's club for quite a few years where I formed a lot of friendships, Tyrone was my best friend during this time we also both worked at Witton Mill.

After leaving the army I had worked for a couple of years in engineering and then returned to the mill where I was employed as a labourer in the weft department.

Most of our time together was spent playing snooker and eventually we took up playing darts. The year of 1977 was the highlight of my snooker career.

I was 25 years old when Tyrone and I entered the individual snooker knockout championship covering the whole of Blackburn and Darwen; we were playing for the Jubilee Cup which came into being in 1952 the year I was born.

In the semi final I played against a man named Adrian whose claim to fame was that he had lost a match to the renowned John Spencer on the black ball.

Our match finished on a high, we were dead even, one game each and exactly the same score when the black ball went down. This meant that the back ball had to be re-spotted and I was nominated to take the first shot.

In practice I had managed to pot the black from this position into the corner pocket, but I had only done it in about one shot out of ten.

It was an enormous risk to go for this sort of shot at this stage in the championship, because if I missed the likelihood of Adrian having an easy pot and winning was well in his favour.

I had decided to be resolute and go for the out and out shot. Silence filled the room apart from a quiet 'come on Vin' from Tyrone as I deliberately positioned the white ball on the yellow spot and lined up my cue to take the shot.

I psyched out the black ball deciding exactly where I needed to finely clip it in order to cut it into the corner pocket.

I hit the middle of the white ball hard and cleanly, watching it speed its way down the table and clipping the black.

It moved slowly towards the corner pocket while the white rapidly ran up and down the length of the table.

The black ball clung to the corner of the pocket and disappeared out of sight, to my delight.

The hushed silence broke into a round of applause; even Adrian put one hand up to the back of his head and said 'well done!'

The championship final was to be against a most difficult opponent, Kevin a top player from Mill Hill Working Men's Club, it was certainly a great occasion.

I was the under dog, so it seemed like it would be a foregone conclusion, just a formality for him to be the winner.

The finals day came, the club was packed out with supporters for both players, and the match began.

I was a little nervous for the first game and made some mistakes allowing Kevin to win quite easily. The second game I played clever, not taking any chances, while he became a bit frustrated and got overconfident taking on difficult shots and missing, even so I only just won.

In the final game my confidence grew, and I began taking on some difficult shots and potting some impressive ones. My score steadily increased whilst Kevin struggled to get into a rhythm.

I finally potted the blue, pink and black to win. Talk about elated, I was ecstatic, the club members overjoyed, and even Kevin appreciated my performance, shook my hand and congratulated me.

This was one of my greatest personal achievements something which I had accomplished consistently over a period of many months before lots of people.

There was a great sense of satisfaction and well-being, I got to keep the cup for the next twelve months, and also I went on to be the team captain for the following season.

New Challenges

One of the lads at the club was given a challenge to play a darts team from another pub and that meant he had to form a team.

Tyrone and I were always ready to take on a challenge, but we had never played darts as part of a team, but as individuals, however because we were decent players, we were picked for the team.

On the night of the match we were down at the club early, practising, and waiting for the opposing team to arrive. When they did we introduced ourselves, had some warm up games, then the match began.

The visiting players were a strange set of lads; one was short and stocky and threw his darts like javelins, another was tall with a skinny body and largish head while another walked awkwardly and talked a little funny.

I didn't realise at the time that this was because they were all handicapped, I had never met anyone with disabilities before. We soon discovered that they were a great set of lads, got on really well with them and had an enjoyable evening.

We were declared champions because although we did not win all the games we did win the majority. They challenged us to play a return match at their local pub. We asked them the name of this pub; they told us that it was called 'Leopards Head'.

We thought we knew every pub in Blackburn but none of us had heard of the 'Leopards Head', so we asked the lads and older men in the club if they knew where it was. Somebody came back with a smart-alec answer saying 'Yes, I do, it's at the other end of its tail', it took a little while for some of us to get it, but when we did laughter rang out.

That night we had a pleasurable evening with camaraderie on both sides and looked forward to the return match, which was set for the following week. Little did I know how this event was going to change the rest of my life?

Heads or Tails

Tyrone and I wondered if the 'Leopards Head' really did exist, so we went looking for it prior to the match. We called in at the Balaclava pub and asked if they knew where it was, and received a positive answer and directions. It was off the main thoroughfare and in order to reach it we had to take several side streets.

It was a Saturday afternoon when we arrived and were met by two of the lads from the last darts match who introduced us to the landlady. She was really pleasant and made us welcome, reminding me very much of Annie Walker who was the landlady of the Rovers Return on the television soap opera Coronation Street, it was uncanny. We were glad we had found the Leopards Head, now we knew where to respond to the challenge.

It was the night of the match, our team arrived within the space of an half an hour from me and Tyrone coming first to Jerry who came last. The atmosphere was good-humoured with a hint of competitiveness. I was particularly enjoying the occasion having won my darts game, and our team won the match by a narrow margin because the opposing team played better in front of their home crowd than they had done at our previous meeting.

After the match the landlady put on a pie and peas supper which made the evening all the more enjoyable. It was good to hear and join in with the different groups chatting in the lounge bar area.

When the match had finished I wandered into the snug where the locals were, and saw a girl sitting at the bar sipping her half glass of larger. She had long jet black hair and was wearing a red top.

I stood beside her making small talk, then tried to share her stool but finished up pushing her off. It was light-hearted and we were in good humour, then I walked her home.

Her name was Kelly; she told me that she was a Romany Gypsy, her family originating from Carlisle. She was a single parent with a seven month old daughter, was a cleaner at the Leopards Head but lived with her parents about five minutes away.

Stopping in a back alley close to her parents' house I told her, out of the blue, that I was going to marry her, she thought I was crackers. Eventually she went into the house while I wandered back to my own house which was across town.

At my home all night long I was thinking and dreaming about Kelly and the type of wedding we could have.

I had some records which were of Romanian Gypsy music and I played these as I dreamed about how romantic our wedding would be.

I could visualise the setting, with painted gypsy caravans out in the country, open fires. Romany Gypsy music played on violins, roasting meat cooking on the spit, couples dancing to the music - what a romantic atmosphere.

The next day at work my head was in the clouds. When my work mates heard all about Kelly, the black haired gypsy, and how I intended to marry her, Gareth the foreman warned me.

'Be careful cock, some times these people marry you just to get into the country', I didn't have a clue what he meant.

Then Tyrone appeared 'what happened to you last night comrade, I couldn't find you anywhere?' He got the whole story about Kelly and our proposed marriage.

When I wasn't at work or sleeping I was with Kelly trying to convince her that we should get married. She said that her mum and dad would be dead set against it especially because of her daughter. Despite hearing this I went to the registrar on Cardwell Place in the town centre, registered the banns of marriage, brought the receipts and gave them to Kelly. She told me she slept with the receipts under her pillow. However this sent her into a complete dilemma; she thought I was this knight in shining armour who had come to carry her off to a life of happiness, as I had mentioned to her that I had my own home, she must have thought I was 'well off'.

The wedding date was set for the coming Saturday; and on the Friday Kelly finally consented to be my wife and arranged for her mum to look after her daughter Lindsay.

That same night I went to my parents' house and asked my brother Paul to be my best man, he consented.

There were four of us who met on Cardwell Place outside the registrar's office. It wasn't quite like the wedding I had dreamt about, with the beautiful painted gypsy caravan, open fires, Romany gypsy music, roasting meat cooking on the spit, and dancing. This wasn't the best way of arranging a wedding.

A last minute collection had been made at work, and my good friend Gus put in a metal washer, we all had a good laugh about that.

There was little time to organise a wedding reception, but my mum put on a spread after the ceremony and a lot of my family came.

In the evening we met at the Griffin Inn to celebrate. In my eyes everything seemed to go very well, but I would have been content just to get married without the quickly arranged celebrations.

I was an impetuous fool who'd had visions of never getting married and being left on the shelf. It never crossed my mind about the feelings of both families and how they would have wanted to celebrate this wedding appropriately.

If we had waited this could have been planned for properly, giving both families an opportunity to meet each other, but looking back if we had waited, this marriage probably would never have taken place.

Chapter 5

Love and Loneliness

After the world-wind romance reality hit home, I was suddenly responsible for a wife and child. Talk about not being prepared for marriage this was an under statement. The main problem was we never knew each other.

I can plainly see in hindsight why courtship is so fundamental to marriage.

We lived in my house on Garden Street for the first few months of our married life, and then one day we received a flyer from the council telling us that all the homes in our street were to be demolished, as the area was designated for redevelopment. There was a compulsory purchase order on our property.

In other words the council was going to pay us a nominal fee for our house and find us a council house to move into.

Whilst still living at Garden Street, I recall walking down a street with Kelly and her daughter, on the way to her parent's home one Sunday afternoon, when I saw two men dressed in suits heading for a building on the other side of the street.

One of the men turned looked straight at me and said 'why don't come in?' I had walked past that building many times before and never realised it was a Pentecostal Church.

I almost went with him, it would have only taken another word of encouragement and I would have gone in. I was so desperate to find the meaning of life, and I sensed that there was something different about these guys – something

good and godly, and it was only much later that I found out what it was.

New Home

We received compensation money for the house and moved across town to Windermere Close. It was a very pleasant property, newly built with a good size lounge, hallway, open staircase leading up to the landing, two bedrooms and bathroom

The compensation money we received didn't go too far once we had kitted out the house and spent a large amount on nights out in the pubs, we certainly like to go out for a drink.

If life was not going to well for Kelly she would take off to her family in Carlisle where she had an older sister and brother. I went with her on a couple of occasions staying at her sisters' home. When she went out on a drinking session with her family she invariably came back in a stinking temper with a foul mouth, upsetting Lindsay. On one of the nights out she got into a fight and finished up throwing a beer bottle through the pub window.

This was typical Kelly; she always seemed to be the instigator and didn't have to be drunk to do this.

Kelly herself told me about the time before we were married when she jumped over a bar and kicked the landlord of the pub between his legs for saying something, which she objected to, about her dad.

Her dad was a 'hawker' and had his own hand cart which he had built. He spent most of the day travelling around Blackburn looking for anything he could sell at the scrap yard.

I heard once that he had tried to break up an empty gas bottle which he found on some spare ground, it exploded and hit his leg. He dragged himself to the scrap yard then made his way home only to find out that he had actually broken his leg, he was a man of grit and no mistake.

On one occasion we were celebrating Lindsay's birthday and had hired the upper room of the Balaclava Pub. During the proceedings as I was sitting upstairs I watched Kelly come to the top of the steps walk across to me.

'I'm sorry for what I am about to do Vinnie', then she punched me hard, her fist hitting me at the side of my head next to my eye.

My head spun side ways, everything went black for a few seconds, I felt blood tricking down the side of my face. I was totally mystified as to why she had done this. By this time she was making her way back down stairs, I got up and followed her to find out 'why'.

When I came down some of the guests held me back from going to where she was. Now whether they thought I was going to retaliate I don't know but that would have been the farthest thing from my mind.

I tried all the more to force my way through but was overwhelmed by the number of men pushing me back. I thought they are keeping me from my wife; became frantic and screamed her name.

She thought they were hurting me and came over telling them to let go of me, so I embraced her and held her tightly.

Finally when we talked, she told me that somebody had said that I was going to fight her dad, this was a totally ridiculous story, but she idolised him.

Kelly's mum was a small skinny woman; she was constantly telling her to leave me, that she shouldn't have married me in the first place.

She was, in all probability, correct, but I never took to her.

My initial impression of her brother was that he was a James Cagney type character - he was another drinker, and seemed to be a very angry man, who was always arguing.

I remember an occasion when he returned to his own home, where we were staying on a visit, and started an argument which grew louder and louder, wakening Lindsay, who became so upset that we had to leave and spend the night at Kelly's sister's home.

I only met him a few times so he might have been a good man, on other occasions.

The main problem was Kelly and I were never friends; we never had this type of relationship. I had also backed away from my family and friends during these times, because on the rare occasion when I did go out to see them a massive argument with her followed.

This situation caused me to be isolated from those I had been close to, so I became very lonely.

I was physically strong and athletic but over a period of time I became run down and thin, the spark had gone from me.

Chapter 6

The Demon Drink

My drinking got worse and responsibilities began to go out of the window. I took on a 'pity me' attitude, started going into work late and sneaking out early, until eventually after a number of warnings I was sacked.

This in itself caused our family life to deteriorate, bills were not getting paid, and we had no spare money.

A man called to collect payment for a carpet which we had bought on higher purchase.

We hid behind the door and wouldn't let him in, so he shouted through the letter box 'I know you're in there', then went on his way.

We lived on the bread line, and had very little money to spend on food, so occasionally Kelly took Lindsay to her mum's and while she was there the little one got fed.

Then she became pregnant with her second child, our daughter, much to her mothers horror.

Things got worse; I was getting sent to different employers by the job centre staff. One job was sweeping the streets which didn't last too long. I had a contraption which comprised of two metal bins fastened in a frame with wheels, but I would hide the sweeper up a back alley and take off for the day.

Then I got another job at John Baines a textile mill, which lasted a little longer, however this starting and

stopping jobs became the pattern of my working career; I was building up a really good C.V. – I don't think.

I had become an emotional wreck, lost all motivation, especially on the occasions when Kelly would use her tongue like a whip and threatened me with her family if I did anything to her. I was not a violent man by nature and would never think of perpetrating any harm to Kelly or Lindsay.

Regrets

There was only one time when I did hit her, immediately regretted it and swore I would never do it again. We had left Lindsay at her mum's and gone for a night out meeting a stranger who said he had nowhere to sleep that night. Kelly invited him back to our house, and then she said he was staying the night.

I was blazing mad and with a sharp discourse ordered him out, but she insisted that he stayed and wouldn't back down. We must have been screaming at each other oblivious to this poor guy so he took off.

We continued to argue with raised voices, she was threatening me with her family as usual. There was a single can of lager left on the plastic four ring holder next to Kelly, she looked at it and then she hooked her finger through one of the rings and threw it towards me, but I moved to one side, the can slightly grazing the side of my head.

She then started breaking ornaments, threw the settee onto its side, shouting abuse in my face about my family until I could stand it no longer. I lashed out with the palm of my hand hitting her on the side of her face knocking her 'for a six'.

The look on her face was one of total shock and astonishment, because I had hurt her. I thought, this is it now, her family of tough guys are surely going to come and give me the hiding of my life, but this time she had taken me beyond my limits.

I'm not sure how we made it through the night but we did, and were still together in the morning.

I had never shown violence to Kelly before or after this incident, but from all accounts this seemed to be the type of character she was attracted to.

Her previous partner, Lindsay's dad, apparently was Romany and a violent man. She once told me that he had driven his transit van onto the pavement and tried to run her over, and I know that the guy that came after me was also a violent man.

Kelly had problems with her eyesight for some time after that, and I was very sorry for what I had done, but the trouble with hitting someone is, you cannot take it back.

This behaviour was all off the back of drinking bouts, what depths I had reached, and I thought this was the worst time of my life, but no - worse had yet to come.

At one time we were experiencing problems with our benefit money and no matter how many phone calls I made, and promises of payments given from the job centre, nothing arrived, leaving us in 'dire straights'.

Kelly was so stressed out that it caused her to have a threatened miscarriage, so she had to go into hospital.

She insisted that Lindsay went to stay with her mum whilst she was in there, and said 'you will never see your daughter again', this meant our unborn one as well as Lindsay.

A Way Out

After a night of drinking I was making my way home heading down Bolton Road when I stopped to look in a jewellers shop, and thought if I could get a lot of money then Kelly would be happy and we could pay off all our debts.

I decided to go around to the back of the shops and break in, so I made my way around the row of terraced shops and down the back alley.

The problem was, when I looked at the shops from the back, it was hard to tell which one was the jewellers, so I estimated where it would be and climbed over the back yard wall making my way to the rear of the shop.

At the rear of the property I saw a brick lean-to and a set of steps heading down to a door which was securely fastened. There was also a window, which when I put my hand on it I thought this feels like Perspex and if I push it hard enough the whole window will shove through in one piece.

I had to move some bicycles which were on the steps and in my way, so my hands got covered, in black grease.

Then I placed my right arm on the wall and my left hand on the window, and began to apply pressure slowly.

I could feel it giving way, then to my horror I heard it smashing and realised that it was glass not Perspex. I felt part of it going into my wrist. A light came on inside the property, and I thought there is somebody in there and they have heard the noise.

I ran to the top of the steps and looked at my wrist only to see a triangular piece of glass, about four inches in length, sticking out of it.

I caught hold of it with my right hand and pulled it out, the blood came shortly after as I ran from the property.

I thought if the police come they will approach down the back alley, so I went to the yard wall between this property and next door throwing myself over it.

I ran across that yard and did the same thing, but when I came to the third yard, at the top next to the building I saw a massive greyhound. It looked a little startled when it saw me, but I didn't hang around for it to react, I cleared the wall in one jump.

Using this method of going from property to property I finally reached the end of the terrace and made my way back onto Bolton Road.

By this time my shirt was red with blood, I felt as if I was in some great Hollywood epic movie, rain coming down, and my wrist pressed against my chest to try and stop the flow of blood.

Arriving home I tried to wash the wound but became faint and had to go into the lounge collapsing onto the settee. I can't go to the hospital I thought, if I do the police will arrest me.

In the early hours of the following day when I looked at the wound it reminded me of cooked sausages in the frying pan, split down the middle. The insides of my wrist were bulging out, so I made my way to the Royal Infirmary and a doctor proceeded to treat the wound. He stressed how close I had come to severing the main artery then stitched it up, the police never came.

I could see the inquisitive look on the nurse's face as she worked with the doctor.

'Where did all the black grease come from?'

I explained that I was repairing my push bike and had put some oil in a milk bottle to use on this repair, when I slipped and fell it broke, cutting my wrist. I was becoming a great liar.

You might have gathered by now that the bicycle shop was next to the jewellers – I'll let you guess which I had tried to break into?????

I went to visit Kelly in hospital to explain what had taken place. She informed me that when she came out she planned on going to stay at her mum's, the next time I went to visit this is what had happened, she had left without informing me.

I never saw her or Lindsay for a long time, I knew I wouldn't be welcome at her mum's; in fact she stayed there until she went back into hospital for the birth of our daughter.

Suicide

I spent a lot of time on my own in the house thinking about my life and how I had lost everything.

There seemed to be no reason to carry on, so I got a bottle of aspirin and swallowed all of them. The only thing I succeeded in doing was to upset my stomach making myself feel 'as sick as a dog'. Is it any wonder that I came to hate the taste of aspirin from then on?

I was out one night and met a lad call Jimmy who had been in a higher year than I at school; he was paralysed down one side of his body.

I looked at him in shock and said 'what happen to you Jimmy?'

'Drink', he said and asked if I had any money.

Telling him that I had only got enough for myself I walked away, looked back at his sorry state and thought, I didn't know drink could do that to a person; but it didn't stop me heading for self destruction.

On another occasion, Paul and I went into Blackburn town and by the end of the evening I was full, not only of drink but also self-pity.

I made my way home and blocking the doors with blankets turned the gas cooker on and lay down.

I thought Paul had gone to his own home, but in fact he was too drunk to find his way to Feniscowles so made his way to mine because it was near to the town centre. Arriving before me he had gone upstairs to bed, but in the early hours of the morning wanting a drink made his way downstairs.

Later that morning he said 'I had a bottle of your milk last night; I think I deserved it because I saved your life. I saw you lying in your sleeping bag in the kitchen in front of the cooker with the gas switched on. It was as if you were trying to kill yourself'.

Now, looking back, I can see myself, and it seems as if it was a different person who was doing this, and I think what an awful thing to have done. This is an instance of God watching over me.

I told him that I was at the end of my rope and couldn't take any more, left the house and headed for the canal.

Unbeknown to me Paul phoned the police and told them that his older brother had left his house and was going to commit suicide, also giving them our parents address.

The Police arrived at my parents home and told them that they believed their eldest son was about to commit suicide, how devastating must that have been for them.

As this was taking place I had sobered up somewhat and was walking along the side of the canal, when to my left I saw a large mill, constructed in red brick, and next to me was a hole in the fence. I decided to go and explore thinking the premises would be locked and secured.

I went through, climbed the black metal fire escape at the back of the building, finding an open window I entered into a large warehouse with boxes stacked to the right and left in rows.

The place seemed deserted, it was as quiet as could be, and no-one was around.

I spotted a small room at the bottom of the warehouse, so went to investigate. I could see through the glass door that it was a food store with catering cans of peas and spam.

With a little force the lock broke and the door pushed in quite easily. I grabbed two of the cans of peas, rushed to the fire escape unlocking the door, went out and threw the cans down onto the grass.

I was expecting someone to come at any minute, but I went back for more taking about eight tins altogether, and then leaving the building I hid them in some long grass and ran home to get my sports bag.

I knew this bag was large enough for me to collect and carry them home and they wouldn't be seen. When I arrived back at my house Paul was still there and told me he had called the police.

'Why did you have to go and do that?' I asked. He replied saying he thought I was going out to kill myself. I said listen 'I've got to go out again and will be back in about forty minutes.'

He asked where I was going, but I said I would explain when I returned, and left the house at speed, coming back with my sports bag full of catering cans of peas and spam.

I don't know what happened about the police report as they never followed it up.

Chapter 7

Life of Crime

Kelly gave birth to a beautiful baby girl and we gave her the name which I had chosen, Kirsty. Coming out of hospital she went to stay at her mum's and then went to Carlisle to show the baby to her family.

The visit, as always included drinking and fighting, and when she returned to Blackburn she stayed not at our home but with her mum, coming back after a row with her parents but returned to their home after a few months – again after quarrelling with me, so once again I was home alone.

Occasionally I went to the Catholic Club attached to Saint Alban's church to play snooker, where I remember seeing a small built, white haired Irish priest who was a whisky drinker.

I thought, how can this man, with a drink problem as bad as that, be a priest, oblivious to my own drink problem. This took me back to the time I had to make a decision regarding the priesthood, but those days were long gone, now I could never enter the priesthood.

I had visited the club one evening and noticed that there was a window to the side of the building and thought that I would leave the window off the latch but make it look like it was locked.

I came back when the place was in darkness, bringing pliers, screw driver and wearing gloves.

I cut through the wire fence next to the school yard; I'm not sure why when I could have quite easily have walked around it and down the pathway at the side, probably

because in my drunken state, I was going through one of my Hollywood epics again.

When I got inside the club I broke into the light metre which was for the snooker table, it only had forty pence in it, users paid two pence a time for the light, and it wasn't always used.

I attempted to prise open the double doors leading to the hallway where the 'one armed bandits' stood, this led into the bar in the next room.

I heard this high pitched noise and ignored it for a while, until it finally dawned on me that I had set off the burglar alarm system.

You fool I thought, I could now hear the police siren, I panicked, I had to get out as quickly as possible, but when I was trying to get out of the small games room window a very large police man grabbed my wrist and his colleague soon joined him, pulling me out.

'Ha, Ha a glove man' he said, put my hands behind my back, handcuffed me and took me to Blackburn Police Station. I was put in the cells over night and a detective spent time questioning me asking about the other crimes I had committed.

These crimes were call TIC's which means Taken into Consideration because the police had to clear up as many crimes as they could from their records.

This detective wanted me to admit to crimes I knew nothing about so that they could be cleared; of course I refused to do this.

He then took me to the bicycle shop next door to the jewellers on Bolton Road.

The owner had reported a suspected burglary saying his back window had been broken but nothing was taken, this was on the records.

I had to go before the magistrates to deal with this crime and all the others I had admitted to. Finally I got released on police bail, and had to appear in court at a later date after reports from the probation office.

This was something else I had to tell Kelly which I was not looking forward to.

I'll give Kelly her due she appeared in court to support me. It went in my favour and I received two years probation, but was told that when this was completed the penalty for all my crimes would be paid.

I had to attend regular meetings, at the Probation Office. These were the equivalent to the AA meetings, no not Automobile Association, but Alcoholics Anonymous.

Homeless

It was after this that Kelly decided to leave me again and go back to her mum's because there were continual arguments.

We had not been paying the rent, and debts were mounting up yet again, however I was still able to see Kirsty and take her out for the day.

I decided to sell all the furniture in our home to a second hand shop and pay some of the bills. The only difficulty with this was, when a man with a drink problem gets money and decides to go for a night out; you can predict what will happen next, there is nothing parted quicker than a fool from his money.

The following day Kelly's dad called at the house, he looked around in amazement.

'Where's all the furniture gone Vinnie?'

Needless to say the conversation was brief.

The next thing I knew was the council ended my tenancy, giving the house to Kelly and the girls.

Sleeping Rough

I went home to my parents for a time but because I caused trouble there, had to leave and finished up walking the streets.

I had a sleeping bag and went to spend the night at the 'old mansion' where we had played for many a happy hour in our youth.

It was in ruins now and had no roof, so I decided to sleep in the cellar which was just a hole full of rubble. It was as black as black could be and very eerie so I changed my mind and went to the park near my parent's home and slept on an old park bench.

When I heard the traffic building up and people talking I knew it was time to make a move, so I hid my sleeping bag and walked the streets all day until dusk returning to find it had been taken.

The following night I went back to Garden Street, to the terraced house where I once lived, which now stood derelict.

There was easy access to the property even though it was boarded up downstairs some of the boards had been ripped off and there were also broken windows upstairs.

The rooms were strewn with rubble, I took some wallpaper, which was peeling off, and used it to cover myself as it was a very cold night.

When I awoke the following morning I was freezing, the cold had gone through to my bones and I couldn't get warm. I thought to myself that I had better try and get indoors to sleep or I would die of cold.

I spent most of the day looking for somewhere to stay and eventually found an advert in a shop window that said 'Room to Let'.

I rang the number and arranged to meet the landlady that evening at the property on Cherry Street.

The room was a shared bedroom with two beds, one at each side of the room. I said 'is this all you have', to which she replied 'yes this is it' and told me what the rent would be.

It was the best I could get as I didn't want to spend another night in the freezing cold, so I took it.

When Mammy and Daddy found out about my difficulties they decided to let me come home.

I slept in my brother's room on some foam cushions which Mammy packed away every morning.

Chapter 8

Separation

I went back to see Kelly at Windermere Close, she talked with me at the door telling me that the girls were with her mum. We were officially separated by now and she said that she wanted a divorce.

I found out by chance from a neighbour she was seeing someone else.

'I don't know what they get up to but I hear her screaming and loud banging noises like he is throwing her downstairs. I know when he is there because he has a push bike and leaves it outside the front of the house with a combination lock attached'.

My imagination ran wild, and hatred built up in my heart I went around to Windermere Close one night and waited around the corner of a neighbouring property.

I saw the push bike and waited for him to come out. I'm not sure what I was going to do, but it got later and colder then began to rain. So I made my way home.

This definitely is an instance of 'there but for the Grace of God' – things could have gone horribly wrong, as I had become a very mean person with no regard for anyone else.

One night I lay on the floor in my brother's bedroom and cried in despair, tears welled up as my family slept on.

My eyes were permanently red, I had been crying inside for some years and when my heart finally broke the floods of tears came.

I wanted to die, rejected by my wife, loneliness like I never knew existed accompanied by self pity caused me in

despair to silently cry out from my inmost being 'God help me!'

The emotion of loneliness was tremendous, living in the same house, loving someone, but having that love rejected.

Looking back I realize that I neither knew nor experienced what love was really all about.

Rejection is one of the main causes of loneliness and for two years it was like having my heart slowly ripped in two. I had a wife and a two year old step-daughter as well as my own child, yet I was lonely, I loved Kelly but we were never friends – which is very important.

At that moment I saw what appeared to be a white light coming down from a distance and then going again, did God hear me in my desperation; I fell into a deep sleep.

The next day I went and bought a New Testament and I started reading it beginning at Matthew.

Job Prospects

Things began to improve slightly. I got a job interview for a night porter at the Saxon Inn on the outskirts of Blackburn.

I was required to wear a black tie for the interview and one of my brother's said he would lend me his. When it was time to set off for the interview I went upstairs to put it on, but it was missing. Mammy found me a tie which had black and silver diagonal bars so I had to make do with that.

To my amazement I got the job and was able to start the following Monday after giving my promise to wear a white shirt, black tie and black trousers.

I kept reading the New Testament, although I couldn't understand a lot of it, but my drinking continued.

There was a big Asian lad working alongside me and he managed to get hold of the night manager's keys one evening.

The bar had been locked up for the night but he unlocked it and put the keys back on the manager's desk without him knowing.

When he left at around one o'clock in the morning we had an open bar for the rest of the night, until he returned.

By the time morning came I was drunk. I had put a handful of cigars down my shirt front, and hidden a bottle of martini in the piano in the concert room so that when I went on the nightly inspection and had to go past the piano I could have a swig.

The night manager returned around 6am and was reading his newspaper.

'Whatever you do don't go near him because you're drunk'.

I made a cup of tea and took it to him.

The cup and saucer rattled, my colleague stood wide eyed looking on in panic, but as it happened the manager said thanks without even lifting his head out of the paper, much to his relief.

I was in the cloakroom when one of the porters from the day shift came in.

I dropped something on the floor and as I went to pick it up the cigars from inside my shirt fell out onto the floor. I picked them up in a hurry and looked into his face, but he didn't say anything.

During my time working there I saw Harold Wilson in his light colour Macintosh, Freddy Truman with his big beer

belly, and I carried Tommy Steel's bags to his room getting his autograph for my Asian colleague. Noel Edmonds came with great pomp in his helicopter; I think he was expecting a lot of attention which he didn't get.

I also remember Roy Castle staying there; he had a great disposition and was performing in a Jazz Quartet.

My colleague said, on the evening of the performance, 'I've been up to the concert room so why don't you go and have a look at the show it's really lively'.

I remember looking into the room and seeing the Jazz Quartet through a wall of smoke, they were playing Alexander's Rag Time Band, it sounded great.

I had many a talk with my friend about life in general, telling him that whatever any body did to us, we should be able to find it within ourselves to forgive them, even if they raped our wives.

He was really taken aback 'if you believe like that you should become a priest'.

Well I thought that's the way it should be according to the New Testament, but, do I believe it.

Chapter 9

Revelation

One day I was leaving my parents house, closing the front gate and about to walk down the street when I looked up and saw the judgement seat of Almighty God it seemed to fill the sky.

I came under enormous conviction and a great dread came over my life. I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I was heading for hell; I was filled with trepidation and knew I had to get right with God.

I had been reading the New Testament and knew that the answer was to be found there.

On Wednesday the May 6th 1981 a thought came to me that I had to walk to Rome to find God, and this was impressed upon my heart.

From a youth I had been taught that this was the seat of power and guidance towards God through the Pope.

It was a big step of faith to leave everything, but I was searching for God, and at that time believed that there was no better place to find Him than in the Vatican City of Rome.

So I stepped out, if there was a God, I believed He would keep me, if not I would be lost.

On Friday May 9th I was ready to go. I paid out my board money to Mummy as usual, and paid other bills leaving me with twenty eight pounds and a little small change.

That night my father had a black-out, he was dying of cancer although nobody knew it at that time, but I knew that on the Saturday morning I had to go.

I set off at 6 am with my small rucksack, an old PVC black jacket, Bible, umbrella and wearing a parka-anorak.

Warmth and Encouragement

Telling no-one about my proposed journey I left Feniscowles heading for Haslingden, I must have walked over twenty miles that first day. Some time in the afternoon I was passing through the small town of Bacup when I saw a church building and went in out of the rain. Shortly afterwards some young people came in to rehearse for their evening meeting which would be at 7:30pm. Each with a friendly smile came and spoke to me, I guess they were thinking - I wonder if he has come to ask about the evening meeting.

They invited me to join in with what they were doing and I was really surprised and my heart was glad because someone was concerned about me, a stranger.

Later one of the girls, called Rachel, invited me home for tea to her father's house, this was really exciting. I remember some of the names of those young people. There was John, George and Denise and an older lady who had a false leg, and of course the Rev. Harris, Rachel's father.

After tea we talked and I told them, about my walking to Rome to find God to which they listened intently.

At the evening meeting, John spoke about the love of God. One of the things he said was 'the Lord will fill you full of the Holy Spirit just like filling a cup, and when you think your cup is full He will fill it even more and you will wonder when He's going to stop, but He won't, even when your cup overflows'.

This portrayed a wonderful picture to me – surely this was what I needed in my life – but I also knew I had to press on with my journey.

After the meeting everyone said good-bye and the young people asked me where I was staying that night.

I said and was getting bed and breakfast somewhere, although I had little money for my boat fare and food let alone bed and breakfast, I told them this so that they would not detain me. It would have been nice to stay, but I knew I had to go on.

Cold and Uncomfortable

I went out into the night, and the rain came down.

Walking out of Bacup I left the street lights behind and walked on passing through a town that was hidden in a valley of hills called Todmorden. Here I stopped in a bus shelter and tried to sleep, but was too cold and uncomfortable, so carried on. In the early morning I came to Halifax and stopping there for a short rest, sat on a loading bay down a side street before heading for Leeds.

Answered Prayers

As I went on I asked God for the rain to stop so that I might lie down and rest in some nearby field. Later that Sunday afternoon the ground had dried up quite a lot, and suddenly I realized that my prayer had been answered.

The sun was shining brightly, it was nice and warm, thanking God I climbed over a fence and found a spot next to a stream, drank a bottle of milk, ate some brown bread I had purchased earlier that day, and after about half an hour or so I was ready to set off again.

I stopped to ask two ladies, who were sitting at a bus stop, the direction to Leeds and I told them that I was walking to Rome to find God. They were quite taken aback, I'm sure they had never been told that before. They gave me

directions and then asked if I would say a prayer for them when I got to Rome.

I said that I would and it felt kind of good that they should ask this of me; after all they didn't know what a bad man I was.

My feet began to get sore, so much so that I had to stop as I approached Leeds, sitting in a field, next to a bill-board; I took off my shoes and socks.

From this position I had a spectacular view of the city with its impressive skyscrapers extending heavenwards. After eating some more bread and having a short rest, I swapped my socks around and began walking again. Surprisingly swapping my socks did make a difference.

Guardian Angel

Passing through Leeds I came to the York road. It was about 11 o'clock at night, I was tired and my legs were giving way. I lay down on the grass verge next to a hedge and tried to get some rest, but was very cold; there had been a shower of rain so the grass was still wet.

I asked God, for somewhere to sleep.

Getting up I walked on, tired, cold and wet. Then I saw a half-way house, which is, a coffee bar for travellers and particularly wagon drivers. There were a number of old cars and vans enclosed by a fence, and also a single transit van on its side outside the fence, right away I knew God had provided this for me to sleep in. There was a hole in its side which the wind was blowing through and inside there were lots of old clothes, so I used them to block the hole up, and finding a piece of old rope I attached it to the back door and pulled it closed after I was settled inside.

At about two or three o'clock in the morning I awoke (I never went into a deep sleep on my journey) and saw a man sitting at my feet. He looked to be in his early to mid forties and was wearing a check jacket.

My immediate thought was how he'd got in as I had tied the door up from the inside. I sat up, reached out to him and said 'ee how are you?'

He smiled at me then his image faded away and vanished..... There was no fear about this situation, but a peace.

Later when I was giving testimony about my experiences mature Christians and Ministers explained that this man was probably my Guardian Angel, watching over, protecting and guiding me.

After he vanished I lay back down and went to sleep to wake a couple of hours later to the sound of dogs barking in the distance, I was feeling refreshed and I knew I had to be on my way.

'One-Eyed Jack'

Arriving in York I asked at the railway station for the price of the ferry from Hull to Europort in Holland, they told me that it was £26:40p. Looking at my money I saw I had only £24 left, but having just read in the New Testament that the Lord would provide, decided to press on and not turn back.

I phoned my sister Molly in Blackburn, told her that I was walking to Rome to find God and to tell Mammy and Daddy I was alright. She said that all the family were really worried because no one had heard from me for three days.

I went into a nearby park to eat my brown bread and drink my milk, throwing some of it to the birds thinking I was a little goody, goody.

I knew that I had to press on to Hull, believing what I had just read in the New Testament that God would provide for my needs.

When I had finished my meal and rested I thought of asking several people directions to Hull.

I walked over to a man laid down on the grass sunbathing, with his bicycle lying next to him. I was about to ask him directions but for some strange reason thought no not him, and walked away heading for the park entrance.

I saw a couple in their twenties sitting on a park bench and veered toward them when again I felt the same thing, don't ask them.

By now I had reached the park entrance and looking up and down the road, saw an older man and woman, and knew they were the ones I had to ask for directions.

They were directing me to the bus station, until I explained that I was walking to Rome to find God.

The man, who later told me he was called 'One-Eyed Jack' and used to be a boxer losing one of his eyes in a match, pulled a £5 note out of his pocket to give to me.

I refused at first 'Sir you don't know me, why should you give me money', but they both insisted and I took it with a grateful heart.

They walked with me to the city outskirts and pointed the way, Jack stressed that it was a long way to Hull.

When I got out of the city I could see the open road spreading out before me like a giant roller coaster going over hill after hill on into the horizon. It was a wonderful sunny day; lush green fields interspersed with trees filled my view.

I contemplated the event which had just taken place and realised once again God had fulfilled His word which I had read in the New Testament which said that if you trust in Him he will provide for your needs, the five pound note from Jack - God had provided yet again.

Chapter 10

Vision and Provision

I kept my eyes on the horizon. When I reached it could see the next horizon just as long, just as far, but there seemed to be an urgency to reach my destination whatever or wherever that might be. I didn't take too many breaks, when I did I would read another portion from the New Testament.

The next stop was Hull; this was about 40 miles away and would take me about 12 hours to reach.

Ten miles out of Hull I found a red and gold cigarette lighter at the side of the road; it was working so I put it in my rucksack.

As I approached Hull I stopped at a junction with a set of traffic lights and was not sure which way to go, I didn't want to head into the city centre because I assumed that the ferry port was located on the coast. I looked to my left I saw an elderly lady tending her small terraced house garden; I approached her and asked the way to the ferry port. She was glad to give me directions and pointed her finger instructing me which turns I had to take. She stressed that it was a long way more than once, saying I would need to get a bus.

I explained that I had just walked over a hundred miles, so three did not seem like a lot in comparison.

Walking on I smiled to myself, three miles, but that three miles became the longest of my journey.

I Missed It!

There was an urgency to get to the ferry port by seven thirty, but my legs were so tired, I was ready to literally collapse in the street.

Just ahead of me on the other side of the road I spotted a stone bridge with a style to the right. There I found a sheltered wooded area where I rested just long enough to recover my strength.

When I did reach the ferry port at about seven forty five I saw the ferry heading out to sea.

I remember speaking to a police man on duty at the entrance, he had a Liverpudlian accent.

I told him I was going to Rome to find God; he was impressed but informed me that the next ferry wouldn't be due until the following day.

I was extremely disappointed that I would have to wait for so long, so decided to buy fish and chips to cheer myself up. On the way to the shop I found a large sheet of polythene which I put into my rucksack.

Sitting on an overgrown bank by the canal I ate my fish and chips, then laid back to rest my weary body.

As I looked at the clouds they appeared to take on the form of Jesus, I could clearly see the colour of His skin and the clothes He wore.

In the background there appeared to be a gladiator in blue standing against the high wall. I got the impression that it was the time when Jesus was on trial, then, as it appeared, it faded away, and much as I tried to bring it back or imagine the scene again, I could not, not even to this day; neither do I know the significance of it.

I wrapped myself in the polythene and went to sleep under a nearby tree the next day I returned to the ferry port and purchased a one way ticket to Europort in Holland.

I went to the washroom to use the facilities; looking in the mirror at my face I was horrified and so ashamed. I was dirty from sleeping rough but I had no way of knowing this until then.

I pictured the faces of the two women who had sold me the ticket, dressed smartly in their navy two piece suits with red and white accessories.

What must they have thought?

The man I sat next to on the ferry was called Lester and can you believe this, he lived in Halton-on-Lune at Lancaster and knew my brother-in-law.

He was travelling with his bicycle and was scheduled to go across Europe camping, but planning to do bread and breakfast if the weather turned bad.

He asked me if I was going on holiday and if so where to, so I told him that I was walking to Rome to find God which left him speechless for a time.

He then asked me how many miles I had travelled, and when we calculated my previous day's journey it worked out about thirty seven miles. He said 'wow! That's more than I travelled - and I've got a bike'.

The only thing I had left to eat was two Mars Bars and as I didn't know if I was entitled to the onboard meal I did not dare queue with the other passengers.

It would have been most embarrassing if I had to pay, because I only had three English pennies in my pocket, so I decided to be content with eating one of my Mars Bars.

The Dutch Experience

I arrived in Holland knowing I had only a one-way ticket, but I was trusting in God. All I had in my pockets on arriving was a Mars Bar and three pennies.

As I set off walking I decided to take small bites from it one at a time to make it last all day, but before the morning was over, guess what, yes the last Mars Bar was gone.

Later that day I was hungry so asked God to provide some food. Sometime later, in the afternoon, to my amazement I saw a packet of unopened biscuits lying on the grass verge.

I could hardly believe my eyes; there they were in a clear film wrapper twenty one biscuits, it was as if they had intentionally been placed there. I knew God had done it, so I really thanked Him, picked them up and went on.

I thought to myself twenty one biscuits, I will eat three a day and there are seven days to get to Rome, but by the evening guess what, yes, you're right all the biscuits had gone.

I recently estimated the mileage from where I was in Rotterdam to get to Rome, was 1,132 miles. Had I been able to walk 40 miles each day it would have taken me 28 days, so to think I could do it in 7 was unrealistic.

Flatlands

Holland unlike England uses most of its land for growing crops and every field has a ditch around it, so the places where I could rest were far and few between.

As the sun was going down I spotted what I can only describe as a concrete ring at the side of the road, measuring

about eight feet in circumference with a surrounding wall whose height was approximately three feet and the middle of the ring was grassed.

I climbed inside, wrapping myself in the polythene, I was protected from the wind and had a great nights sleep.

The following day as I was walking I noticed a man in a garden burning wood; he had a large hut with a big white rabbit in it.

About three or four hours later I spotted another man in his garden burning wood and he too had a large hut with a big white rabbit.

I thought what a coincidence, until it dawned on me that I had walked in a circle.

The last thing I wanted to do was loose time; I was so annoyed with myself.

The problem was that because the land was so flat I couldn't get my bearings, there were no land marks.

I carried on with my journey and in the early afternoon I was getting hungry and found myself once again asking God for some food. Walking on I looked to the side of the footpath and saw a mallard duck with green and purple ringed feathers around it neck lying on the grass verge, dead.

I assumed that after being hit by a car it had landed there, I didn't think anything about it at first and was going to walk past, until it was impressed upon me to pick it up.

I did and put it in a carrier bag in my rucksack, thinking what on earth can I do with this, as there would be nowhere secluded to cook this due to the flat terrain.

In the distance I could see, over to my left there was a large bridge, spanning a branch of the river Ryan, and on the far side there were some trees. I went over and as I came down the banking on the right hand side to the water's edge, I

could see an area with sand and bushes, one of the few overgrown places.

I approached it and found that in the middle there was a clearing where I could build a fire, lighting it with the lighter I had found outside of Hull.

Collecting the wood I noticed that there were white and green twigs, I do not know why, but I found my self throwing the green ones away only keeping the white ones. When I lit the fire I could see why, there was hardly any smoke and what smoke there was blew out low over the river and seemed to dissipate quite quickly. I cooked the duck and had meat. As I was eating the duck, I thought God has done it again.

After resting and reading the New Testament I got back onto the main road and needed to find some where to sleep for the night. As the sun was going down I saw a small housing estate, with a group of trees, which I was really pleased about because I needed a pee.

When I entered I saw what looked like a rubbish container but on closer examination found it to be a den which the local children had made out of wood and it had a piece of carpet inside. I climbed through the small opening and used my umbrella to stop the draft, I had a sound sleep.

My trusty umbrella protected me, not only from the wind and rain but also from the sun. I had been walking from morning to night and on sunny days could feel my face burning, so was glad of the shade it provided.

I'm not sure what those people seeing me with an opened umbrella on a hot sunny day would think.....probablyEnglishman?????

Chapter 11

The Wrong Way

I arose as dawn broke and set off on my way before anyone came and I was discovered. I was still struggling to get my bearings and decided to follow the sun. Knocking on someone's door I asked directions to Rome.

The older man and woman who came to the door had to get their teenage daughter to translate, they could not speak English. She told me I should head for a place called Breda, which was nearby.

I'm not sure what they thought, it must have seemed odd a stranger knocking on their door and asking for directions to Rome!

All day I had been following the sun and continued to do so, forgetting it moved round, so I went the wrong way. After going four or five miles I knew I had missed the sign for Breda and must turn around and head back.

I was very frustrated not just for going the wrong way but losing all that time. I had a short rest, ate some meat, read my New Testament and headed back. I felt desperate, because by this time my left ankle was swollen and I was limping.

I thought here I am in a strange county going around in circles and no way to get back home, once again, in great despair; I began to call on God for help.

God not Man

I got back onto the Breda road and had walked about five hundred yards when I saw a small green hatchback car with a man driving pull into the curb and stop.

Instinctively I knew that the car had stopped for me but I wasn't going to approach it, so walked past. A voice said something in Dutch, looking back I saw that he had leaned over his seat and wound down the passenger side window.

I came back and he spoke to me in Dutch, so peering through the open window I said 'I'm English'. He replied in broken English asking if I wanted a lift.

I thought for a moment, looking back from where I had just come, remembering that when I set off from England I had said I would walk all the way to Rome.

However considering that I had walked four or five miles the wrong way and back again, I said 'yes'; thanked him, got in, glad to sit on the comfy seat, enjoy the rest and have someone to talk to.

He told me his name was Gerrit and asked me if I was on holiday. Explaining that I was walking to Rome to find God I told him I had a Bible, whereupon he showed me his which was under the dashboard.

He asked me if I had heard the news that on the previous Wednesday the Pope had been shot and wounded.

He went on to explain that on May 13th thousands of people had been gathered in St. Peter's Square to witness the Pope driving through in his Pope Mobile and receive his blessing. Suddenly a gun was fired and four bullets struck the Pope, one hitting his right arm, one his little finger and two his stomach.

As people fell to their knees screaming unable to believe what was happening, he collapsed, and was quickly taken into the Vatican complex; before being rushed to the hospital where he underwent a five hour operation to save his life.

I was astounded at what had happened and replied that I had not heard, but as I said this I realised it was God I was searching for, not a man.

Friendship

Gerrit then asked me if I had ever visited a windmill. On discovering that I had only seen them at a distance, he offered to take me to see one close by which was owned by a friend of his.

I readily accepted and enjoyed the tour, especially standing on the wooden balcony about 20 feet up and seeing pear trees growing next to the mill.

We finished looking round and set off on our journey I thought to myself – what a kind man Gerrit is, there was something different about him, he reminded me of the Christians I had met at Christ Church in Bacup.

Approaching Breda he said, 'last time I was here I wanted a Chinese meal, but they make a meal for two people, and I was only one person'. Oh, no, I thought, he's going to ask me to have a Chinese meal with him, and I have only three English pennies.

He continued, 'How do you say in English, the treat is on me, Ya?'

I said 'YA'.

So we went into this 'posh' Chinese restaurant and ordered the meal for two, which was a variety of different dishes kept warm on a hotplate.

It took us about an hour and a half to finish during which time Gerrit asked me lots of questions. When we had finished he explained what had happened to him that day.

God's Instructions

He was on his way home to Utrecht and could have gone via Rotterdam or straight onto the motorway, but, the Lord had instructed him to go right out of his way and take the road to Breda, on this road he would see a man 'loopen' which means walking in Dutch - and to pick him up.

'Now I believe the Lord wants you to come with me' he said 'but if you think you should continue on to Rome, I will drive you as far as Antwerp'.

Conversion

Something was happening to me, there was a welling up inside my stomach and my eyes began to glisten. I told him that I knew I had to go with him as something was happening to me; his reply was he could see it in my eyes.

I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that God had sent Gerrit to get me. Travelling to Utrecht we looked at the horizon and saw the sun going down. 'Look the glory of God', he said referring to the splendid sunset.

When we arrived in Utrecht we went to a Christian cellar coffee bar where about 15 to 20 people had gathered. They had a game called shuttle buck and played music on guitars and sang along, what a wonderful atmosphere.

There was something different about these people, and they had a joy and peace about them which I didn't, but wanted.

Later Gerrit took me to his home and gave me a key saying my house is your house. I was overwhelmed to say the least; I thought how can anyone, trust me. As we talked he asked what I wanted and what I was looking for?

I told him plainly I was looking for God, he replied asking what was stopping me from giving my life to God. All night long this question was going through my mind - what is stopping me?

It was great to be able to have a shower, shave etc., and to sleep in a comfortable bed.

I thanked God for this, and I thanked Gerrit for his kindness, for as well as providing all this, he had noticed that there was a hole in the back of my jeans and brought out a new pair held them up and said 'look, these are just for you'.

The next day was Sunday the 17th of May nine days after I had set off on my quest to find God. Gerrit brought me to his Church to a meeting of about 250 to 300 Christians.

There seemed to be a collection of different instruments played by the music group.

The person playing the grand piano was a classical music teacher. There were drums, violins, a man playing a piano accordion and another who played the sweetest music on his trumpet.

Five or six men whistled the introduction to some of the songs, this had a haunting melody, and all in all, the entire atmosphere was heavenly. They were singing in Dutch of course and the words on the overhead projectors were Dutch, but I joined in the best that I could. Even though I had no

understanding of the Dutch language, I sang what was in my heart.

As they were praising God their praises seemed to ascend up in one accord and I knew it was there and then that I had to ask Jesus to come into my life.

Lifting up my hands I said 'Jesus come into my life' I said this out of my heart and meant it like nothing I had ever meant before.

At that precise moment I looked up into heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Although I had seen pictures of Him in my mind before, now I was experiencing Jesus for the very first time.

In wonderment I said to myself Jesus you're alive. Something happened inside; literally I felt all of the hurt being pushed out of me, from the top of my head, to the soles of my feet. As the hurt was leaving the love of Jesus was filling me, just like the cup overflowing (as John had said in Bacup).

My face lit up causing those Christians around to remark at the change. A well built elderly lady over to my right looked at me and said 'you are my brother now' and gave me a great big hug.

People were going out to the front of the church to be prayed for, I'd never seen anything like that before, I know it didn't happen in the Roman Catholic Church where I went, but I was feeling elated and went forward.

As the men laid hands on me and prayed a woman over to the right prophesied, she said it was as if I had been poisoned and my body was full of poison but now the Lord was drawing it out with a big syringe.

The whole day was wonderful, the people, the atmosphere, coming into a living relationship with Jesus.

Going Home

Back at Gerrit's home we talked into the early hours. I told him about my life in England and the events leading up to the present time.

He had befriended another young man some years earlier, asked him to stay with him, and he too had tried to gas himself. He had turned the gas on in the house and fallen into a deep sleep. When Gerrit arrived home he quickly turned it off and opened all the windows, but when he went into the kitchen he saw a lighted candle. By the laws of nature the house should have blown up, but he believed that the Lord had His hand on this young man and was going to use him, and that's why He protected him.

He went on to say that the Lord's hand was on me and that was why He had protected me from committing suicide. Then Gerrit had to decide what to do with me next, so the he spoke to the elders of his church.

Chapter 12

The Way Home

I spent the next few days at Gerrit's home where I had the run of the house; he was out most of the day, working at restoring windmills.

That's why he was so friendly with the miller at the windmill where he took me on a visit. During the day I investigated the centre of Utrecht. It was the fourth biggest city in the Netherlands and because of its central location, major train station and university, made it a very busy place. It also had a lot of bell towers, the tallest being the Dom Tower standing at a height of just over 367 feet; this could be seen from Gerrit's home.

Utrecht was a medieval city with a canal winding through, with cobbled narrow streets and back allies, raised footbridges decorated with black cast iron railings, and hundreds of bicycles wherever you went.

I noticed that when Gerrit parked his car he wedged pieces of dowelling on the release buttons inside his two front doors. This meant he could only enter through the hatch-back.

He did this because there was a lot of car crime in Holland especially in the big cities.

Gerrit was 37 years old and stood about five foot ten inches in height, was slim built, dressed mainly in brown corduroys, checked shirt with a tank top type pullover and brown leather shoes.

As we walked through Utrecht centre on an evening I found out a little more about him, he was single, had a great love for the Lord Jesus and for the nation of Israel, having

visited the Holy Land many times, he was due to visit again soon.

God's Servant

He seemed to be always looking and listening as if the Lord would speak to him and give him instructions which he was ready to instantly obey. This is what happened when he came looking for me, I was impressed, if only I could be used in this way.

As we walked through the city centre everything seem fresh and new, like I'd been given a fresh start.

There were lots of people sitting outside the bars drinking and talking. I was impressed with the street musicians who played a variation of stringed and fret board instruments, they sounded great.

After a pleasant evening walking and talking we returned to his home and talked some more. I asked about the unusual shape of the houses in Holland.

They had a narrow front but were built to extend quite a way back and went up three stories.

In Gerrit's house the kitchen, dining and shower room were on the ground level. A winding staircase led to two bedrooms, one on the first floor and one on the second, the lounge was on the first floor too.

Gerrit explained that people in Holland had to pay tax based on the size of the property frontage. This was why they had been built with a narrow front, but extended either backwards or upwards, or both.

Gerrit was an amazingly kind man with lots of friends and I had the opportunity of meeting some as he brought me

to the home of one of his Christian friends from the church fellowship.

There were about 12 to 15 people there and I recalled that some of them, including the classical pianist, had been at the Sunday service. He explained that Christians do not go to church; they are the church and wherever they meet that is the church.

The experience I'd felt at Bacup when I met the Christians and thought they had something I didn't; I now had for myself, and I knew it was a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now I had that relationship and felt one with all of them, even though in my Christian walk I was only a few days old.

They sang and talked and Gerrit translated, then we had tea and biscuits, it was a wonderful evening. What ever problems I still had in England I was ready to face them now.

The Missionary

A Dutch Christian missionary home on leave from Taiwan, came to Gerrit's home to see me. After talking to me, to make sure that my decision to follow Jesus was not simply a way out of my troubles; he said the church elders had decided to buy me a plane ticket from Holland to Manchester.

They had spoken to Christians in Bolton who had agreed to collect me from the airport and bring me home to Blackburn.

The arrangements were made that same week and I found it terribly hard to part from my new found friends.

The missionary who was called Koert de Zwaan brought me to the airport and bought me a typical Dutch meal

before I boarded the plane. For the short time that I knew Koert I found him to be a lovely, kind and generous man.

It took eight days to walk to Holland and considering the one hour time difference between countries you could say I was back in no time at all. The flight set off from Amsterdam Airport at 12 noon and arrived in Manchester at 12 noon.

This was the first time I'd flown. I had always thought I would relish this and had planned to savour it, when it happened; but meeting with the Lord Jesus had surpassed that expected experience.

The Lord spoke to me during the flight showing me how he was going to provide for me.

I came back to England nearly two weeks after leaving, a brand new man. There had been no need to continue walking to Rome, God had shown me that man made religion would never meet my needs – but a relationship with Him would.

Arriving Home

I came back to my parent's home and with great excitement explained everything which had taken place during the epic journey.

I thought everyone would be pleased to see me and supposed they would understand what had happened.

I had my Bible with me; it was the King James Version. One family member, I'm not sure who, said that it was a Protestant Bible, to which I tenaciously answered that it was the Word of God.

My father after hearing all I had to say looked and pointed straight at me,

'You are a thief!'

I thought to myself he's right and the only way I'm going to show them that I have changed is by a changed life.

I went to my 'local' to see my mates planning to explain what had happened. Buying half a larger, something I'd never done in years it was always a pint, I sipped it. I didn't usually do this either, half the glass would be emptied with the first mouthful.

One of the lads started telling a crude and dirty joke, I was disgusted, but thought two weeks ago it would have been me telling the joke!

I felt like Daniel in the lions den, so I put my glass on the bar still a little more than half full, left the pub never to return again. That was to be my last drink of alcohol for the next four years.

That evening I went to visit Molly one of my sisters. She told me later that when I arrived at her door my face was glowing as I told her about all the things that had happened to me on my journey.

I explained how during the church meeting in Utrecht I saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God full of grace and truth; and that He'd poured His love upon me forgiving me of all that I had done to offend Him. We call it sin.

I had come into contact with the King of Glory and now I knew that everything which was written in the Bible was absolutely true.

Truth from Error

After listening intently she blurted out 'I knew it, I knew it', it's the born again thing!'

She explained her story from when she was a teenager, became pregnant out of wedlock.

This was looked on with disdain by the Roman Catholic Church and Daddy and Mammy wouldn't have anything to do with her either.

After his birth her son was put up for adoption because she had no home of her own but was living in a hostel.

With one day to go one of our aunts telephoned. 'Go and get your baby you can come and stay with me'.

Throughout this situation Molly experienced difficult times, more than the majority of our family ever would, yet she is one of the kindest people I know and am proud to have her as my sister.

As we were speaking about my conversion she told me that for her Christmas was perhaps the most important event of the year, she really looked forward to it. One night, just before Christmas the previous year, on her way to bed a great fear came upon her. By the time she reached the top of the stairs she was in a cold sweat, and didn't know if she would make it through the night.

When she was living at the hostel the owner, a staunch Christian, had read the words of Jesus to her, where it said you must be born again, meaning in order to become a Christian you must be born of God.

'Vinnie this is what has happened to you'.

She was torn between Christianity and Daddy's staunch Roman Catholicism now she didn't know where she stood, even though she had previously made a profession of faith.

I told her in the New Testament Jesus said once you had given your life to Him nobody could pluck you out of the Father's hand.

She was desperate to know where this was written; I had my Bible in my hand and to my surprise when I flipped open the pages my finger landed on the very word pluck.

The Gospel of John chapter 10 verse 29 'My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.'

She fell down on her knees crying tears of joy, thanking Jesus for his great love and faithfulness.

Sitting in one of her arm chairs I was having an amazing experience. It was as if all around me had become holy, and heaven was open and I saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. I was overwhelmed with His great love and He said clearly 'I HAVE CHOSEN YOU', and I knew that He would use my experiences to speak to others.

We were both overjoyed and prayed thanking Him for His amazing love and favour which we had never deserved. I said we need to tell others in our family that they need to be saved.

At that time Molly was working as a cleaner for a priest and he had given her a Catholic Bible. I decided to take this to Mammy and Daddy's and explain to them that the same things written in the King James Bible were also in the Catholic Bible.

Molly set off for work and planned to speak to the priest as she wanted to tell him all that had been happening in her life and also to share my story with him. When she arrived at his house she pressed the bell and kept her finger on it until he answered. With a puzzled expression he looked at her and looked at her finger still on the bell. 'Come in Molly'.

Meanwhile I was at Mammy's house. I showed her the Catholic Bible and said the things which have happened to me

are all written in here so I will leave it with you so you can read it and see for yourselves.

'Take that with you' Mammy said as I prepared to leave.

'No, read it' I replied.

'I'll put it in the bin' was the swift response.

'Ha, ha, you can't do that it's the Holy Bible' I said as I left.

On reflection I don't suppose it was the best way to go about things.

At the priest's house Molly was dusting away and finally got up the courage to tell him about my journey to Rome and what had recently happened to her.

He said 'I'm really pleased for you; it sounds like you both had a real experience with God'.

She asked him what made him become a priest and he went on to tell her that he had been watching television one day and saw a young man who he'd gone to school with, and thought if he can become a priest so can I. She was completely surprised at this explanation as there didn't seem to be anything spiritual about his decision so she asked if that was the only reason he became a priest to which he said yes.

When we met up later she told me all about this conversation and we decided that just because a person is a member of the clergy it doesn't mean they are a Christian, or have a personal relationship with God.

Return To See Kelly

The following day I was determined to go and see Kelly and make everything right again.

It was a sunny day so I walked along the canal bank and then crossed town and arrived at Windermere Close.

I knocked on the door ready with my good news, looking forward to seeing our daughters. To my surprise a teenage girl answered asking who I was. I explained that I was Kelly's husband and the girls' father.

She told me Kelly was at work cleaning in a pub and would be home shortly, she let me in and I talked and played with the girls.

The child minder asked if I knew that Kelly was getting married.

I was totally surprised and replying that we were still married, she then went to the back door anticipating Kelly's return and before long I could hear raised voices.

Kelly bust through the lounge door wearing a black leather jacket, I couldn't help noticing she had a black eye.

She snarled like someone possessed, determined to get me out of the house as quickly as possible, every second word seemed to be a swear word. 'Kelly I've changed', but alas that was all I had the opportunity to say.

Walking away and looking over my shoulder I asked myself a dozen questions.

Is she getting married to the man she has been seeing? Was he the one who had given her the black eye? Would I ever see the girls again?

I would normally have been angry and looking for a drink but was at total peace believing that the Lord would help me sort it out.

Chapter 13

New Christian Friends

I needed to meet other Christians so one day I picked up the Citizen newspaper, something I hadn't done before, and spotted an item advertising a Christian meeting in Great Harwood. It was the word Christian I was looking for and that was the word that jumped out at me, I had to get there.

As far as I was aware there were Christians in Holland and Christians in Bolton, now I had come across some more.

I telephoned the number on the advert and spoke to a man who told me that the next meeting was on Sunday, but it was only Wednesday and Sunday seemed a long way off. I explained that I had just become a Christian and was longing to meet with others.

'Well we have a Bible Study meeting tonight I suppose you could come to that' and he gave me directions.

I was excited and full of anticipation at the prospect of meeting other Christians in Great Harwood which was about eight miles away from Feniscowles. I set off early and walked all the way.

I stood outside the building looking at the sign 'Pentecostal Church', I was thrilled I had made it, 2 ¾ hours after setting off.

I met the Pastor; he was wearing a green two piece suit and spoke with a Birmingham accent.

Everyone was friendly and seemed pleased to see me.

I met another Pastor by the name of Jack Fleming; it was he who was going to have the greatest impact on my Christian life.

He listened with eagerness to my story of how I had walked to Rome to find God. When I had finished he asked me to pray the sinner's prayer and receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had already received Him but I went through the motions anyway.

There were two services the following Sunday, morning and evening, and I attended them both.

I met Jack's wife Pauline and their three daughters Deborah, Julia and Sharon; I also met his mum and dad, sister, her husband and two sons. During the service I heard a lot of the people singing and speaking in another language and wondered how they had learnt it.

I met with my sister Molly nearly every day to look at God's word and we shared what He had done for us; I also kept going to see members of my family speaking about the wonderful things Jesus had done to secure eternity for them.

Continuing Change

My conversion that is my changed life from being a thief, a drunkard and no use to anybody - to someone who is able to be useful to others showing them that there is a better way of living, that their situations are not hopeless, took place on the 17th May 1981. Since then I have seen the lives of many people changed by God just as He changed mine.

New Home

One day I received a letter from a lady working at the Town Hall. She told me that as my name was on the housing

list an empty flat at Mill Hill had been allocated for me to move in to.

I kept the arranged appointment to view the flat. For me this was wonderful and I accepted it, moving in within a short period of time.

It was about half way between Brookway where Molly lived and Fenisowles where my parents lived.

I didn't have any furniture or money to buy any, but I was extremely happy.

There were three blocks of flats at Mill Hill each with fourteen floors, I was on the fourth floor in the block called Ewood Court.

I found out that, at the bottom of the building, there was a large storage area where residents in the flats left unwanted items.

I was highly delighted because from these I was able to equip my flat with almost everything I needed. I also got help from Mammy, and other family members.

One of the first things I built was a long bench it spanned the lounge window; I put cushions all the way across.

I bought a Dr Johnson's family Bible from a second hand shop, and would sit with my legs up on the bench seat, reading it for hours.

There seemed to be an urgency to read through the Old Testament now that I had finished reading the New. I wasn't very well educated and couldn't understand a lot of what I read, but knew I was being fed on the Word of God.

I talked to the Lord effortlessly like a child, and knew His voice when He spoke to me.

One of the things that I read in the Word was that my name was written in The Book of Life, I was absolutely awestruck.

Many a time I would get down on my knees lift my hands up and begin to thank Him with all of my heart. Sensing the presence of Almighty God great joy would rise up in my spirit and the tears would flow. That a Holy God could have forgiven me and poured out His amazing love on a wretch like me was beyond belief.

Nightmares

After living at Mill Hill flats for the first month I found that my past was trying to drag me back.

The same dream kept tormenting me. I had got into trouble with the law and the police were coming to arrest me. In a cold sweat I would jump up from out of my sleep totally wet through

The dream was so vivid and real that I didn't know if I had actually committed a crime or not. I had to wait for the day to unfold to see if the police would come for me.

I was always frightened of going to prison especially after hearing some of the terrifying stories of what could happen there. Despite this, what I did know was, that if I was sent down I would go as God's witness and tell people about Him whatever the consequences.

However I was wholly relieved to find that when I came to the end of the day it was just a nightmare. This happened just a few times and I thank my God that He gave me the victory because I belonged to Him and He wasn't going to let me go, ever.

Used of God

Whenever I met any of my friends or acquaintances from the past they would look upon me with surprise and ask what had happened.

I had changed so remarkably, I was told that my face seemed to shine. Of course straight away I would launch into my story 'Walking to Rome' telling them of the wonderful things God had done for me, explaining He was able to make a difference in their lives, if they would let Him.

I'm not sure who told me but I heard that there was a Christian lady who lived in the same block of flats as I. One day as I was waiting for the lift this lady came in through the main doors, when she saw me asked if my name was Vincent.

I confirmed that it was and in a wonderful Scottish accent she introduced herself as Sadie. She lived on the floor above mine and invited me to her flat for a cup of tea and a chat.

I told her all about my conversion, she told me about herself and that she attended St Andrews Church of England.

Sadie use to get Christian teaching tapes from Kingdom Faith Ministries by mail order and listen to them every week. She held meetings in her flat and quite a few people attended, I decided to join them. We would listen to the tapes and then share how they had spoken to us.

This is where I met Gerry who looked like he was from the hippy era, he loved Jesus. We were to have many an adventure in these flats over the next four years. I also met a couple who lived at Griffin court which was the next block of flats.

Instructions

One day whilst visiting them I was led by the Holy Spirit to return to my flat, so I told them that I believed the Holy Spirit wanted me to go somewhere.

'Go where?' they said

'I don't know but he will show me when I set off.'

This is the way things had happened since my return from Holland. Walking across the car park to my flat another friend told me that someone had been looking for me but had just left.

'I know it was my sister Molly'.

With a puzzled look he asked 'how did you know that'.

'I just do' was my reply.

I went back to my flat, picked up my jacket and walked up to her house.

When I arrived she said I felt I had to give you this, fifty pence. I thanked her immediately left, and walked to the bus stop near Green Lane just as the bus arrived; using the money she had given me for the fare.

I travelled to my parent's house and looked around, quietly speaking to the Holy Spirit asking who He wanted me talk to.

'Where is Paul?' I asked.

'Upstairs' was the reply.

I knew straight away that the Holy Spirit wanted to speak to him through me. Walking up the stairs I called his name in order not to surprise him by suddenly appearing in his room.

I talked to him about his need to receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour, how in was written in the book of Revelations

that all those whose names were not found written in the book of life would be cast into the Lake of Fire.

He then told me of a strange thing which had recently happened to him.

It was at night and he was in his bed facing the wall when he heard a voice call his name. Turning round he looked into the bedroom only to find his two brothers, who shared the same room, were fast asleep. He thought that's strange, and turned back.

Again he heard the voice call his name so for the second time he turned and looked around only to find the same thing, his two brothers were fast asleep.

He turned back thinking I definitely heard a voice, when yet again, for the third time, he heard the voice call his name, this time he thought this must be God.

I said that it was and He was calling him into His Kingdom, but I knew God had to bring him, His way.

I was at Molly's we were having a wonderful time looking into Gods Word and sharing all the things He was doing. I sensed a welling up in my spirit and knew that the Holy Spirit wanted me to go elsewhere.

My sister said 'how do you know this'.

I replied 'I just have this overwhelming sense that I have to go and yet I don't know where to go or who to see, but I know that once I leave this house and start walking He will show me.'

Sure enough as I left her house and asked the Lord where do you want me to go and who do you want me to see, the face of my friend Tyrone flashed up in front of me and I knew he was that person. The hour was late, but he was a late owl himself, and wouldn't object to my visit.

He looked surprised when he saw me.

'Hiya Ponchos', this was one of his old ways of greeting me, it was this or comrade.

His wife was there also, they both showed delight in seeing me because I wasn't doing too well the last time we had met.

After getting a brew and settling down I started telling them my story, all about the things that had happened to me on my journey to Rome when I went looking to find God.

I spent most of the time speaking directly to his wife repeating what I had told my brother about the need to receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour. How it was written in the book of Revelation that all those whose names were not found written in the book of life would be cast into the Lake of Fire.

I turned to look at Tyrone and saw him sitting crouched on the chair with his hands over his ears.

When I had finished saying everything I had to say I said my good byes and left them to think about what I had told them.

Many years later, I was surprised to see his wife walk into the church where I was at that time, and asked her what she was doing there.

She went on to tell me that she had left it a long time, but now she had given her heart to Jesus.

When I had left their house after visiting on my return from Holland, the words I had spoken played solidly on their minds for the next two weeks. She hadn't done anything about it then, but later she was reminded of these and eventually gave her life to Jesus.

Chapter 14

New Beginnings for Family and Friends

A letter came from Kelly's solicitors stating that she was applying for a divorce. I shared this with Pastor Jack who said as long as there was a chance to be reconciled I should not close the door.

I prayed about it and was determined not to get divorced, but if Kelly continued to pursue it, I would not be obstinate and block it.

I remember saying to Pastor Jack, that if the divorce went through I would remain single like the Apostle Paul and serve God.

He said 'no you mustn't do that, how do you know what God has planned for you'. I thought he's right, how can I know what God has planned for me, so I remained open to the idea of re-marrying.

My Brother and Sisters Coming To Jesus

Paul and I had planned to go camping at the weekend but sitting in my flat thinking about this, the Lord said that he was going to rescue him and bring him into His kingdom.

I set off walking to Feniscowles, taking the route along the canal which always gave me time to think things through. I wasn't too sure what to say when I arrived but I knew when the time came the words would be there.

Arriving at my parent's house I was told that he was upstairs, I went up and spoke to him.

'I've got work for you but you must come with me now'. He had been out of work for some time.

'OK 'he replied, got ready and came with me heading back to Mill Hill flats.

'What about this job, what is it?' he asked as we walked down Moorgate Street.

I replied 'the Lord has work for you'. I think this made him a little annoyed.

I went on to tell him even though we had planned to go camping at the weekend I believed he needed to come with me to church on Sunday.

He was about to light up a cigarette, 'you don't need them any more either'.

He looked at me then looked at the cigarette, 'you're right'; put it back into the packet, and threw them down never to smoke again.

On Sunday after the service Pastor Jack spent some time talking to him, finally leading him in the sinner's prayer.

There were no flashing lights, he came into Gods kingdom in a nice quiet way and has been constant throughout his Christian walk ever since.

Every time my sister Molly and I told another sister, Maisie, about the good news that Jesus loved her and died to save her, she would always come up with a why or what if.

I didn't know it at the time but she had read a passage in the Bible which said 'go and sell your possessions and give them to the poor and come follow me'. She took this literally believing that like these people she too was going to have to give up her home and family in order to become a Christian.

When she did it was with tears of joy asking 'why did I wait so long?'

Relating to the problems she'd had thinking she had to give up her home and family, she now realised that if she put God first, He would look after her and the family.

Heavenly Route Finder

I was sitting in my flat at Mill Hill when I sensed that the Lord wanted me to speak to yet another sister called Fay, so I made a phone call. Finding out that she had gone to town shopping, I set off to find her.

Walking through the six day market I thought this is impossible. Wondering how I was going to find her amongst so many people, I said 'Lord you know exactly where she is, will you please lead me to her'.

I then experienced something quite remarkable; I was led by the Holy Spirit, out of the six day market into the three day market.

I turned right then left and right again and saw her at a fruit stall. Going across I stood at her side watching as she selected the best fruit. All of a sudden she looked to her left, saw me and jumped, very startled.

'Mr Vinnie, where did you come from?'

I explained how the Lord had spoken to me and divinely led me to find her telling her that He had some things to say. We went to a near by coffee bar and purchased a drink.

I told her about the love that Jesus had for her, how He had died to save her from sin and a lost eternity.

When I had said all that the Lord had instructed me, I said my good byes and telling her I loved her, went on my way knowing that the Lord would do whatever He desired, to bring her into His Kingdom.

I met with this sister some time later and she shared with me the greatest news ever. She had experienced a real tussle about becoming a Christian. The previous Sunday she

had attended a service at The Church of the Saviour, where the minister had preached an impressive message.

It spoke to her heart so she went to him after the service and he led her in the sinner's prayer to receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

With tears I thanked God and was overjoyed that this Church of England Minister had been so obedient in leading my sister into God's kingdom.

Big Rob

Robert was a lad who I had met whilst on probation, he got the name 'Big Robert' assigned to him, I'm not sure why, but I think his size might have had something to do with it.

He used to come to the meetings at Great Harwood and the house group meetings at Jack's and also those at Sadie's. He made a commitment, with his child like faith, to become a Christian and follow Jesus, I gave him free run of my flat and we spent a lot of time reading God's Word together.

Over the few months since returning from Holland I had seen my brother, three sisters and my nephew, come into a relationship with Jesus. Jack had started weekly house group meetings at his home on Rhodes Avenue in Blackburn and we attended these.

He became our spiritual leader, teaching us many precious truths from the Bible; he had a great love for the Lord and a passion for souls. His wife Pauline along with their three girls, his mum and sister were also present at these meetings.

Daddy Passed On

Daddy had not been too well for a long time I didn't realise how sick he was. I went to Molly's one day and she was on the phone crying and trembling, and could hardly tell me the terrible news she had heard.

'What is it, what's happened?'

'Daddy has got cancer'.

My initial reaction was to break down and cry. 'Listen the Lord can heal him, I believe God can and will, heal him'.

I had to go and find Fay to tell her the news. I found her near to the Church of the Saviour, so calling out I walked beside her.

'I have some sad news for you regarding Daddy'.

I saw her lips quivering as I told her that he had been diagnosed with cancer.

'Listen the Lord will heal him, he did it for all those people in the Bible and he can do it for Daddy'.

We held each other tight and consoled ourselves in the knowledge that the Lord was our only hope, we had to trust Him.

Going to visit Daddy at the hospital I was shocked to see that he had gone to skin and bone.

Paul, Molly and I held an all night vigil where we read the Word and prayed for the Lord to heal Daddy. During this time we had a vision of him under a tree, an angel took him and he was healed, but to be honest at this time in our Christian lives we did not fully understand what this meant.

One very sad day came when the Christians in our family had gone to an adult baptism in Great Harwood. Paul had been due to be baptised that evening but for some reason had not turned up. It was a mystery why he hadn't come

because he would not under normal circumstances have missed his baptism.

The service was good especially since my sister and nephew were also being baptised.

When we arrived back at Molly's house at Brookway, Blackburn, I was the first to reach the front door and was greeted by Paul looking really sad and he said to me 'Daddy is dead'.

I held my composure and turned around looking over the railing on the balcony of the maisonette, making eye contact with my sisters who were outside of the car but still talking to a friend called Kitty who had travelled home with us.

'How is Daddy?' Molly shouted at seeing Paul.
'He has passed away' I replied.

Like a cloud of sadness coming upon them sorrow filled their hearts and floods of tears their eyes. They raced up to the house whilst I stood outside in total incredulity.

I had believed God would heal Daddy, so much so that when I had told my story about walking to Rome to find God at a church in Oswaldtwistle I told the congregation that He was going to heal Daddy.

I looked in amazement at my heartbroken sisters with Kitty, who was a staunch Christian, trying to console them.

'Listen Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and He can raise daddy also'.

Leaving there I started walking towards the hospital determined to lay hands on Daddy and pray that God would raise him from the dead.

I was heading up Bolton Road when an overwhelming thought came, the Lord would raise Daddy during the funeral when all the relatives were present, just like he had with

Lazarus. Then they would all know that Jesus is Lord and Saviour.

My thoughts were that this must be from the Lord as I would never have imagined anything on this scale ever happening

Over the next few days leading up to the funeral, I kept my distance from the family.

I wanted to see Daddy raised from the dead and thought they would be negative about what I believed, would happen.

Big Robert had done something which had upset a lot of people, and I was angry with him. I bumped into him by chance on Redlam where he greeted me with a friendly smile and a bit of a grin.

I told him I was annoyed with him and didn't want to see him any more, whereupon his face changed immediately to one filled full of anger and he looked as if he wanted to hit me.

Walking off I left him stewing, but that evening felt very guilty about what I had said. Knowing I had to make it right before God, and ask Robert's forgiveness, I asked for help to sort out the problem. As always I left it with the Lord knowing He would make a way.

The following day I was walking up Moorgate Street on my way to see Molly. I had not seen her for a few days, but, thinking she was going to be very negative about Daddy getting raised from the dead, I turned around and headed back to the flats.

Continuing past I headed across some waste land towards Galligreaves Estate.

Looking up I saw big Robert coming towards me, the Lord had answered my prayers once again.

I could see that he was deliberately ignoring me. 'Robert I'm really sorry for what I said to you yesterday, will you forgive me?'

He carried on walking past without answering.

I've left my flat door unlocked and got some food in; you can go there and help yourself'.

I saw him stop turn around slowly, a bit of a grin came on his face.

I smiled at him and said 'can you forgive me Rob?'

'I forgive you brother'.

We walked toward each other holding out our hands, after a firm handshake he gave me a big hug.

'By the way that watch you gave me I threw it away'.

I had given him a watch which my father had previously given me because it was special. I believed in giving things of worth to those you call friends. '

'The Lord can find anything all we have to do is ask Him'.

'Well I smashed the watch in bits before I threw it into the canal'.

'Oh, well perhaps not' I said.

The Funeral

The day of my father's funeral came and I was determined not to be mournful nor would I wear a black jacket.

Coming to the house shortly before the cortege was due to leave, I didn't want to comfort anyone or to be comforted because this was the day when God would raise Daddy from the dead.

The service was at Pleasington Priory. I cannot remember anything about it, but I do remember sitting in the front seat of the car directly behind the hearse next to the driver keeping my eyes fixed on the coffin.

After the service we travelled to the cemetery. As we pulled away from the Priory I saw Jack and Pauline standing there; it was a great comfort to know that they had come to support the family.

When we reached the graveside, the coffin was being lowered into the grave, when one of the handles broke off. A rope had been connected to this to enable the coffin to be lowered into the grave so when it came off one end of the coffin suddenly dropped.

Molly knew I believed that Daddy would be raised and thought within herself, is this it Lord.

As the coffin slipped I too was thinking is this it? There was a hush of silence, another rope was attached and the committal continued.

People began to walk back to their cars while I stayed with my eyes fixed on the grave.

The cars slowly drove down the road out of view until I could only see the grave diggers standing to one side, and I knew they were waiting for me to leave so they could get on with their job of filling in the grave.

I was overwhelmed with a feeling of immense disillusionment; Daddy was not going to be raised from the dead. I walked slowly away from the cemetery across Pleasington playing fields, home to Mill Hill flats.

I arrived home knowing now that my Daddy had gone, I would never see him again in this life. I cried my heart out.

My faith had received a severe blow, I had thought I was full of so much faith to believe that God would raise Daddy from the dead, but it never happened.

Lament for Daddy

Like a flood overwhelming thoughts poured in. Daddy would not be returning from the grave, and my mind was racing with agonising regrets. Where did I go so horribly wrong? Had I not believed the word, and did Jesus not raise Lazarus from the dead bringing many to faith in the only Son of God?

Did the Almighty give me a direct word saying He would raise my Daddy?

If not, perhaps what I had called faith was in fact based on the strength of my own conviction. This was, if I believed hard and long enough, it would come to pass?

I had innocently played the fool and folly had come my way.

I cried myself to sleep consoled in my sorrow by the Lord.

In the vision had I not seen Daddy under a tree and an angel who took him, and he was healed. Yes, now I knew it was true that the angel did take him to heaven, and was he not healed? Freed from the grasp of pain and at peace with the Almighty, where else would one rather be?

Regrets..... I had not been there to console Mammy, and my brothers and sisters. I had isolated myself in my lone vigil believing, hoping and waiting in my folly.

Now I would say my late goodbye to the Daddy I so loved. I would miss him, but what was I to do now, except go on.

We had all got to pick ourselves up and go on; I suppressed my grief somewhat but had no photo's of Daddy for many years for the pain was too great.

Chapter 15

The Lord Answers Prayer

I was looking in my pocket for two pound notes which I knew I had but couldn't find. I thought well it's only two pounds so I will just forget about them, but all that afternoon it played on my mind.

Late afternoon and I had another search for them without success.

'Lord if you want me to find these then please cause me to put my hand right on them'.

Now I had prayed I could get on with what I had to do without being side tracked about the missing money.

It was Tuesday and I was looking forward to the housegroup at Jack's, glancing at my watch I thought I'd better make it snappy, it was time to set off if I was going to get there before it started.

Outside the front door ready to lock it I thought I need my pen and writing pad. I hurried back inside went to the bench seat, reached across the cushions for them, and between the cushions I saw the two pound notes right under my hand. In my heart I had given up on ever seeing them again even though I had prayed, but there they were exactly as I had asked.

I remember a conversation I'd had with one of my brothers-in-law about my journey to Rome.

He kept saying coincidence, until it finally became obvious that even for him there could never be that many coincidences.

It was amazing, every time I prayed asking the Lord for something, a coincidence happened, just like the incident above.

House Mover

I was aware that a blonde haired young woman called Lucy had moved into the flat diagonally across from me.

I never had an opportunity to meet her, the only time you would meet your neighbours in high rise flats was at the lifts or coming and going through the front door.

I heard that she was moving, and was disappointed that I hadn't had the opportunity to tell her about the Lord Jesus.

'Lord will you please make a way for me to talk to her about you, I ask in Jesus name, amen'.

A day or so later I was sitting in my flat when I heard the Lord say 'get up and walk to the lift door, when the door opens Lucy will be there and will ask for your help to move'.

I left my flat and walked to the lift, looking at the lights I could see someone was on their way up. The door opened and sure enough there she was.

'Hiya, I heard you were moving'.

'Yes I'm moving this Saturday'.

I went on to ask if she had plenty of people to help with the move, and was told no, all she had was one man and a van'.

'Would you like me to help, I'm free on Saturday'

'Yes please that would be really helpful, thank you so very much'.

Saturday came and I called at Lucy's flat well before the removal van came just to see if I could do any anything to help.

She had everything packed and ready, even her kettle and cups, but fortunately I had brought my kettle and brewing things along so we could have a cup of tea.

I discovered, after she had moved to her new home, that I had left my kettle and brewing things in her old flat – I was so concerned that I didn't miss out on witnessing to her I forgot to take them with me. I hoped the new tenant would find them useful, but when I got to know him I didn't ask.

Whilst waiting for the removal van she explained that she was a secretary and had come up from London, inheriting the small house she was moving to.

As we were talking the buzzer went, the removal man had come early. For the next few hours were very busy taking furniture and household goods down the lift and into the van. This was hard work because using the lift meant only a little at a time could be carried.

Arriving at her new house on Redlam it proved to be much easier to move the furniture and household goods in.

Moving the last item in it dawned on me, I had not had the opportunity to tell her about the Lord. As I thought this He spoke to me 'she will invite you back on a visit'.

She paid the removal man, thanked him and he set off for his next job. Next she thanked me for all my help and appreciated all I had done.

'I know Vincent that you are a Christian would you please come back to visit me and tell me all about it'.

We agreed a time and date, said our good byes until we were due to meet again a week later.

On arrival I found she had prepared tea and snacks, we talked small talk for a while then she asked the question.

'Vincent will you please tell me how you became a Christian?'

The Holy Spirit said 'now share your story'.

As I recounted how I walked to Rome to find God, I could see her eyes glistening, it was so tangible I could almost see and feel the Holy Spirit speaking to her heart.

When I had finished she was physically and spiritually moved, asking how she could hear more.

I mentioned the Tuesday house group meetings, without hesitation she said she wanted to come.

She came and at the end of the meeting Jack took her to one side and shared with her about asking Jesus to be her Lord and Saviour. She did and joy and peace flooded her whole being.

Don and Geoff

I realised that the flat across from me was now empty and I needed to pray for the next person who would live there.

A Christian lady in our fellowship mentioned that one of her sons was about to become homeless and needed some temporary accommodation. I spoke up saying I was willing to take him into my flat; I had two bedrooms so it wouldn't be a problem.

This lady's family were Salvationist and her son was brought up with them and he was a good singer.

My new lodger Don had not been with me long when we heard that a new lad had moved into the empty flat across the hallway.

Don was going swimming that day and had the bright idea of knocking on the new person's door and asking if he wanted to go with him. He knocked, but was told no, as the new tenant was busy settling in.

Geoff the new tenant mentioned the invitation he had received from my friend to the caretaker.

'Doesn't that strike you as been a little odd, two single blokes asking you a complete stranger to go swimming with them?'

'Now you've mentioned it, it does sound a bit strange' he replied.

Don was the only one going swimming and the invitation had been intended as a sign of friendship and welcome to the new resident.

The next time I saw Geoff, after he had settled in, I introduced myself and shared some of my story about 'Walking to Rome'.

'That's a coincidence; I've just walked all the way from Liverpool'.

He went on to tell me how when working at a petrol station had been, over a period of months, siphoning off some of the monies paid to him.

It was found out what he had been doing, the police were involved, so he was on the run.

I had bought a Panoramic Bible Study when I first became a Christian; it was a long A3 picture booklet giving an overview of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. It was full of striking pictures outlining the meaning of the Bible, and making it amazingly clear, majoring on what would happen at the end of time.

Inviting Geoff to my flat and making a brew of tea and a snack for us both, I left it opened on the settee hoping he

would look at it. More importantly give me an opportunity to speak with him. Later on in our friendship he told me that the panoramic study had really impacted his life.

He had started going out with a Christian girl from the Brethren Church, she was a beautiful Christian with long flowing ginger hair.

I had shared the gospel so many times with him and wondered why he hadn't become a Christian.

One day I came and stood at his side and looked him straight in the eye 'why are you not saved yet?'

His answer was that he was going to wait until he became really good then give his life to the Lord.

I laughed and telling him this would never happen that Jesus came to save sinners not good people.

Following this conversation he started going to the meetings at Bethesda with his girl friend.

There were some special meetings arranged where an Evangelist came giving messages on becoming a Christian, by getting right with God. They both planned to go to these.

I had some friends around for a visit one evening and went to get some milk from the corner shop located at the back of the flats. When I came out of the back door I saw them in her dad's red Robin Reliant car.

Geoff was excited telling me all about the meeting and the Evangelist who had spoken that night. How he had called for people to come to the front and give their lives to Jesus. He said that if someone had just given him a nudge he would have gone out and that when the evangelist spoke the following night and called for people to go forward that's what he was going to do.

'You don't have to be in a church building to give your life to Jesus, you can do it right now'.

He thought about it.

'I want to'. He told me later, that the moment of making this decision seemed like an eternity.

I prayed the sinner's prayer and asked Geoff to repeat it and mean everything he said, he prayed and received Jesus as his personal Lord and Saviour.

I witnessed him being born again right before my eyes, and saw joy and peace fill his soul as he received the forgiveness of God.

He lent out of the car window and embraced me and then he turned to his girl friend and did the same, the car was rocking.

I went back to the flat, without the milk, I didn't really need it, I believe the Lords timing was involved once again. His girl friend went home and he came up to my flat saying he had a good idea for sharing 'the gospel. He was going to take my big family Bible and knock on people's doors and when they asked what it was for; he would tell them about Jesus.

I prayed that night and said Lord please talk him out of doing this, and was glad when the following morning he came saying perhaps the idea with the big family Bible wasn't the best.

I agreed, silently thanking the Lord.

I had an old imperial typewriter which he borrowed and began typing out the New Testament starting with Matthew, why I don't know, but it was something he felt compelled to do. We had some great times of fellowship sharing what God had done for us both.

The best of these was when we went to court about his crimes. Finally the law had caught up with him and his case would be dealt with over the next few months. His girlfriend

Megan and her family were very supportive and kept the situation before the Lord in prayer.

They had planned a family holiday and invited Geoff to join them. The holiday was booked and would start on a Saturday but some time later Geoff got a letter saying that he had to appear at the Magistrates Court for sentencing on the Friday which was the day before.

The day came and there was a lot of fear and trepidation on Geoff's part. He spent the best part of Thursday evening in my flat, saying he'd been told that he a custodial sentence would be the outcome.

I reminded him that both Megan's dad and I had written supportive character references and I knew in my heart of hearts that he would be going on holiday with them as planned on the Saturday.

I lent him my New Testament and marked out a scripture, Mark 11:22.....'have faith in God'.

'Some time God leaves it until the twelfth hour before acting in order to test our faith' I told him.

He walked down the hallway, reached the front door slowly turned and walked back.

'He does leave it late doesn't He?'

Megan, her dad and I were present in court the follow day.

When it came to the sentencing the Magistrate was perplexed and went on to explain that it was an unusual case. Then he did something he had never done before.

Asking for Geoff to be taken back down to the cells he discussed the case with his colleagues on the bench.

It felt like the time when Jesus was on trial was how Geoff later explained his feelings at that time.

Putting him back in the cells the officer told him that he would 'go down'.

He had my New Testament in his pocket so with his hand on it said 'no I'm not', remembering the scripture Mark 11:22.....'have faith in God'.

He came back in court, and the Magistrate looked at him.

'You should be receiving a custodial sentence, but I have decided to give you a community service order'.

Relief was written all over Geoff's face and I could here the biggest sigh of relief coming from Megan, and her dad.

As for me, my Lord was revealing His overwhelming grace and kindness just as promised, He never fails.

Geoff knew and had admitted that he was guilty.

He knew that it was through God's intervention that this result had come about.

Man Power Services

I had been out of work for quite a while and my work history wasn't looking too good because of the crises I had put my self through which had been fuelled by drink.

I had some interviews at the job centre and they told me about a scheme run by Man Power Services Commission which was working with a gang of lads doing soft and hard landscaping.

I found out some time later that soft landscaping was pertaining to plants, shrubs and trees and hard landscaping was building and pointing stone walls.

On my first day I was with a gang of lads at Cherry Tree Cricket Club, we made a line and passed cobble-stones to

each other and placed them in a skip, these were to be used on another project.

I was amused by the look on some of the lad's faces; they were thinking what's this all about, it looked as if we were on a chain gang.

In the afternoon we were pointing a stone flagged patio area, I could see one of the lads sliding across towards me.

'There is something different about you, what is it?'

'I'm a Born Again Christian'.

'I knew it' he said sliding back.

The following day we moved to a site at Revidge where we had a foreman and an area manager who called at all the sites every day.

We had a good gang of lads, and I was able to have many conversations with them about my conversion.

'It's all religious brain washing' was one comment.

'Don't be stupid, weren't you listening, he was walking to Rome by himself, there wasn't anyone around to brain wash him. How did that Dutch man who was a Christian' I interjected saying 'Gerrit', 'ya Gerrit, how did he know to pick him up, or who to pick up?' The first one with a frowned look on his face said 'Oh ya'.

During one of our breaks in the cabin I told the lads about the time when I was leaving my parents house and had seen the judgement seat of Almighty God, and come under conviction, knowing I was going to hell. I was filled with trepidation; I had to get right with God.

The following day one of the guys was telling us what had happen to him.

In the middle of the night he jumped up in bed waking his wife in the process.

When she asked him what the matter was he told her that there was a lad at work call Vinnie who'd had this incredible conversion to Christianity. He explained that I had told them about seeing the judgement seat of Almighty God and hell and things.

Maybe he needed to think about the way he was leading his life, she had replied that if he started getting into that religious stuff she was going to leave him.

'You almost had me there Vinnie'.

During our breaks we were able to share stories about our everyday lives.

The foreman told some amusing ones about incidents when he worked as a tradesman.

He was a brick layer by profession, and always wore a trilby hat. Once he was working outdoors using a lump hammer and chisel.

The day was very windy and as two ladies walked past a gust of wind blew his hat off. Instinctively he grabbed it hitting himself on his head with the lump hammer which was in his right hand.

'The two ladies must have thought I was stupid hitting myself like that'.

On another occasion he was going to a property to do some work. Looking for it he saw a rag-and-bone man heading down a back alley shouting 'any old rags' as he went.

That's where I should be going he thought, so followed him. Walking past a particular back yard he heard someone open the gate. A woman appeared carrying lots of old clothes.

She dumped them in his arms, saying 'there you are', slammed gate shut leaving him standing there.

'I don't believe it; she thinks I'm the rag-and-bone man!' was his astonished comment.

When the work was finished that gang of lads got spilt up and moved to different sites, I was sent across town near to St Thomas's Church, which had become a derelict building. Whilst working there I was able to have conversations with the group about my changed life.

One day three lads came with a wheelbarrow for some sand; their site had run out of it.

We saw them coming up the road one wheeling the barrow with a spade in it, the other two walking either side.

The lad wheeling the barrow filled it up while the other two lads watched and chatted.

When he had finished he put the spade in the sand and they began to head back to their site, the two lads walking either side, as before.

'Why have these two lads, come with you, are they your indicators?' I shouted
Everyone found this really funny and we all had a good laugh.

One Friday early in the afternoon everyone including the foreman went missing and I was left on my own. A couple of hours later they returned bringing a wheelbarrow and talking like they were inebriated. That's strange, I thought, nobody gets paid until later this afternoon when the area manager comes with our wages.

Late afternoon during break time, I found out why they were acting strangely. They had gone to St Thomas's Church, taken the lead off the roof, sold it and been to the pub. They hadn't asked me to join them because they knew that I wouldn't be a party to it.

Another afternoon whilst we waited for the manager to come with the wages some of us were sitting in the cabin around the table.

A blonde haired lad, at the head of the table, began to argue with me about Christianity. I was sitting at the opposite side, at the bottom, the other lads sat either side looking at me when I spoke and then at the other guy when he spoke. It looked as if they were watching a tennis match.

I told him I have been where you are and I wouldn't go back.

'Anyway he' pointing his thumb to me, 'he's better than you' commented the foreman. 'What?' Questioned the blonde guy.

He said again 'he is better than you, he's been where you are but you have never been where he is'.

I thought I've never quite heard it put like that but it just about sums it up.

Another workman popped his head into the cabin and said the area manager is here with the wages, so we all went outside and waited for our names to be called.

As I was opening my wage packet I felt an arm come around my shoulder and a voice said 'sorry mate, sorry mate', when I looked to the side of me I saw the blonde lad with an apologetic look on his face.

I put my arm around his shoulders and smiled. 'It's ok, it's ok'.

When this work was finished I moved to a new site and was made foreman.

The Terrible Two

Two of the lads on this new site, I think they were cousins, didn't want to be there at all. We were making a flower bed and building a stone wall about two feet high around it. The site was across the road from my old school on

Dean Street, this now stood derelict along with the row of houses next to it.

These two guys were hard work, the area manager wasn't happy with them, especially relating to their performances on other sites as well as ours.

They came to work late and didn't want to do anything when they arrived. I asked them why they behaved in this manner. They told me that it was just one of those government schemes where they want to reduce the employment figures, and it was a dead end job. I asked them what they would be doing if they didn't have this work, to which they just shrugged their shoulders.

One of the other lads told me that when I wasn't around they would throw the daffodil bulbs which were waiting to be planted, at the gable end of a house and crush them into the ground with their boots.

I sent them to the derelict houses and asked them to find stone slab paving's so that we could break them up and continue building the wall round the flower bed. I thought this might give them something useful to do.

They had been gone for a considerable time so I went to look for them. I went into one of the derelict houses and could smell smoke, and saw the fire which they had lit.

They had found a settee and dragged it into the middle of the room where the ceiling slats had dropped and set fire to it, with the intention of setting fire to these slats as well.

I shouted at them to get outside and ran to the fire to see if I could extinguish it, as I did an aerosol can exploded, and shot right past my head like a fiery missile.

The ceiling slats were now alight and I knew then that there was no way of putting the fire out.

We got out of the building and as we came around to the front of the street could hear the fire engine with its siren screaming out.

It arrived just about the same time as the area manager; his face was a picture. I explained everything to him, following which the cousins were suspended from working on the scheme, never to return.

Some years later when I was preaching at Hollin Bank Mission who did I see but one of them in the congregation. That particular message was about my journey walking to Rome, and how I was converted to Christianity after seeing so many signs and wonders.

I had opportunity to speak with him after the service. He told me he was a househusband, married and living in London, but was back in Blackburn visiting relatives. Seeing the mission hall, where his grandma used to bring him when he was younger, he decided to have a look in at that morning's service.

It was not a co-incidence that I was the preacher on that particular morning. This was not the church I attended and was the one and only time I spoke there. I haven't seen him since, but I hope he is doing well.

Chapter 16

A Pastor Promoted

My first impressions of Jack and his family were that they were godly people and had a relationship with God that I wished I could have some day.

Jack had bright blue eyes and a cheeky grin, he loved the Lord and had a passion to see souls saved and be disciplined. In those early days of my Christian walk I had a hunger to hear the word of God and loved going to the Sunday and mid week services.

Along with other family members we would sit and listen to Jack expound the scriptures, and I do not know why I was so surprised but when Jack's wife Pauline spoke she had an abundance of knowledge on the Word, even their three girls answered questions I couldn't, so I needed to learn quickly.

I still met with family members who had become Christians and we shared about God's love for us and the blessings we were receiving.

About eighteen months after becoming a Christian I read in John's gospel that Jesus gave us life, and this was life more abundant.

I stopped and thought about this, realising that it was true. Day and night ever since I had met Him in Holland I had been conscious of the Lord, and knew I was experiencing this life more abundant.

I was still in awe that my name was written in the Book of Life.

Water Baptism

I heard that there was going to be a baptism service, taking place in a field at Buck's Farm, West Bradford.

The farmer, who was also a Pastor, had blocked up the stream so there was enough water to baptise people, it was about three to four feet in depth.

I was invited to go along with a co-pastor and other Christians from the fellowship, and was more than eager.

There were four or five people who were being baptised that day, each gave a testimony as to why.

Brian interrupted the service and said in a loud voice 'is there anyone here that wants to be baptised today'.

My hand shot up without hesitation 'I do'.

He asked if anyone could vouch for me that I was a Christian and going on with God.

'I can vouch for him, I am his pastor,' so I was allowed to go and join the others.

I thought that when I was baptised God would 'zap' me and I would take off like a rocket.

I got into the water, which was freezing, went down and came up cold and wet, nothing else happened, I wasn't zapped by the Holy Spirit or anything,

I was so disappointed until, as I matured I realised that the Christian walk is not about feelings but facts and faith.

Brian was kind enough to lend me some dry clothes and I put my wet ones in a carrier bag.

It wasn't usual for him to ask spectators if they would like to join the baptismal group as he had on that day.

Usually every candidate had undergone baptismal instruction first, so knew what adult baptism was all about.

They also could give a testimony of how they came to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

That day for some inexplicable reason, he felt compelled to make that announcement. However I knew God didn't make mistakes.

There was an evening service which was held in a barn at the farm, bails of hay were set out in rows for seating and there was a makeshift stage for the music group and the speaker.

We sang some beautiful choruses and the presence of the Lord seemed to fill the whole barn. A Church of England nun sang with the music group so exquisitely; the whole event was a memorable occasion.

Blackburn Christian Fellowship

When the fellowship formed it was made up of a group of people from Great Harwood, Rishton and Blackburn. It moved to Blackburn and there were quite a number of house groups.

The leaders prayed about a building where as Christians we could meet together each Sunday. On one occasion two of them went looking for a building that was available for hire in Blackburn. Unbeknown to each other they met at Roman Road Community Centre, each asking the other what he was doing there, of course that's where God had led them.

The centre was available for hire on Sunday's so we began to meet there as Blackburn Christian Fellowship.

We went from house to house explaining to the community who we were and telling them when our meetings would be held.

We had the Sunday morning meeting, Sunday school in the afternoon and an evening service. At the end of the day we had to stack all the chairs and any tables we had used away before vacating the building.

Over a period of time people from the surrounding area, including whole families, came to the services and became Christians.

I learnt many things from Pastor Jack, especially when we went to visit people at their homes.

One thing was to never give up even when things were not looking too good.

We called at a flat in Mill Hill. A man in his mid to late thirties came to the door; he must have been a 'keep fit' man because he was wearing a t-shirt and looked like a muscle man.

He was absolutely adamant that he did not want to talk about religion as he called it, but Jack persisted in talking to him and I could see that the gentleman was becoming a little annoyed.

In my mind I was saying 'come on Jack he doesn't want to know', but he continued talking and the next thing I knew we were invited into his flat and Jack was sharing the good news of the gospel with him.

'Tell him what happened to you Vinnie'.

I was taken by surprise but it wasn't long before I had launched into my story about 'Walking to Rome'.

When I had finished I think the man was impressed, his heart had certainly softened.

Jack concluded the visit by saying that it was up to him to accept or reject Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and we left.

Calling at another house a man came to the door but as soon as he heard what Jack was talking about he adamantly said 'I'm a Catholic' as if he didn't need to hear any more.

What he meant was he was a Roman Catholic. Jack opened his Bible and pointed to a scripture about Cornelius saying that 'he was a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment and was a Roman Catholic. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly'.

He showed the man where it said 'one day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!'

Cornelius stared at him in fear. 'What is it, Lord?' he asked. The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter'.

Cornelius was a good Roman Catholic but he needed to receive Jesus personally as Lord and Saviour.

This man, probably for the first time in his life, realised that he couldn't take for granted being a Roman Catholic would guarantee him entrance into Heaven.

I was always grateful for what Jack taught me, he was a spiritual father to me. When he preached, he would tell us not just to take his word as the truth, but to go and check it out to see if it was written and confirmed in the Bible.

I would then go home, get on my knees, place the Bible on a chair in front of me; open it and ask the Lord where the things Jack had spoke about were written.

It was some time later that I was transfixed by a certain passage of scripture.

In the book of Acts it talks about the Bereans from a city in Greece they had received the message with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures every day to see if what Apostle Paul said was true. Just like Jack had encourage us to do.

He had a great love for the Lord and it was very evident when we had the 'Breaking of Bread' meeting on Sunday mornings as he brought out the amazing love Jesus had for us when he died in our place.

He told us that God had demonstrated His own love for us because even while we were still sinners, Jesus had died for us.

To me that was an incredible love for which I would be eternally grateful.

We had some wonderful meetings moving from prayer to praise and at the pinnacle of praise move into worship.

The presence of the Holy Spirit would fill the building and I didn't know if heaven had come down to us or if we had gone up to heaven.

Such an experience happened in one meeting and the wind of God gently blew through the building, the ladies dresses were blowing yet not one window was open.

My sister Maisie felt the presence of Jesus directly in front of her and when she opened her eyes she saw an image of a person as pure as light, she was overwhelmed and shed tears of joy.

There was one particular meeting when Jack was going through a difficult time with his health. During the meeting he asked me and Paul to come and lay hands on and pray for him.

I didn't know about my brother, but I thought who am I to lay hands and pray for this man of God.

I cannot remember what I prayed but I know it wasn't full of faith, these were sad times.

Some time later at a meeting in his home he quoted the words of Jesus when He said 'You heard me say, I am going away and I am coming back to you. If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens so that when it does happen you will believe'.

It was as if Jack was telling us he was going away, I became very sad and didn't want to believe it.

Promoted

One Saturday, I called at their house and Pauline said that Jack was very ill. He was up stairs, in his pyjamas and in bed. His middle daughter Julia was knelt on the bed behind him with his head on her lap.

He had been ill for a long time but I'd never really seen him unwell, he hid it from us to protect us. His blood wasn't circulating so I took one of his hands and began to rub it and we prayed.

That evening Jack was rushed into hospital, he'd had a heart attack.

He had an agreement with Pauline that she would not act against his wishes unless he was incapable of making a decision. He believed in Divine Healing and that God would undertake for him. It was not until he collapsed that she took matters into her own hands, and rang the GP who was unavailable, so she rang the ambulance.

Jack was taken to casualty where he was examined but died whilst the examination was taking place – it was called myocardial infarction – explained as a blood clot to the heart.

When I heard that Jack had died I ran to my car and began to drive, tears flowing down my face. I didn't know where I was going, I just wanted to go anywhere, far away.

It was the Lord who stopped me and brought me to my senses telling me Jack had gone home to be with Him. A great sadness came over the whole fellowship; we could empathize with the disciples to some extent when Jesus was taken from them. If we were devastated, what must Pauline and the girls be going through?

Jack's Funeral

One of the most amazing testimonies I have ever witnessed was that of Pauline and the girls. I remember a friend of theirs, who was also the family doctor, coming to console the family just after Jack's death. They were so resolute in the Lord that she had to get up and leave after being there for just a short time, because she was ready to break down and cry.

She wasn't the type to be easily moved and wouldn't show her emotion in front of people so she said her goodbye's and quickly left.

Only God could have given them such fortitude in order to maintain their witness before their family and the church family who were distraught.

No, we didn't see their personal pain but it was surely there, in the night seasons and the quiet times, when the memories came flooding back.

I remember Pauline telling me about the shadow of death that came over her life to consume her but the Lord brought her through the valley of the shadow of death and I am thankful He did.

Jack's funeral was like no other funeral I had ever witnessed.

Yes people were coming to mourn his passing from this life into the presence of the Lord, but there was an overwhelming atmosphere of celebration for the life that he had lived.

Long before the service began his coffin was placed in the chapel area, with the lid at one side, so family and friends could see the body for the last time and pay their respects.

I was standing with some of my brothers and sisters and asked Molly if she was going to look at his body, but she said that she wouldn't because it would be more than she could bear.

I wasn't too sure if I should go but I did and saw something I had never seen before.

His body reminded me of one out of a Waxworks Museum, but looking at it I saw the resurrection, because Jack wasn't there, he was with the Lord and what was left was an empty shell. I saw the reality of everything that I had ever read in the Bible concerning the resurrection and now it all made perfect sense.

'You've got to go and look at Jack's body because if you do you will see the resurrection'. Molly must have seen the genuine expression of wonder on my face because she went; I also encouraged my other brothers and sisters to look as well.

At the funeral parlour I was given the job of standing on the staircase to welcome people as they came in and was amazed to see the amount of people who turned up.

Pauline and the girls were so very brave and were an encouragement to the church family, especially my own family, and I.

Her middle daughter Julia led the worship, and Deborah and Sharon were such a great encouragement to all around them.

Before long the chapel was full and a crowd gathered at the door until people overflowed into the entrance hall so much so that I couldn't get into the service so stood with all those outside.

After the chapel service the cortege headed for the cemetery and a long, long line of cars followed.

A large crowd gathered at the graveside for the committal and an elderly minister called Lawrence Livesey was asked to pray.

His prayer was beautiful as he thanked God for Jack's life and prayed His blessings on the family.

This gentleman had in fact been Jack's mentor at the beginning of his spiritual life and even when he had been founding churches in India they had always kept in touch so it was good to have him take part in the service around the grave.

After the coffin was lowered into the earth and the committal ended, people broke out in spontaneous praise and worship, it seemed that no-one wanted to leave the graveside.

The ladies from the church had prepared a tea and the majority of the mourners, including those who had come from London, returned to Pauline's home to share in this meal.

Although it was a sad time it was also a time of rejoicing as we shared memories of Jack and how he had blessed and helped us, all agreed that our spiritual growth had been influenced by his teaching.

In the days that followed the funeral we discovered as we talked amongst ourselves that he had visited around 12 to 14 people on the day before he died – one person remarked

that she couldn't remember what they had talked about but she remembered the Godly sheen on his face as they shared about Jesus.

Car Accident

After this time of eating and sharing which lasted until the end of the day I was driving Molly, Fay and my nephew Nigel home.

Fay lived at the top of a hill so I dropped her off first and after saying our farewells pulled away and was ready to turn left onto the main road which in turn went down a steep hill. I put my foot on the brakes in order to stop at the junction but nothing happened.

In panic, I shouted 'hang on the brakes aren't working', turned the steering wheel sharp left and pumped the brakes, but the car continued moving forward. Thank God there was nothing coming in either direction as we went through the junction.

I realised we were heading down this very steep hill, I had no time to think what I could do.

I could hear Molly, who was in the back seat, praying. I had to find a way to stop the car, so I turned the steering wheel left full lock and deliberately headed for a garden wall.

I thought if we go down the hill the car will rapidly pick up speed and we will all be killed, so it would be better to hit the wall then only the car would be damaged.

We crashed causing us to lunge forwards and backwards in our seats.

Nigel and I, who were sitting in the front were alright but when I looked behind at Molly she had blood running down from her bottom lip. She had reached forward to try to

protect us and collided with the back of our seats, she was the only one hurt.

This was typical of Molly not to think of herself but to try to protect those that she loved.

Fay had heard the crash and came running to help and before long an ambulance had arrived and took us to the hospital.

I phoned Pauline's home to speak to the co-pastor to let him know I could not return. I had said after dropping my family off I would go back to transport other people home.

He wasn't there, but the next thing I knew, Pauline had arrived at the very same hospital where Jack had passed away earlier in the week. This was because the co-pastor and all the other people with cars had already left her home so she was the only one available to come out.

She told me later that she'd a great dread about returning to the hospital, but because of the circumstances she didn't hesitate to come, and when she realised where she was, that dread was broken.

Molly survived the crash with just the loss of her two bottom front teeth but it could have been tragic if the Lord hadn't been protecting us.

The police, who attended the accident, had my car towed away saying if they found out the brakes had failed, because I had not maintained them, I could be prosecuted.

When they did get round to testing the brakes they found them to be working ok and said that a grain of dirt must have got into the system.

No more was said about the accident, but I didn't get a penny payment for my Princess car through the insurance.

The headstone which was eventually placed on Jack's grave read John (Jack) Fleming 'Promoted' and this really summed the whole day up.

Pauline

After the funeral I made a point of visiting Pauline and the girls. Other members from the fellowship also visited but over a period of months their visits decreased as they had their own families and situations to deal with, but I kept on visiting.

I would say 'come on get your coats and let's go to Blackpool' and off we would go and have a great day.

We had become good friends whilst Jack was alive, and could talk for hours; looking back I'm not sure what we talked about but we certainly enjoyed each other's company.

We spent a lot of time working on the church magazine and in administration, besides planning church events.

After Jack's death we saw a lot of each other at the Sunday meeting's and mid week housegroup's, we also worked together doing the Sunday School and I would preach every so often at the Sunday services.

One night we had been out and as we went our separate ways Pauline said something that intimated that our relationship might be more than friendship. Like most men I was slow to pick up on this.

The following evening I had promised to take her to the bon-fire at Witton Park. Watching the fire being lit and then seeing the firework display was really great, and then we made our way back to my flat at Mill Hill, had a drink and something to eat, and talked.

I finally asked her the burning question, 'you said something last night that indicated our relationship might be more than friendship'.

She said 'yes, I love you'.

I thought what, how can anybody love me? I had to ask her again. She said plainly and simply 'I love you'.

Time and eternity stood still and what seemed like an enormous explosion of ecstasy rushed through my being.

'Do you know what this means, this means for the rest of our lives?' She replied 'I know'.

As she was leaving Pauline said 'do you not think we should kiss?'

I was still in a daze 'Oh yes, of course' and kissed her on the cheek, we married 14 months later.

I knew that my God had brought this immense love into my life and to a great extent through this He was also showing His love for me.

I was never meant to go through life on my own as Jack had been wise enough to point out to me at the break up of my first marriage.

Over the next weeks and months I was ecstatic, overjoyed, elated, what am I saying, 25 years on I'm still euphoric.

At this point in time I feel that we are experiencing some of the best years of our lives together – what is more – the best is yet to come!!!!

I am the richest man in the world. My pet name for Pauline is 'Heart' we just got that close to each other and our life together is filled with what I call 'high adventure'.

Pauline's singing voice was trained when she was young and she sings soprano. There have been times when we have attended Christian meetings and both men and

women have come over to her saying how blessed they were by her singing.

I would say, especially to the ladies 'hey, that was me singing'. They would look at me for a second or two not knowing how to take me, and then seeing the smile on my face we would all have a good laugh, it saved Pauline from getting embarrassed.

Some years ago she saw a musical instrument call an omnicord and fell in love with it.

It wasn't long before she bought one and taught herself to play it. She now has the latest model and it's called a Q-chord, and sounds like a one person orchestra. She felt guilty about spending the money to purchase it, and yet many people have been blessed as she plays it and sings.

I recall a time when we were on holiday in Gran Canaria having a drink at one of the many coffee-bars. Two musicians were playing; one on a keyboard, the other would inter-change using about four or five instruments.

When they played 'The Skye Boat Song' Pauline began to sing, when the musicians heard her they stopped and asked who is was that was singing. One of the female customers said it's the lady over there pointing to Pauline. So they called her out to join them asking if she was with Scottish Opera, to which she said 'no'.

They passed her a microphone and started the introduction, when Pauline started singing, people walking past stopped to listen.

She has a powerful voice projection even without using a microphone, so with it her voice carried quite a distance and sounded absolutely beautiful.

I've always been proud of her but; I can say honestly that night I was full of admiration.

She enjoys singing enormously and thanks the Lord for giving her a beautiful voice.

On many occasions I have listened to her leading the praise and worship and witnessed the presence of the Holy Spirit come into the room. Sometimes I do not think she is aware of the anointing on her life.

Above all things she is a Bible Teacher, loves researching the Word of God; expounding and explaining it in an amplified way.

She has led a number of house groups, ladies meetings, teaching seminars, run a Sunday school, and preached at different churches, plus much more.

She longs to see the kingdom of her God advancing with Christians growing and fulfilling their ministries; she loves the truth and will not suffer fools gladly.

Chapter 17

Divine Intervention

One day I was at home with Pauline and my brother Paul, we were sitting at the dining table having just finished a meal when the phone rang.

Pauline answered it and at the sound of her voice we knew there was some distressing news.

The person on the phone was a young man, a member of our fellowship and he wanted to speak to Paul who was his pastor. This young man was in his early teens and played the drums at the church services, he was slim built, a pleasant lad and came faithfully every Sunday travelling about eight miles.

Pauline encouraged him and put my brother on the phone, and while he was talking to Paul she told me that his mum was in hospital for tests and they had now confirmed she had cancer. His dad had said that he didn't want anyone religious going to see her. After my brother had encouraged him and was going to hang up I asked to speak to him.

'Listen when Jesus was here He healed the sick and worked miracles, have faith and do not give up'.

I hung up and turned to my wife and Paul. There were some words inside me which were 'she will not die but live' so I asked if the Lord had spoken to either of them that day.

They looked at each other searchingly, Pauline shook her head saying no, but Paul said there was one thing that had been impressed on him that morning. Psalm 118 verse 17.

'I shall not die but live, and declare the works of the Lord'.

When he said that, my spirit jumped within me. I said that Lord had put these same words on my heart as I spoke to the young man on the telephone, she will not die but live’.

‘The Lord is going to heal her’.

We were excited but didn’t quite know what to do; I couldn’t keep still and finally said ‘we have got to go to the hospital’.

I phoned our young friend and telling him I believed the Lord was going to heal his mum and we were coming to take him to the hospital, encouraging him to just believe and see what Jesus would do.

‘Sweetheart you stay here and pray, we will go to the hospital’ I said to Pauline.

I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that the Lord was going to perform a healing.

I didn’t speak whilst on the journey; but kept focused on the task in hand, sensing an amazing presence of the Holy Spirit I had absolute confidence in what He was about to do, and was preparing my heart to be obedient.

We picked the young man up on the way to the hospital as arranged. Arriving at his home I could see his eyes were red from crying. He was with his friend and they had been painting to keep themselves busy.

‘Are you ready we’re going to the hospital and if you believe - you will see the Lord heal your mum?’

The four of us arrived and I spoke to the nurse explaining that Paul and I were ministers and requested to see the young man’s mum.

We were aware that it was not visiting hours, but she told us that it was not a problem and we could go right in and see her.

I told the young man to first go and ask his mum if she wanted to see us.

As he went I said 'Lord if this is of you make a way for us'.

I was bearing in mind what his dad had said, about not wanting anyone religious going to see his wife.

Our young friend returned with a big smile on his face and said 'she will see you'.

My brother sat on the chair I sat at the side of her bed, looking at this lovely lady.

'I have never met you before but the Lord has told me that if you are willing he will heal you'. I explained the events which had led up to this moment and how the Lord had confirmed His word from Psalm 118, asking if she wanted me to pray for her to which she answered with a sincere 'yes'.

The Holy Spirit opened my eyes and I saw a spirit of cancer.

I spoke to it quietly and directly, rebuking it and commanding it to leave her body in the Name of Jesus. Then thanked the Lord for what he had done and after spending a few minutes reassuring her that all would now be well we left the hospital.

As we were driving away the awesome sense of the Holy Spirit's presence which I had felt from leaving home up until then, left.

I had the strangest feeling; it was as if I'd had no part in what had just happened. It was the Holy Spirit who had healed her; I was just a channel that He used for that period of time.

The following Saturday at our daughter Julia's twenty first 'fancy dress' birthday party our young friend appeared.

I saw him skipping down the room to the food bar where I was standing. He was wearing an Indian outfit, and had the biggest of smiles on his face.

'The doctors examined my mum again and cannot find the cancer, even my dad said we know who has done this', meaning God.

What a time we had rejoicing and praising as well as celebrating a birthday; all who heard about it were amazed and so very thankful.

Bridgewater Limited

After finishing on the Man Power Services Commission scheme, which only ran for one year, it was difficult to find another job. As always I would talk to my God asking for guidance, and it wasn't long after that I saw a job advertised at Bridgewater Limited for a labourer in the factory warehouse.

I applied and was invited to an interview; I had a very nice three piece pinstripe suit which I wore for this. The managing director was a morally good man, a man of principles. During the interview he stressed a number of times that the work was hard. I said 'Sir I am a hard worker, and can do anything that is asked of me'. He must have seen the sincerity on my face because he decided to give me a start.

I was so pleased to be able to go home and tell Pauline that I had got the job. The company was a franchise stocking two main products, Polypropylene plastic sheets (German) and Steel knives (Austrian), these were used in the cutting industry for a wide range of products including envelopes, shoes, saddlery, boxes, and most leather goods to mention just a few.

The steel knives were highly strung on a roll and had to be put in a purpose built device before they could be opened.

Otherwise they would spring open like a giant watch spring, and could cause major lacerations or even kill a person.

I was told that on one occasion the restraining bands had snapped when a worker was moving a reel and the steel knife ripped through the cardboard box and severely cut the man.

Polypropylene plastic was in lengths of about 30 feet long, 2 feet wide and 2 to 4 inches thick. Our job was to cut them in 5, 6 or 8 foot lengths depending on the type of cutting press they were to be used on. Two layers of 1 inch plywood was glued to the Polypropylene plastic and put into a press to dry. These were known as cutting boards and were quite heavy to lift or carry.

On my first day two cutting boards were dropped of at the warehouse door for some repair work, the foreman picked one up and started carrying it to the bench so; I picked up the second cutting board and began to follow him. He said 'be careful cock they're heavy!' What an under statement, it nearly gave me a hernia, I thought if this is what this job entails I'm never going to be able to do it, little did I know that I could have used a sack truck. The foreman was a strong bloke and I was only ten and a half stone at that time.

I worked with a guy called Joe, and he used to make me laugh. There was an industrial planer and when a cutting board was put in, the machine locked-in gripped the board making it jump up about two to three inches.

One morning I saw him putting a cutting board in the planer, he had his head low down looking to direct it in, but

as the cutting board locked-in it jumped up and hit him on the chin, I could hear the crack from the bench-saw where I was working.

There was another occasion when he was working on the bench saw stripping a cutting board by knocking the nails out using a punch and hammer.

I would glance up occasionally and see him swivelling around in a circle blowing on his thumb. I couldn't help laughing to myself as I pretended not to notice that he had hit it with the hammer.

He used to fly model planes at Pleasington playing fields.

'Can you believe it despite all the grass that is there, my plane has to land in the middle of the concrete road and get smashed to bits, all because I tried to avoid hitting a lady when it was landing. I must be accident prone'.

He went on to tell the story about the time when he and his wife were in a traffic jam and she saw something out of her passenger window and shouted for him to have a look. He said that he must have glanced across for a second, the next thing he knew he had bumped into the back of the car in front of him.

Another time he was working under the bonnet of his Citroen car when a gust of wind lifted the bonnet; it fell back and smacked him right on the head trapping him in the car engine.

I wanted to laugh out loud, but he was so matter of fact and serious, that I didn't, I saved it until later when I was on my own.

Promotion

After working at Bridgewater for a time I got unsettled and wanted more, I didn't want to do factory work all my life, because I felt I had more to offer.

Pauline said that she believed that Mr. Blackmore the MD was going to offer me a job as a sales representative.

I looked at her as if she had two heads, he had just appointed a young man as sales representative and it didn't look like he was going to be giving it up in the near future.

'I don't know how, but God will get you that sales representative job and he will do it before Christmas'.

'Sweetheart it's about five weeks to Christmas but if you say that the Lord has said this I will not argue against it'.

I did begin to tell my workmates that I was going to become a sales representative, it was a faith confession, because there was no opening for this, and the foreman did not want to loose me from the factory, I was a good and conscientious worker.

When I first joined the company there were two sales people one of them was a young man called Adrian who I remembered from St. Peter's School, so I made myself known to him. Apparently he had initially worked in the factory but Mr. Blackmore had sent him to some of the firms to deliver their orders. He got such good feed back from them because having worked in the factory he was able to answer any queries they might have, and they could tell that he knew what he was talking about.

So it was decided to make him a sales representative and he proved to be well liked. The other sales representative was called Alec he was an older man.

Eventually business increased and another sales representative was needed and Billy was selected.

He had previously been employed by the company as a van driver, and was very cocky. I went out with him one day to make a delivery, travelling in the Volvo estate which was the car set aside for his use.

He would drive down the motorway at ninety miles an hour, wearing sunglasses, one hand on the wheel the other resting on the open window. I thought one mistake and we've had it, I did not feel safe at all.

Two weeks before Christmas all the staff received a Christmas bonus, I was given over five hundred pounds. Most complained because they had received a larger bonus the previous year, but that was because that year the sales figures had been better.

I had no idea that they paid a Christmas bonus so I was highly delighted, so was Pauline.

On the following Monday when I was in the warehouse I could see a lady from the office talking to one of the van drivers, and the news soon spread around the factory floor that Billy had taken the company car out over the weekend; and crashed it, damaging it quite badly. The problem was made more serious because he had been drinking and was well over the limit.

A few days later the MD asked me to come to the office where he told me that he had checked out the situation with a friend who was a police inspector and confirmed that Billy would lose his licence, he went on to ask me if I would take his position as sales representative for the company.

I was highly delighted and so was Pauline when I told her, but she already knew the job was mine because the Lord had previously shown her.

Please do not get the idea that God caused the accident, He didn't. In His foreknowledge He knew what was going to happen so could tell Pauline that the job was to be mine.

The following week I came home with a navy blue Volvo estate and looking at it from the bedroom window it look a bit like a hearse.

This was the oldest car owned by the company and was allocated for my use. When I went out to visit clients if I stopped to map read, but kept the engine running, it vibrated so much that it became impossible to read the map, until I turned the engine off.

Eventually it was replaced with a silver Volvo estate two litre injection. I loved it, so did Pauline and our pet dog Becky.

As a national sales representative I travelled through England from the Lake District in Cumbria across to Blyth north of Newcastle in Northumberland down to London north of the river and across to Bridgewater in Devon where I visited Clarks Shoes.

I was privileged to see the seasons change over the years especially in the Lake District. One day I saw the snow coming down and it covered the mountains near Keswick like icing sugar, with the scene changing before my very eyes, it was a spectacular sight.

When I travelled back from Leeds at night the yellow and white lights on the motorway seemed to meander across the valleys and hills like an enormous gold and pearl necklace.

I saw some spectacular fireworks going off as I made my way home during the evenings leading up to bonfire night, and the Christmas decorations in towns and cities across England were a sight to behold.

During this time most people were in a festive mood, we gave calendars to our customers, as well as expensive wine and malt liquors to those who had spent a great deal of money on our products over the year.

After working for Bridgewater for three and a half years I became unsettled and again felt that there was more that I should be doing.

After all my experiences in life I had a desire to work with people who were vulnerable and going through difficulties. I mentioned this to Mr. Blackmore who was very understanding; I arranged to leave three months later.

By this time his son had come into the business, he would eventually take over on his father's retirement.

I liked this young man immensely because he too was a really genuine person, and like his dad a man of good morals and principles.

When I left Bridgewater I was presented with a gold pen and on it was inscribed 'Jesus is Lord'. The downside was, I had to give the company car back, and this was a great loss.

Chapter 18

Working with the Homeless

I worked for the next twelve months trying to set up my own business as a private sales representative, thinking this would give me the finances and more time to begin to work with people needing help, especially those who had messed up lives and needed to find the answer, just as I had.

This was one of the wrong avenues that I went down and all credit to Pauline, she was so patient and understanding. One day I went to see a probation officer who got me started working voluntarily with the probation service; this was a bit of an eye opener particularly during the group work sessions.

One of the lads was saying when he committed a burglary the people at that house would get their insurance payment and nobody was worse off.

I asked what about the people whose house you violated, their insurance, and everybody else's goes up as a result. He said 'what's that to me'.

On another occasion there was a female probation officer leading the group, some negative comments were made about Hitler.

'Don't, talk about Adolph Hitler like that, he is my hero'. I finished up shaking my head thinking I do not believe what I'm hearing, and she's in charge of this group.

My step-daughter Julia knew a man who worked at a project housing homeless people in Blackburn, and they were looking for a project worker.

I went to the project, which was a ten to fifteen minute walk from home, and spoke to the manager telling him that I

was willing to work for nothing for a trial period and then if he thought I was any good he could employ me.

'Why work for nothing when you can have a wage', was his answer. He took me on there and then as a relief project worker. He gave me a brief induction about the work involved in the 14 bed roomed hostel, a bunch of keys, and said that he would see me in the morning.

So began my first night shift, and some of the residents 'tried me out' saying they were allowed to do this and that, I replied that I would confirm it with the permanent staff in the morning.

As I was coming away from the building after handing over to the day staff, it felt really good, as if I was doing something of some worth.

I was to be with this Housing Association for the next ten and a half years.

There was a Christian called Gary who worked at the project, he was the one who had mentioned me to the manager. He asked me how I would get on when I knew that some of the clients were sleeping with each other; he felt this would offend my Christian values.

I replied that I could not be held responsible, as a Christian, for what they did, but if I was not there to be a witness and show them a different way of living, how would they hear. If I put it like that then he supposed I was right was his reply.

The work was very rewarding, but you received very little thanks from the clients, no matter how hard you worked on their behalf.

One of them committed arson in the empty property next door to the project; the flames were lapping out of the windows setting fire to the trees next to our property. As

smoke billowed into the air, we heard the siren from the fire engine as it came up Montague Street rounding the corner and coming onto next doors drive. There wasn't enough evidence to prosecute our client.

On another occasion we had a client call Will in the office, he had a serious drink problem, and whilst sitting in front of it, kept banging his head on the desk quite hard. The manager said 'Will don't do that you are going to damage our desk', but when we tried to stop him he became aggressive. We had to restrain him by literally sitting on him while the housekeeper phoned the police.

He lost his place at the project and I never heard what became of him, but I did have an opportunity to share my testimony with him before this incident.

I used a magazine full of coloured pictures; this explained how Jesus could help him and change his life just as He had changed mine. He asked if he was going to hell and I answered yes he was, but if he turned his life over to Jesus this would change.

Unfortunately because of his drink problem he had to be moved on and I lost contact with him.

Sharing My Faith

From time to time I was able to share with residents and staff alike about my Christian experience. I had written in brief about 'Walking to Rome', had it printed in booklet form and was able to pass it on to people.

I shared my story with the housekeeper who was called June as well as stories of others who had been dramatically saved. There were times when I was aware that the Holy Spirit was speaking to her through me.

She said to me one day ‘why it is always hardened criminals who have these dramatic experiences and become Christians?’

I thought to myself well that must have been the only stories I have shared with her.

I told her the story of little Mary who was in her seventy’s and lived at Mill Hill whilst I was there, and about her sister-in-law Sadie.

Sadie spent hours telling Mary about the Lord and how He had died to save us and bring us into His own family. She would talk to Mary until she was blue in the face, but it all seemed to go over her head, until one day Mary heard this same message from someone else, but this time God spoke to her heart and she was wonderfully saved.

Even though she was a nice person and had not led a wicked life she needed to be ‘born again’ because that’s what Jesus said people needed to do.

Joy asked. ‘What’s ‘born again - I thought that it was an American saying, I didn’t know it was written in the Bible.’

I explained that it was written in the Gospel of John chapter three and verse three, and Jesus had explained the meaning of this verse by saying that the truth was no-one can come into the kingdom of God unless they are born again, so that is where the saying originated from.

June had been a Jehovah’s witnesses for about twelve years but was put off by their beliefs regarding Christmas.

Along with her husband Barry she was discouraged from going to the Christmas nativity play to watch their grandchildren. Her son-in-law was a strong Roman Catholic and always invited them to go, so this played a large part in their reluctance to fully commit to JW beliefs.

Alpha

We had been thinking and praying about starting an Alpha course and Pauline wanted to ask Barry and June to come.

I mentioned the course and she asked me what it was about. I explained that Alpha is an opportunity to explore the meaning of life in an informal, fun and friendly environment. The course consists of a series of talks, looking at topics including 'Who is Jesus?', 'Why and how do I pray?', and 'Does God Heal Today?'

They are carried out on a weekly basis each is followed by refreshments and a discussion; giving listeners an opportunity to ask questions and express their views.

The Alpha Course is for everyone; no questions that people will ask are too hard and no questions are too simple. People are free to discuss as much or as little as they wish.

We didn't assume people had any background knowledge of, or belief in, Christianity, it was free and everyone was welcome. She seemed to be interested.

Pauline and I were driving past their house and they were both at the front door. I pulled over to have a quick word, and as we moved away Pauline said, 'don't forget June the Alpha course starts tomorrow, you also Barry'.

We received a little grin in reply, I thought Barry coming to Alpha, no way!

Oh you of little faith, the following night as people were arriving I saw both of them coming through the door, I was amazed that Barry had come.

After watching the video it was time for a discussion and the people were encouraged to ask any questions they needed answering.

The first video which was entitled 'Christianity: Boring, Untrue and Irrelevant', it covered issues like objection, misconceptions and asked the question what has Christianity to do with life today.

It was remarkable how the presentation had brought out an amazing amount of facts which were substantiated in the Bible.

'What about all the other religions in the world, don't they all lead to God?' was the question asked by Barry at discussion time.

I thought how do I answer this, had I the time I could have brought out facts but needed an answer for him there and then.

I asked the Lord and the answer came right away. 'If you take all the other religions and removed the head they would carry on. For instance if you remove the Pope from Roman Catholicism another Pope will take his place or if you remove the King or Queen from Head of the Church of England another King or Queen will take over. Religions are about men seeking God; Christianity is about God coming to seek man. Religion is about keeping a lot of rules, Christianity is about a relationship. If you take Christ out of Christianity you have nothing'.

I went on to tell the group about an illustration I'd heard.

If you were walking down a road and at the end you reached a crossroad but didn't know which way to go. You saw Buda, Confucius and Mohammad who are all dead, and then you saw Jesus who is alive. Who would you ask for directions, was not the answer obvious?

Barry thought about it 'yep that makes sense'.

A few weeks into the course I asked him how he was doing. Asking if I remembered the part about the Holman Hunt picture 'Jesus Light of the World' where He is standing outside a door knocking and there was no handle on the outside.

'Nicky who was the programme presenter said we have to open the door because the handle is on the inside. Well I've got my hand on the handle, but I'm hesitant about opening it to let Him in'.

I told him from past experience I had found when people were that close to giving their lives to Jesus it could take place in their own homes. People had then gone home thought about what I had said and come to the next Alpha meeting, their faces gleaming, saying 'last night when I went home, I asked Jesus to come into my heart'.

I explained that after all, the relationship was between a person and God; he said he would give it a lot of thought. I will never forget the night when this lovely couple came through the door and Barry's face was beaming.

'I did it; I gave my life to Jesus'.

He went on to tell us he was in bed and had decided to read the booklet by Nicky Gumbel called 'Why Jesus'.

'Right I'm going to do it' and he asked Jesus to forgive his sins and received him as Lord and Saviour.

His wife said 'I can see the difference already; when he was reversing his car out of the garage the other day he caught the bumper on the garage door and pulled it off. I was waiting for the swearing, and all I heard, to my amazement was Hallelujah, Praise God. So I know he's saved', she had also given her life to the Lord around the same time.

Sharing Together

Once at work I asked her, if she had told Gary she had become a Christian, she hadn't but was waiting for the right time.

Gary and his wife were good friends of theirs having known them for many years.

Gary had been a Salvation Army captain and over the years had done a great deal of work for the organisation, collecting money on the streets and managing understaffed hostels.

When they had children they found it very difficult, the environment wasn't suitable for raising two young boys, so they felt it was time to move on.

They received no help and finished up living in unsuitable empty accommodation. It was Barry and June who enabled them to get on their feet, providing furniture and work; so Gary had a deep appreciation for them both.

I think it might have been on the next day, when June and Gary went to get provisions for the project, that she told him about her salvation. When they returned, with the shopping, I was in the kitchen. Gary walked in with four carrier bags; he had a big beaming smile across his face. 'She has told me about becoming a Christian'.

He dropped the bags on the kitchen floor, couldn't stop because he had more shopping to bring in and was parked on double yellow lines. 'Did she tell you about her husband?'

He turned his head to one side and nodded,

'Yes, she did'.

He couldn't wait to get the rest of the shopping in, and park his car, in order to get back to the office and talk to June and I.

He could hardly comprehend what had happened and I do believe it was one of the happiest days in his life, knowing that his very good friends had become Christians.

Gary along with his wife and their two sons came to the church which met in our home each Sunday and mid-week after the Alpha sessions had finished.

They were all musicians and between them led the music, we had some wonderful meetings. As a church group we supported an event called 'Champion of the World' and organised a coach from Blackburn to Wembley Stadium, where tens of thousands of Christians gathered to listen to and join in praise and worship.

At the end of the concert we were told of a remarkable occurrence. Apparently the forecast for the day was that it would be overcast with torrential rain.

The event organiser said that the local weather report for London was, rain had been falling all over the city except for the area over Wembley. The Christians gathered there had been praying for the rain to keep off because the bands were performing on the field, in the open air.

Answered Prayer

Some time later June heard that Barry had passed out at work and feared it was a heart attack.

After a series of tests it was diagnosed that he had an illness along the lines of tinnitus, and this would eventually lead to a disability causing him to finish up in a wheelchair.

One night I had a dream and in the dream the Lord said that I was to pray for him and He would heal him.

I shared this at the next meeting, and June burst out crying. After a short time when she had been consoled she said

'I knew that the Lord was going to heal him' and she went on to explain.

She told us, every day when I walk to work I go past Corporation Park and I always associate the park with Gods creation.

One day I heard a voice saying 'I'm going to heal him you know'. The voice was so audible I looked around but could see nobody. As I walked on I heard the voice again saying 'I'm going to heal him you know', she realised then that it was the Lord speaking to her.

In the days which followed, as she was taking the same route to work, she was contemplating what she had previously heard.

'Lord was that really you, if it was can you give me a sign?'

Immediately a car pulled alongside and the driver asked for directions to the YMCA. Looking inside the car she could see a small cross on the dashboard.'

Lord is this, the sign I asked for?'

She was thinking so much about it that she directed the person all over the place; the YMCA was only about two streets away.

The following day she wasn't convinced that it had been a sign from the Lord, and asked for confirmation. Looking up she saw the air stream from two airliners which had crossed leaving a gigantic sign of a cross in the sky. She told us she knew then, that this was the sign.

As she shared this with the group we all laughed especially Gary who laughed the loudest, for which he apologised, explaining that he could see the funny side.

'At first you said that you wanted a sign from the Lord and he showed you the cross on the dashboard of the car.

Then, because you were not sure if that was a sign, you asked for confirmation and the Lord showed you this massive sign in the sky as if to say 'is that big enough'. We could all see the funny side now.

I asked Barry if he was willing for me to pray for him, as the Lord had shown me, he was more than happy.

When I prayed nothing dramatic happen, it was just a simple and quiet prayer but spoken with authority.

Over the next few weeks and months he came off his medication and had no further problems with the condition.

A Second Chance

We had another young woman who was training as a mental health nurse at Queens Park hospital attending Alpha called Janice.

One night Pauline found a carrier bag outside the front door of our home, it contained the Alpha Course books and a note from her saying that she found it too hard and challenging so she was not going to come again. A few weeks later she phoned, she was missing everybody and really could not do without the Alpha Course and could she come back, we laughed and told her that the group was really missing her, so please come back.

During the course Janice became a Christian and came to the church meetings which followed. Then she was baptised in her home town of Keighley and some of her family came to the service. She later moved to Australia, married and joined a church there.

Gary and his family also moved on, he became a minister in Colne, and Barry and June joined a Church of

England in Blackburn and eventually were used in running a number of Alpha Courses.

Pauline and I look back on those days with fond memories, whilst we were sad that the church group, meeting in our home had run its course, we rejoiced in the fact that God had moved these people on to serve Him in different areas. Indeed he had pre-warned us that this would happen and encouraged us to bless these people and send them out with joy when it did.

Chapter 19

The Shop

Pauline had been working as Company Secretary for an interior design company and was beginning to find the going difficult as they had a lot of debts and had gone into liquidation once before under a previous name.

She spent most of her time trying to balance the books and keeping the tax man and creditors at bay, I could see it was wearing her down and out of the blue buying a business for her to run, seemed an option, like we had loads of money, I don't think.....!!!!

On one occasion she was outside the shops on East Park Road in Blackburn. Standing outside the wool shop, she felt this was the business the Lord was providing for her, so she placed her hand on the shop wall and said 'Lord if this place was for sale and meant for me I would like it - and in Jesus Name I claim it'.

Later on that day when she was at home she thought out of curiosity I will look at businesses for sale on the internet, she came across the web site for Thomas Shaw Estate Agents and to her amazement saw that the wool shop on East Park Road was for sale.

At the first opportunity she told me what had happened and showed me the website.

'Do you think the Lord is trying to tell us something? If so let's make an appointment, go ahead and have a look at it' I advised.

We went to view the premises and met the proprietor and her husband. Pauline saw the shop with its contents and potential, I saw the cellar which measured sixteen feet by

twenty seven feet, and thought surely we can start a work for the Lord here.

Pauline had never been inside the shop before so when she was shown around she thought this will be a challenge, but I can do it, when we saw the upstairs lounge, we were sold.

It was big and spacious with a beautiful stone built fireplace made of hand cut stone. There was also a very large attic room with a louvered window which opened out onto the roof; this was going to prove ideal as an oil painting studio where I would spend many a happy hour.

We put our house on the market and waited for a buyer who would give us the asking price. One Asian gentleman came with about five members of his family. Looking around he asked how many bedrooms it had, I told him three large bedrooms to which replied that he was looking for a four bed roomed house. I couldn't understand why he had come when it was advertised as having 3 bedrooms, probably just to be nosy.

A friend and neighbour, who was a retired medical doctor, said she thought we'd never get the asking price and went on to tell us that a number of people in the area hadn't sold their properties until they considerably reduced the price.

We explained that we were trusting in God, but she believed that we should face reality. We almost got the asking price, and negotiated for a reduction on the shop, and before we knew it we were moving in.

We had many happy memories of Winston Road and of the friends we'd made whilst living there, but now it was time to move on.

One of these was a lovely Asian lady called Fatima. She had called to visit one day and was complaining about pains in her hand.

Pauline offered to pray for her and then did.

A few days later they were chatting together and this was mentioned.

‘Oh, I’d forgotten all about it. The pain went after you’d prayed’.

Our God does not have barriers relating to creed or race, He is the same for everyone.

We had been the organisers of a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme for the area, run from our home. It had also been the place where many overseas visitors had stayed with us when we were part of Blackburn Christian Fellowship as well as being used for different activities by other church groups.

I do believe that the shop on East Park Road was the biggest property we had ever owned. At the back of the retail area was a dining room and large kitchen measuring forty two feet in length, part of this was an extension.

Upstairs, over the shop area, was the lounge, then there were two large bedrooms and a bathroom with a separate walk in shower, all on the same floor. Above these on the next level was the very large attic space which had been converted into another bedroom – then there was the cellar area.

God’s Place

Over the next twelve months I worked on the cellar converting it into a cellar-coffee bar. It was a job-and-a-half just emptying it, especially the massive work bench left by the previous owners before it became a wool shop.

They were plumbers, and this bench had been made out of railway sleepers. There was a steel girder which supported the whole upstairs part of the building running across the middle of the cellar and two angle irons measuring 16 feet in length also spanning the room. These had been used as a place for storing plumbing pipes.

I had to figure out how to get these angle irons out because they were fastened into the wall at either side of the room.

As always when I had a difficult problem to resolve I asked the Lord and as quick as a flash I knew exactly what to do.

I would cut the angle brackets in the middle with my angle grinder and pull them out.

It worked a treat so I went to tell Pauline, but instead of saying angle brackets I said girder and she nearly had fit.

She had visions of the whole premises collapsing.

'No, No not girder, I meant the angle brackets'.

'Thank goodness for that!' she said still puffing and blowing.

The next job was to board out all of the walls and ceiling, putting up-lights on the wall and down-lights on the ceiling, also to install a ring circuit. I asked advice from a friend who was an electrician, which he gladly gave, and a friend from church, who was a joiner by trade, came, and helped as and when he could.

When our daughter Julia came on a visit from Italy, with her husband and family, Giuseppe also pitched in and helped, which was very useful.

I built wall-seating along either wall maximising the space and asked my brother-in-law if he would help with the upholstery. He showed me how a craftsman cut and covered

the foam seating and was pleased to help, for which we were very thankful.

I installed the kitchen doing the entire pipe work myself and fitted a wooden floor, before putting the units in, and then I continued with the rest of the room.

One evening I had put the cement on a plaster mould and was pressing it to the ceiling until it gripped when I heard a popping sound coming from the kitchen, and gushing water.

I do not believe this I thought, and let the length of moulding drop behind me, rushing to the stop tap as water poured out.

There were a few more calamities but nothing Pauline and I, with the Lord's help, couldn't handle.

Some of them were very frustrating especially the incident at the beginning when all the building materials etc., were in the middle of the room and the drains backed up and overflowed into the cellar.

Pauline had seen a large amount of water outside the entrance and gone to investigate.

We didn't realize that so many building materials were able to float – water had come in up to a level of about 12 inches – it was dirty and smelly.

She was distraught and telephoned me at work but there was nothing I could do until I arrived home.

A rubber bung was built into the door threshold and we had to sweep the water (and other things) out through this until it was clear, then came the cleaning up process.

A similar incident occurred at a later date, these were usually after major downpours and as ours was the last cellar on the terrace we suffered the most.

Eventually United Utilities acknowledged that the problem was theirs and dealt with it.

When the cellar coffee bar was completed we called it God's Place, and had an opening evening, dedicating it to be used for the Lords work.

During the time we ran God's Place we had family reunions, breakfast meetings for church leaders, teaching events including 'Beating Burn Out' and 'Marriage Matters', music evenings, quiz nights, film evenings and Alpha Courses.

We provided light refreshments like toast with a topping, soup, and a variety of ready meals. People remarked on the peaceful atmosphere which they experienced when they came to any of the events.

Chapter 20

Family Re-union

One day when I arrived home from work Pauline said 'get washed and ready we are going to Mammy's, there is someone who has come to see you who you have not seen for a long time'. I stood for a while pondering who she could mean, but couldn't bring anyone to mind. She said 'your daughter Kirsty is at your mum's waiting for you'.

We had been praying for Kirsty for the past twenty one years, but I could hardly take it in that she was at Mammy's.

Pauline went on to tell me that she hadn't wanted to phone me at work to break the news. I was working in Burnley and would have to travel home on the motorway, so I might have been distracted, and she did not want me to have an accident.

I was still in a daze as we drove to Mammy's I didn't have a clue as to what Kirsty would look like or what sort of a life she had been living.

We arrived, and with anticipation I braced myself and walked in. When I first looked at her I saw Kelly, her mum and my first wife. It was a shock because it brought back all the painful memories for a brief time.

It was a moving experience for us both because twenty one years had been lost out of our relationship.

Kelly and her partner had brought Kirsty to Mammy's house, dropped her off saying they would return after a certain length of time.

We talked for a short time and then, when her mum returned, we took all three back to our home, Kirsty travelled

with me whilst Pauline went with Kelly and her partner to show them the way.

I will never forget her saying 'where were you dad? There were times when I needed you'.

I tried to explain the way things had been between Kelly and myself, briefly describing my journey walking to Rome and my conversion, and how I had come back to see Kelly in order to make things right.

I gave her a copy of the 'Walking to Rome' booklet and some photos of her and her sister as babies which I had kept for the many years since the divorce.

I was amazed to hear that Kirsty had a partner, twin girls, and an older daughter from an earlier relationship. I thought, well I didn't know what to think, it all still seemed like a dream.

Kirsty couldn't really ask all the questions she wanted, she was overwhelmed by what had taken place and felt inhibited. However Kelly and I were able to exchange memories of Kirsty and Lindsay as babies.

I went to make us all a 'brew' and Kirsty came with me.

Whilst we were downstairs in the kitchen, Kelly remarked to Pauline that when I had come back from Holland, she had felt I had got religion and was angry about it.

Pauline said to her that it wasn't religion I had got but a personal relationship with Jesus, she went on to tell Kelly that she too had a similar relationship with Him.

Later when Pauline told me about this conversation I could only reply that she hadn't given me a chance to really explain to her what had happened, but sworn at me until I left the house.

It was around eleven o'clock at night, and they had a long drive ahead of them, so we said our good byes and I gave Kirsty a big hug, we exchanged contact details and I promised to go and visit her soon.

A New Family

The day came when we went to Carlisle and met her partner and the children for the first time. The girls got to meet their maternal Granddad, and Pauline was to be known as Nanna.

I was impressed with my daughter's partner even after meeting him for the first time; I could see he loved Kirsty and the children.

He had a great job as a manager working at the McVitie's factory in the centre of the city; this was the main source of employment for many people in Carlisle.

As Carlisle's largest employer, McVitie's continues to be an integral part of the culture and community of the area but in 2005, during some of the heaviest rains in Britain, the factory was flooded and closed for several weeks. Along with many other staff my future son-in-law worked voluntarily to clear the water and sludge which had got into the machinery.

At one time it was touch and go as to whether this particular factory would ever open again because there was talk that they might relocate, it was a tense time for the staff and a relief when it re-opened.

Searching

Kirsty told me that when she was sixteen she had come across her birth certificate and saw my name on it, Vincent

Purcell. She asked her mum who Vincent Purcell was, and the reply came 'he's your dad'.

This was the first time she had found out who her dad was, and it must have played on her mind for some time because she had come to Blackburn on a previous occasion to see if she could find me, unfortunately without success. She told me she had even contacted Trish, who had a television chat show for help, but again without success.

Finally she said to her mum 'I want to find my dad' and her mum replied saying that if she'd asked her she would have taken her to Blackburn to find Mammy's house because she knew where it was.

They choose a day to come and Kelly's partner said he would drive her and Kirsty to the address she had remembered over the years.

It wasn't the actual correspondence address, only the location.

When they arrived outside the house Kirsty thought, - it's twenty one years ago since his mum lived here, - and she had visions of knocking at the door asking the question and the person in the house saying sorry they moved on some years ago.

So she nervously knocked on the door and a stocky young man answered it. She said 'my name is Kirsty and I am looking for my dad who is called Vincent Purcell'.

To which he replied that he was his younger brother Max. Kirsty said she could have passed out when she heard him saying that, but she was welcomed in and when Mammy found out whom it was she threw her arms around her and cried.

Kirsty told Mammy that she was frightened to meet me because she had heard some bad things about me from others.

Mammy told her not to worry as I was a kind man and would accept her because she was my daughter and I loved her.

It was then that Mammy phoned Pauline and asked where I was, and when she was told that I was still a work, said that Kirsty was at her house and was asking for Vinnie.

Pauline was highly delighted but made the wise decision not to 'phone me but to wait until I arrived home to pass this on.

Aunts, Uncles, and others.

The news went out to my family that Kirsty had found her dad, they were all extremely delighted. A big reunion was organized by Pauline, and the newly converted cellar was an excellent venue.

Kirsty found it extremely hard to remember the names of all the new found aunties and uncles, not to mention cousins, but I think it was fair to say she liked her Grandma Purcell from the outset.

My brothers and sisters were really glad to see her and her family, and made them feel welcome and part of our family, some even brought presents.

Reflections

When we'd sold our shop on East Park Road and moved to rented property in the Beardwood area we invited Kirsty to come and stay over night.

I sensed that there were still a lot of questions she needed to ask and we really hadn't spent much time together since our re-union.

So Kirsty came and stayed over and during her stay she went in the garden, sat on a bench looking as if she had all the cares of the world on her shoulders, so I went out and sat with her. She had the big question and finally the courage and opportunity to ask it.

'I believed that when people had children that they had a responsibility to be around, look after them and raise them up, so what happened to you?'

My, my, this was a serious question and it must have weighed heavily on her mind for some time, and the truth was I didn't have a ready made answer.

I had to explain it from where I was then, not now, older, more mature and wiser.

I told her that nobody had prepared me for marriage or the responsibility of having children, it was a complete change of lifestyle, from being single and able to do what I wanted, when I wanted.

For me the marriage had happened overnight, I had only known Kelly for eight days, and even though I was twenty five I struggled to adjust. Now I knew why couples have courtships before they enter into marriage vows.

I went on to explain that if I had known Kelly for any length of time we probably would never have married, but I'd always had a fear that I was going to get left on the shelf, never have a wife, and a bachelor's life was not for me.

I put in plain words how, after my conversion to Christianity and God had sorted me out, I was ready and willing to sort things out with Kelly, but that wasn't to be as she was seeing someone else, and I didn't stand a chance of getting back with her.

I also explained that I didn't want the divorce; it was Kelly who pursued and eventually got it.

I told her that I had heard from a friend who was a psychologist about children who lived in a broken marriage situation, having a step father who lived with them, their real dad only coming to visit. He said that it left the children emotionally scarred for life.

I had thought about this long and hard and decided to wait until Kirsty was older and could understand things better, then I would make contact with her.

Although she would not remember because she was only a baby, I reminded her that when Kelly and I had first split up there were occasions when I would take her out for the day getting her back for tea time.

Sometimes I would take her to Mammy's or one of my sister's houses, I was proud to show her off because she was a beautiful baby.

I didn't know about applying for custody, anyway men never got custody of their children, only on rare occasions, and at that time I had a criminal record and was on probation, so even if I had thought of it I wouldn't have stood a chance.

I told her about the time when she was small and I took her to the probation office where they held a drop-in for clients. She was so tiny and as she was walking around the small snooker table with a big cue in her hands, she banged her head on it and started crying.

I felt really sorry for her and thought, what are you doing to your little girl - what a mess I had made of my life. This was one of the reasons I decided to back off seeing her until she was older.

Although she listened intently, I could see that this was not a convincing answer, but I didn't have any other.

Most women when they have a crisis in life just carry on because they have responsibilities, knowing that life has

got to be lived, but this is not so with some men, they let everything go, and just kick out at life.

The Last Straw

When Kelly found out that I had become a Christian she thought that I had finally flipped my lid.

I'm not sure why the visits stopped but when they did I occasionally went to the school to see if I could see Lindsay, Kirsty's sister.

Then I thought what if the teachers see this man looking over the fence during the children's play time, they will think it very suspicious and maybe even phone the police, so I stopped.

I continued to tell Kirsty, that when I worked for the Man Power Services Commission one of the lads lived just across the road from Kelly so I always asked him how things were with her and the girls.

One day he told me that Kelly's dad was very ill and in hospital, it sounded as if he might not recover. I had always admired her dad so said to myself that I would make a point of going to see him even if Kelly didn't want me to.

Some days later I made my way to the hospital and asked to see him, but the nurse looked at me with a shocked expression, she was sorry but he had passed away a few days earlier. I was a little stunned at the news and thought what a blow for the family.

When this job finished I lost the valuable contact, but had lots of dreams of going to see Kelly and the girls, only to wake up so disappointed.

I learnt to my horror that Kelly had left our old house and moved and I didn't know where to. This was probably

the result of her losing her dad; I imagined she would have gone back to Carlisle along with her mum.

When Kirsty was older and I was a national sales representative, I called into an information office in the city of Carlisle but was unable to trace the family. I knew that Kelly's older brother was a roofer but had no idea if he had his own business or what his company could be called, and I couldn't find his surname in the phone book.

Therefore from losing contact at around 2 years old until she was 23, I knew nothing about Kirsty, but we had prayed daily, that the situation of our separation would be resolved and in January 2003 God answered our prayers. I told her all these things hoping it would give her an understanding of what had happened and that from this point on we could begin to re-build our relationship.

Chapter 21

The Black Hole

During this time I was still employed in social housing and whilst working for a previous housing association had come under a lot of pressure at work, with many of the staff going off on stress related illnesses.

The organisation had recently undergone a major restructuring program getting rid of a line of middle management. As a result of this we had lost a lot of support for project managers and staff, which was taking its toll.

I was working with a clientele made up of ex-offenders (and not so much ex), people with drug problems, alcoholics, and people with mental health problems on a daily basis. This included sleeping in overnight as part of a 24 hour shift and this situation wore me and other staff members out over a period of years.

One year whilst working at the Burnley project we heard a rumour that our jobs were at risk because of lack of funding. The Blackburn project had recently been closed because it failed to maintain client levels and there had been no funding to support it.

The area manager came and put to the team, what seemed like an ultimatum, which was to take over the project in Darwen and develop it into a mental health project, otherwise basically we would be out of a job.

The team from Burnley transferred over a period of a few months and took over from the temporary staff based at Darwen.

We put together what we thought was a comprehensive presentation of the type of housing, provision

and support which we proposed to offer to clients and made appointments with various social service departments, and mental health teams in Blackburn, Darwen and Bolton to give them an awareness of what we proposed doing, and an option for them to buy into it.

There was a fairly good response and we had to negotiate a price based on each client we accommodated and the level of support we would give them.

It was a bit hit-and-miss at first because we still housed ex-offenders and we should not have mixed them with the mental health clients. There was a lot of stress attached to our job and this added to the pressure we were already experiencing, we had no training to work with people experiencing mental health disorders at all, and discovered that it was a lot different from working with ex-offenders, people with drug problems and alcoholics.

You could predict to some degree as to what these clients would do but mental health clients were unpredictable.

On one occasion we received a 'phone call from the police saying that a young man in one of our houses had smashed the upstairs window and was screaming through it that 'they were coming to get him'.

This happened during one afternoon and I met the police at the property to enable them to gain entrance using my pass key.

Once inside we discovered that furniture had been placed against the rear door as he was paranoid about people coming to get him, a rope was also attached to this door handle. The police took him to the mental health ward at the local hospital for re-assessment.

Office Space

Other mental health clients shared the accommodation where our office was located, two living in the adjacent rooms, and three in the bedrooms over the office.

Staff were packed into what had been the smallest bedroom, so when all the office furniture was in the atmosphere became claustrophobic.

There were also two office desks so this meant that there was hardly enough room for members of staff to fit in. We had to have a work-top especially made, fixed on hinges and fastened to the wall by our handy man, a joiner by trade, and remove these two desks.

I vividly remember on one occasion we had five workers in the office at one time, one was on her knees writing out a report, I was using the top of a filing cabinet to complete some client files, the manager and the other two project workers were cramped up using the desk.

I looked around and said that this was ridiculous, could we not ask the management for an office which would be large enough to accommodate us all.

Eventually the manager persuaded the organisation to move us from the smallest room in the house to the largest but this was still not adequate in proportion to accommodate the number of staff and office equipment.

The Problem of Sharing

When the staff came into the office one Monday morning they found themselves standing in two to three inches of water. During the early hours the client upstairs

had pulled the radiator off his bedroom wall, water poured through the ceiling until staff arrived.

Going into the kitchen to make a brew first thing in the morning, we would lift the basin out of the sink and there would be a load of phlegm hanging off it, with more in the sink.

This was because staff shared the kitchen with clients, and the one responsible for the above problem stood six foot two tall and was quite imposing. Staff shared his kitchen not the other way round, so it was a difficult situation to deal with, and even though we asked him not to do this he, still did. Eventually we moved our brewing equipment into the office.

He came to the office door at five o'clock one Friday evening as staff were going home.

'I'm going to commit suicide when you have gone'. I told him that I was just going to have to call the police to deal with this matter.

'I'm not bothered, do it' and he went back to his room. 'Phoning his social worker I explained what had happened. 'Tell him I will tell Nula about him'.

Nula was a trainee who worked with social workers and clients.

I asked him to be serious explaining that his client was threatening suicide and that I would have to take appropriate action.

'Tell him me and Nula will come and see him Monday morning'.

I knew I wasn't going to get any help or advice from him so documented what had taken place and went home.

This was on my mind all over the week end and I wondered what staff would find returning to work on Monday morning.

After an uneasy weekend I found that our client was alright. He had gone out and bought a bottle of whisky and drank it until he passed out.

On many occasions clients would refuse to take their medication thinking it wasn't doing them any good and they didn't need it.

One who was a musician, a good musician I might say, would let you see him put the tablet in his mouth and then when he took a drink of water he would spit the tablet into the water.

A member of staff found the residue of a tablet in the bottom of the cup just by chance, until then we could not understand why he was deteriorating. He wore a top with a hood and one of the tell tale signs of this was when he walked around with his hood up.

One day when he was going through a difficult time, he walked up and down the corridor looking through the small, foot square glass window in the office door; a member of staff got annoyed and eventually pulled down the blind covering the glass. After several minutes we saw him walking up and down outside the office pursing his lips and staring in through the window.

Later that morning a maintenance man came from Gastech to check out our metres located in the corner of the office.

'I'll tell you what, that's a weird looking man outside'.

I looked across at him making eye contact and said very seriously 'that's our manager'. You should have seen his face, and the staff all turned and looked at me in

astonishment, and then seeing the funny side of it began to laugh.

To be quite honest if we didn't laugh, we would finish up crying, things were so bad.

Breakdown

The manager had been off for some time with a stress related illness and office moral was very low, also some experienced staff had left and been replaced by others who knew very little, needing to be shown everything about administration and the way things were run.

I was working for thirty five hours each week and on-call overnight and most week ends.

Managing three clients I had to support them individually, ten hours each, per week, I was also in charge of collecting and recording housing benefit payments for clients as well as rent accounting, which took an enormous amount of time.

An experienced member of staff covered a four bed space project in Padiham, when she left it meant that I had to periodically travel the 25 mile round trip and check on the clients there. This additional work made my workload impossible.

There was a backlog of housing benefit payments dating back six months, and head office was pushing for these payments to be processed, also pressurising us to take on more clients and make presentations to other organisations in order to get them to buy into our services.

Little did I know how much all this strain was taking its effect out on my health. When I was at home, but away

from Pauline I would cry for no reason, pulling myself together when she was around.

Life at work progressively got worse and at lunch times I would drive out to an isolated place where I would pray to God for help, but it was as if the heavens were as hard as brass and no help seemed to be on its way.

One day Pauline came into the bedroom and saw me sitting on the end of the bed with my head in my hands crying like a baby.

She was shocked to see me in such a state and asked me what the matter was, I couldn't tell her for some time because I was sobbing so much.

Eventually I told her that I was struggling to cope with work, I didn't really know why I was upset, but it should have been obvious because most of my work colleagues were knocked out with stress related illnesses and now here I was, burnt out. I had given everything week in and week out, now I was reaping the results of my commitment.

As part of our church ministry Pauline and I had run a course called 'Beating Burn Out,' it gave two scenarios which went as follows.

1. In olden times when people were heating a tin of beans, they would pierce the top of the tin with an opener and heat it in a pan of water. A woman did this but forgot to pierce the tin and she left the room. The pressure built up to such a point that the can exploded. There was a cat sitting on a stool in the kitchen and when the can exploded the cat's fur lifted as the beans hit it.

This was an example of one type of stress that builds up over a short period of time. People who suffered from this

type of stress would have an outburst of anger to get rid of the pressure.

2. A man suffering with a certain type of stress was taken by a counsellor and shown a house. The counsellor pointed to the roof and said can you see the heavy roof slabs which have been placed on that roof. Well that building was never intended for that type of heavy roof slabs. He then pointed to the walls and said can you see the walls of the house; they are beginning to bow under the pressure.

I thought about this presentation and now I could see clearly that this was the kind of pressure I was under and it had finally taken its toll.

Pauline said 'you are not going back to work; you will go and see your doctor tomorrow and get signed off until you are better'.

I got signed off for the next four weeks and then on the following Monday morning as I was making my way back to work, I just wanted to drive away from everything and never return.

I needed to see the manager but she always came to work after the other staff had arrived. However when I reached the office I could see her there taking a Hoover out of the boot of her car, there were no other staff cars in the car park, which was highly unusual.

We went into the office; she sat down looked at me.

'How are you Vince?'

I opened my mouth to tell her, but cried like a baby and struggled to control myself.

'Vince, go home and take care of yourself until you are well', she said sounding really concerned.

I was off work for the next ten months and during this time I went through my darkest period as a Christian.

As a matter of fact I didn't want to celebrate my fiftieth birthday at all; there were times during the middle of the night when I asked the Lord to take me home.

One of our daughters had got a new dog and had called to see me and asking if I wanted to go for a walk in order to cheer me up. I was still in bed and Pauline came up to tell me that Debbie was here and asking if I wanted to go for a walk, I told her no.

I just wanted to die, it felt like a black hole was opening and I wanted to be swallowed up by it.

Pauline realised that what was happening was demonic and prayed and took authority over this and broke it in Jesus name.

I can honestly say that I never reached that low ever again; I thank my Lord for giving me such a spiritual and faithful wife because she went through this terrible time with me.

As a Christian I could not understand why I had to go through what seemed like the valley of the shadow of death. One thing I did know was that He would never leave me or forsake me because I was his child.

I watched an animated film called 'The Miracle Maker' and there was a particular scene that spoke to my heart. It was the time when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane agonising over the trial he was about to go through, namely death on the cross.

It showed Satan running up a winding path and when he reach the place where Jesus was he stretched out his hand and the trees behind Jesus moved to the right and left making a path for him to escape.

Satan spoke to Jesus telling Him to run, there was still time, to go quickly before the soldiers came, to run now, and for a split second Jesus looked, then he cried out in a loud voice.

‘No, not my will, but your will, your will be done’.

The whole thing just leaped out at me and in comparison I thought that my suffering was nothing compared to His, although it was very real to me.

There and then I made a profession.

‘ Lord not my will but your will be done’.

I didn’t know what was ahead but I told the Lord that I wanted to go through whatever it was I had to endure; I did not want to go back.

The following became an anchor to my soul.

Jesus Lives in me The Hope of Glory
Colossian chapter 1 verses 26 and 27

‘The mystery, which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to the saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of His mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

These words from the New Testament became a security for me during those dark days, reminding me that, because I had asked Him into my life, Jesus lived in me and was my hope.

They spoke of the mystery that had been kept hidden for ages from generations of people, now revealed to God’s chosen people, and I knew that this meant me.

To me, God had chosen to make known the glorious riches of this mystery; the hope spoken about was so

absolutely certain, plus it was a promise that I could totally depend upon.

This was, when Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross and died, He had shown the full extent of His amazing love, and the powers of hell could not defeat or eradicate it.

This made me resolute and determined, for the remainder of my life, I was going to live for Jesus; why, because Jesus lived in me, the hope of glory.

Barabbas had been judged guilty and condemned to death but the people decided that he could be freed; Jesus would die instead, even though He had committed no crime.

In effect this meant Jesus paid the penalty for Barabbas' crimes, this is what He did for me too.

Counselling

The problems I was experiencing were made worse because the situation was getting to the point where we were struggling to pay our mortgage, my wage had decreased by half and I had to repay £1,000:00 that the housing association had overpaid me in error. This meant we were in jeopardy of losing the shop and our home.

The housing association had a counselling service connected to Lancaster University which I took advantage of and was referred to a counsellor based in Blackburn not too far away from my home. I was allowed a number of sessions with her and they proved to be very beneficial.

I gave her a brief overview of my time working for the association and couldn't help noticing how many times she said 'wow'.

As a lone worker I had been put in very vulnerable situations on many occasions, without fully realising it.

On one occasion in the Blackburn project I had barred a big tall lad, a known drug user who we had previously evicted. As I sat in the office I saw him run past the internal door and disappear up the stairs. Locking the office I followed him up the stairs and found him in one of the bedrooms on the top floor.

I told him that he was barred from the project and needed to leave now; he swore and said he would leave when he was ready.

'No you're leaving now; and we were going downstairs together'.

He argued with me and I could see by his eyes he was high on drugs. His mate whose room he was in said 'come on I don't want any trouble, I do not want to lose my place here and I will if you don't leave'.

So he followed me down the stairs and I let him out the front door. Thinking about it later I realized he could have smashed my head in or pushed me down the stairs, certainly size wise I was no match for him.

I shared with my counsellor many instances like this were I had been at risk, I also told her about the situation in the Burnley Project where some young people in one of our houses whilst high on drugs, had killed one of their friends, cut open his stomach and put some of his insides in the fridge in order to feed to someone's pet ferret. Then, they had put the contents of the ash tray and an empty crisp packet inside his body, for some unknown reason.

Is there any reasoning when a person is high on drugs? The counsellor was not a bit surprised that I had burned out after ten and a half years working under this type of pressure.

After counselling I later went back to the housing association at the Darwen branch and was staged back into

work starting with two days, working up to five, but I desperately needed to get out of housing and away from the mental health clients as soon as possible.

I was finding it too hard to do and asked for a transfer. They gave me some alternatives which were no option at all and finally I finish my position with them on the grounds of ill health. The line manager, who had worked his way up from a project worker, said that if I required one he would give me a good reference so long as I was not working with mental health clients.

One of the things that stood out in my mind whilst working for this association was that clients would say they could relate to me because I knew where they were at.

I used to leave copies of my booklet lying around the houses so they read these and knew that because I had experienced difficulties, I could empathise with theirs.

Chapter 22

Different Types of Work

I needed to get back to work because of our financial status we were struggling to pay the mortgage, I applied for many positions I even tried doing Kleeneze but was making about fifty pence an hour so I told the contact person that I couldn't survive on this kind of money.

She said that this is not the way to look at it, that in the long term I would be making plenty but I explained that in the meantime I could lose my home because I could not pay the mortgage.

I saw a job in a different line of work; it was with Akzo Nobel in Darwen as an order picker. They had the biggest warehouse that I have ever seen stacked to the rafters with every colour of paint imaginable, I had to complete a six day training course in order to be competent enough to drive a flat truck which was used to pick up pallets and raise them about six feet in order to reach a second level of shelves.

I had a good friend called Gus when I worked at Witton Mill, and his younger brother was on the training course at Akzo Nobel along with five other guys and me, all seven of us passed the course, received our licence and were issued with overalls and a hard helmet.

Our job involved receiving a job list and a computerised gun; which was a bar code reader, and then we had to go around collecting all the items on the list scanning them with the gun.

A lot of times I would wear my Dennis the Menace sweat shirt and had a small cardboard notice on the front of my truck with Dennis the Menace written on it in felt tip pen.

Distressing News

Every lunch time I would phone Pauline checking to see if anything had come through the post regarding a position I had applied for. Eventually a letter did arrive saying that they had received a bad reference and could not offer me the job.

In due course I received a copy of the reference, saying that I was not capable of working with people on any type of level, I was devastated to say the least and thought that my career in housing was at an end.

Whilst working at Akzo Nobel I had applied to B & P Community Housing for a position to set up a floating support work.

I went for the interview and was accepted but my only concern was my health report. I had been very honest and mentioned the ten months out of work with stress and they had sent for a doctor's report.

I phoned after a few weeks for an update; the doctor's report had come back and was acceptable. The only thing that they were waiting for was the reference from my last housing association employer.

However, the line manager who was sending this reference – the same person who had promised me that he would provide me with a good reference should I need one, providing it was not working with mental health clients – had sent one which said that I was not capable of working with any person at any level – this caused me great distress, but I was trusting the Lord.

I then applied for work at another project, within a housing association, which was looking for a floating support worker in Burnley.

I was glad that a former colleague, who was an assistant director at this project, would be on the interview panel, as I was able to explain about the derogatory reference which had been written. I did get this job and the person I was replacing got the post I was initially offered with B & P Community Housing

Some time later I received, from an anonymous source, the minutes of a meeting. In attendance were representatives from B & P, plus the line manager who had given the bad reference.

In these it was reported by one of the B & P managers that Vincent Purcell had been offered the post to set up a floating support work.

There was then a comment made by the line manager from my previous job, that if I was offered this post it would cause him a problem. I believe that this was because he considered the work that I would do, should I obtain this post, would be in competition to what he wished to set up through the housing association employing him. They were also hoping to set up a floating support work in Burnley.

It was after this meeting that I received the letter refusing me the post, but it gave no reason as to why, I enquired why this had happened when previously I had been told all was well, but was given no feedback.

The Guest House

I wanted to get out of supported housing work so started looking at other businesses. Every so often I would look in Thomas Shaw's estate agents, and one day I saw a property for sale in Burnley, a seven bedroom guest house

and coffee bar, the property was empty and a little run-down, the owners had retired and gone to live in Australia.

Pauline and I talked about it for some time; it certainly was going to be a leap of faith; as first we had to raise the mortgage using our present home and business as collateral.

It was a difficult time but we eventually purchased the guest house in Burnley. We then had to contact housing standards to come and assess the premises to see if it was fit for purpose.

When they arrived they were very officious and began to measure the bedrooms, the first bedroom they said was too small and my heart sank. They measured the second bedroom and said that this was also too small, my heart sank even more and I thought what, are we going to do now.

They then went and measured the third bedroom and said that this bedroom was going to be too small as well; they must have seen my face and said we will measure it again because it is border line. The second time they said well it is border line but we will say yes, the other four bedrooms were larger so they were ok.

Specifications

They made a list of requirements needed before the premises could be used as a guest house. The two bedrooms which were too small would have to be knocked into one, a full fire alarm system would have to be installed and a full electrical check would have to be completed and certified.

A sink with hot and cold running water would need to be plumbed into every bedroom; and every room would also need to have a fridge.

In the kitchen there would have to be a lockable cupboard for every resident, the front door lock would have to be four lever and every bedroom door be a half hour fire door fitted with a door closer.

We were required to keep an accident and fire log book and do fire drills every so often; they also said that residents would have to have access to a phone in the case of an emergency.

They had set a mammoth task for us and none of this included a full decoration and furnishing. The heating system was divided in two and there was a back boiler and a combi boiler system operating in the property.

We found that the back boiler needed to be replaced, the fire needed some welding repairs to it and the combi-boiler needed re-locating from an upstairs bedroom to the kitchen area.

There was a massive expense attached to all the work which was needed and the longer it took getting the work done, the longer it would take to get clients and rents.

We worked really hard, I toiled there all day every day, Pauline came over when she could and even closed up her shop for two weeks in order to get the work finished, we worked flat out.

I remember once when we were painting one of the bedrooms Pauline had a chair propped up, on a raised level, and as she reached up to paint the ceiling the chair gave way and she fell through mid air completing a somersault before hitting the wood floor landing on her head.

She hurt herself quite badly as there wasn't anything I could have done to break her fall, but I did pray for her and God undertook.

Ready at Last

Finally the guest house was ready for business; housing standards had come back, checked and approved the work. The company was already set up and was called H.D.N.W. Ltd.

We produced all the appropriate literature along with tenancy agreements and posters notifying the borough council homeless team. Slowly we got clients and found out that they had high needs but housing benefit would only pay single room rent, which was not a lot, despite the fact that indication had been given that because H.D.N.W. Ltd., would be part of the homeless strategy, there would be help and funding available to us.

Pauline was devastated when she found out that there was no funding to help with the high need clients we were housing, so although we housed vulnerable people, we could not give the level of support we first envisaged and I finished up going back to work to enable us to keep the guest house running and was fortunate to get a job with a homeless project based in Burnley.

There were a number of times when we had to do mid-night runs to our property because of problems there. One night we received a phone call from one of the residents saying that another resident was cooking in the kitchen and the kitchen was full of smoke. There were many more incidents some funny, some not so funny.

We were a little disillusioned with the guest house, all the plans for H.D.N.W. Ltd., were not going to happen.

The idea was to support clients in the guest house and then move them into their own rented property and provide floating support until they could live independently.

We had hoped to be able to work with the residents and the community sharing the good news of the gospel. This didn't happen in the way we would have wished but we did have lots of opportunities to talk to the residents about the love of God and encourage them to seek Him out.

Places for Sale

We put the guest house on the market as an investment property, and as Pauline had made up her mind to retire when she reached retirement age, we decided to sell her business too, this included our home.

One day a postman came and asked about the premises a couple of doors up from ours that used to be the post office as it was up for sale.

'If you're looking for a shop for sale well this one is going on the market soon' was Pauline's response.

He seemed very interested and it was explained to him that there were four levels to the property. This included a very large cellar coffee bar and a large attic room as well as a garage.

It was a relative of the postman who came back and had a look around and was definitely interested in buying. There was no quibble about the price all we needed to do was get a solicitor to act on our behalf, because the deal had been sorted out.

The young Asian man buying the property was soon to get married and wanted to complete the deal before then.

There was a race on as to which of the properties would sell first, but it was the shop. A couple of weeks delay signing papers and then he was married and went off on honeymoon, but brought his prospective wife to meet us and

we gave them an original oil painting, which I had done, as a wedding present.

Tragic News

The deal finally went through and a date was set for us to move out. We had decided to rent a property for a time rather than having to be rushed into buying.

Shortly after we moved we heard some tragic news regarding the young man who had bought the shop.

A few days after returning from his honeymoon there was a terrible road traffic accident when his Mercedes Benz left the road, hit a tree, he and his friend, both in their early twenties, were killed.

Property Problems

The day came and we moved and went to live in the Beardwood area of Blackburn in a rented four bed roomed detached house.

Our guest house in Burnley finally sold, but completion dragged on because the buyer's solicitors were being finicky. They asked for the landlord's gas certificate and when I checked, it was out of date.

I had to get one completed as soon as possible but was unable to get hold of the contractor who did the original work, the man who we eventually got to do the Gas test found a fault with the fire which the original contractor had fit, but getting hold of him was like getting hold of the Scarlet Pimpernel and the sale depended on the landlord's gas certificate.

I spoke to his mother over the phone and pleading with her to get him to make contact, but he didn't.

Eventually we had to drive out past Bacup where his office was located. He was not around but we saw his mother who worked in the shop and explained that the reason the landlord's gas certificate could not be issued was because of her son's work when he fit the back boiler.

She contacted him because he was not answering our calls, he eventually came and issued a landlord's gas certificate and not too soon I might add.

Then the buyer's solicitor wanted some outstanding minor jobs doing which he saw on the electrical test certificate which we didn't have to give him, but did. This cost us an additional two hundred pounds and the electrician who did the minor repairs said that it was not really necessary.

The deal finally went through much to our relief and we were able to bank the money and use the interest to pay the rent of our new home but I never did feel easy about the rented property, I felt it was just wasted money as the property could never be ours.

The house which was detached was really spacious and in a good location with a very nice garden. We had not had a decent garden for the last nineteen years and it made a great deal of difference, we enjoyed it immensely.

More Property Problems

At that time I was still working for the housing project in Burnley and one day travelling between houses to see clients I received a phone call from our youngest daughter Sharon.

She asked if I was driving to which I replied I would never contemplate driving while using a mobile phone.

She then asked if I was composed because she had some bad news; immediately I thought of Pauline, but she went on to say that she had just received a phone call saying that a vehicle had run into our house but not to worry about mum as she was not in at the time.

I phoned work explained the situation and told them that I would have to go home. Driving home I started to think how is it possible for a vehicle to crash into our house, it is on a cul-de-sac with a large lawn to the front? Is it a run away wagon or a young speedster in a fast car? I didn't know what to expect. Rounding the corner of the close I saw police cars and the fire brigade; apparently the ambulance had just gone.

I couldn't park any where near our house so I parked further up the road, I saw Pauline she was with our daughter Sharon. I could see a gapping hole in the corner of the house, big enough to walk through. There was a small blue car wedged between there and the leylandii tree in the garden.

The onlookers were trying to work out how the car got into that position, I figured that when the front of the car hit the corner of the house the back end flipped behind the tree.

When the full story came out it was discovered that the driver of the car was travelling down the close to visit a neighbour who was a consultant at the hospital, and when she reached the bottom of the close she put her foot on the accelerator rather than the brake.

She had just got this car and it had an automatic gearbox and she had been used to a manual one; so she made a mistake with the pedals, which meant she had come right across the front lawn and crashed into the property. We

could see the tyre marks crossing the lawn but no skid marks showing that the brakes had not been applied.

A neighbour had heard the noise and looked out of her window but couldn't see anything because of the way her house was facing.

She then heard someone moaning and knew there was something seriously wrong.

When she came out of her house she saw the car at the side of our garden and a lady lying on the lawn area. Going to see how badly this lady was hurt she noticed the neighbours pulling away from their house and waved for them to stop.

They were going to look for their friend because it had been a while since she had telephoned to say she was setting off and had been a long time coming. When they realised what had happened they called an ambulance.

We were not allowed back into our house until it was made secure. It needed four acros to support the damaged side of the property and then we finally got to go inside and see the damage there.

The estate agents who acted for the landlord were informed they in turn told him, he was very distressed to hear the news.

Pauline later described the events of the day as they had turned out for her.

The accident happened in June when Wimbledon was on the TV and she loves watching tennis. That afternoon she had settled down to watch but kept getting a prompt to take her books back to the library. She couldn't understand why because she still had a few days to go before they were due to be returned.

Eventually she set off and whilst in town received a phone call from Sharon who had been contacted by our

mutual accountant a friend of the neighbour who had gone out to assist the lady in the accident.

This neighbour had the wisdom to contact the accountant to get our daughter's telephone number as she knew he was acting for both of us.

If Pauline had been in the living room watching tennis when the accident took place she would have been seriously hurt, we believe that the prompt came from the Lord because he cares for her.

The big heavy television which stood in the corner near the window was flung across the room; breeze blocks from the inner wall were strewn all across the floor and rubble was everywhere.

Our brand new leather two and three seater sofa's which had come from Italy a few months earlier were full of masonry dust and rubble and were damaged.

Thank goodness we had fully comprehensive insurance and the sofas were insured separately, but when the insurance assessor came it was like the inquisition and made us feel like criminals, and that really annoyed me.

We finished up living in the conservatory; it was a really hot summer that year. We had asked the landlord for a reduction of rent during this period because we could not use the lounge and would eventually not be able to use the main bedroom whilst the property was repaired, plus all the inconvenience we were experiencing, but he refused, so taking this all into account we decided to look to purchase our own property elsewhere.

Some times we do not understand why things turn out the way they do especially when we are looking forwards, then when we look back we can see a clear trail showing the way the Lord was leading.

Having decided to move we started looking for houses in and around Blackburn, I told Pauline not to look at any houses in Darwen, I didn't want to live there because at one time during my break down I could not even travel to there. We picked out a number of houses to look at but none of them met our requirements.

Settled at Last

One day we were both looking at properties advertised on the internet, one came up for Darwen, Pauline was going to bypass it but I said 'no look at it', we did and found it was a fine-looking house. I was impressed with the garden and particularly with the stone wall which ran across the back of it.

'Make an appointment and we will go and see it', was my instruction.

'But it's in Darwen' came the reply.

On the day arranged for a viewing we visited two properties before this one, they were not suitable. The tenancy was due to run out on the rented house soon so we needed to find one very quickly.

As we made our way to see the next property Pauline said 'do you know sweetheart I believe this is the one for us'.

'You might not believe this but I know it's the one' I replied, remembering my previous comments about moving to Darwen this was astonishing.

The house was only seventeen years old and modern. When we walked in through the front door we thought yes, this is it, walked on through the open- plan lounge and dining area into the conservatory and then I saw the garden that sold it for me because it was so beautiful.

I called it a Rupert Bear garden, it was full of shrubs and flowers, and besides having a small garden shed there was another very large one.

When we came away we knew that this was the house for us so we offered the asking price and it was accepted.

So the lesson we learned was, when things were going wrong it was because God wanted us somewhere else, but this will not be true for everyone, we could only measure it by our own circumstances.

We moved house on the 4th of August 2006 to the smallest house we had ever owned even though it was a three bed roomed property, but what a blessing it has turned out to be.

Chapter 23

Mammy

There was a time as a young man, after I came out of the army and was working at Walkers Steel, when one Friday I received my wage packet and had a pleasant surprise.

It must have been a tax refund because I found I had one hundred and twelve pounds instead of the normal forty five pounds.

I divided the money and put two lots of twenty pounds in the front pockets of my jeans, two lots of twenty pounds in the back pockets with the rest in my jacket.

Arriving home Mammy was in the kitchen waiting for me because she needed some money for shopping.

She asked if I had got my wage. I took her into the lounge and sat her down on the armchair.

Pulling out the first twenty pounds I threw it on the carpet.

'Is that ok?'

'And where is the rest of your wage?' she asked.

I pulled a second twenty pounds out threw it on the carpet.

'Is that ok?'

'What on earth are you up to Vinnie?'

Taking a further twenty pound from my jeans pocket I threw it on the carpet.

'Is that ok?'

Well sixty pounds was fifteen more than my normal wage. I could see her face light up as she asked yet again what I was playing at.

Once more I pulled out another twenty pounds and it landed on the carpet.

'Is that enough?'

I repeated this procedure, this time she was stuck for words. I reached into my jacket pocket yet again and threw two five pound notes on the carpet.

'Well, is that enough?'

'Oh Vinnie what have you done, have you robbed a bank or what?'

I laughed out loud 'no I haven't' and reached into my jacket pocket for the last two pounds and threw them down to join the rest.

Looking at the money spread over the carpet it did look like there was a lot more than a hundred and twelve pounds.

This was typical me, I couldn't just give Mammy the money in her hand I always had to think of some novel way. She never forgot and we talked about it for years to come.

Mammy and I had a special rapport, the rest of her sons and daughters had unique relationships with her too.

Maternal Concerns

When I was off work for the ten months after experiencing 'burn out', I felt as if I passed through the valley of the shadow of death, and this caused me to think of Mammy, that some day we as a family, would loose her.

I came to visit her one day, no-one else was there just the two of us, and even though I was dreading it, this very subject came up in our conversation.

I was trying to explain to her that one thing filling me with trepidation was the thought of loosing her.

I became very upset and began to cry and could hardly finish the sentence.

She looked at me aghast 'Vinnie, Vinnie don't upset yourself, I'm not worried about going, I'm not worried about dying'. Then looking into my tear filled eyes as if to reassure me she repeated 'I'm not worried about going'.

'You're not?'

'No I'm not and I don't want you to be upsetting yourself either, we all have to go sometime and I'm alright about it'.

I was both surprised and consoled to some degree that she didn't have any fears about leaving this present world.

Hidden Problems

It was around early October 2006 and we found out that Mammy was not well. She had never been really ill in her life and I was saddened to discover she had been quietly suffering, not telling anyone until she absolutely had too.

She never liked doctors and hospitals; they were a last resort for her.

After some medical tests and speaking to the specialist it was decided that Mammy needed a major operation in order to have the problem rectified.

I 'phoned her and was told about this major operation she had been advised to have; but she had thought about it and was not going to, she was going to trust God.

I was surprised to hear this but accepted her trust in the Lord.

The following morning was my birthday; I was awake in bed and talking to the Lord thanking him for his great love and grace.

He spoke to me saying 'I have heard Mammy's prayer when she said that she was going to trust me to heal her'.

I was overwhelmed and thanked my God and knew that I would have to go and share this with her as soon as possible. We were due to go to Preston so went via Mammy's, and found her sitting in the kitchen as usual and two of my brothers were there as well.

I told her what I'd heard the Lord say to me that morning, and made a point of stressing that He had heard her prayer.

'I believe it Vinnie, I believe the Lord will look after me' she replied as her eyes filled with tears.

We left and continued on our journey to Preston, I was quite happy knowing I had been obedient to do what that Lord had told me.

Change of Plans

It was the 27th of October, and I went to see my sister Kerry, it was her birthday, and was told because she was in so much discomfort Mammy had decided to have the operation, which would be carried out by keyhole surgery.

I thought that's ok, this will work for good because when they do they will see what God has done

We were having some alterations done to our house, a new shower put in; a combi-boiler installed as well as block paving in the garden area.

During this time the heating had to be turned off for a few days and workers had the front and back doors open. The weather was unusually cold and Pauline got really ill for about six or seven weeks.

I was engaged in doing a Web Design course at Blackburn College whilst waiting for a short term contract to come through from one of the agencies seeking employment on my behalf.

The job, when it materialised, would be working for the National Rent Office in Manchester, and I would earn a good wage.

On November 27th I went to the hospital with Mammy, for her appointment at the clinic, along with Max and Kerry, because Pauline was not able to take them as originally planned, she was still very poorly.

My sister was suffering from pain in her lower back so I said, 'I will pray for you', laid my hands on her back and asked Jesus to heal her.

Later that day she remarked how her back had improved, she sounded surprised.

The specialist spoke to the family explaining that all operations have risks. In detail he outlined how it would be carried out; Mammy was OK with this and decided to go ahead and consent to the operation.

Bad Day at Black Rock

On Wednesday, the 13th of December, we were travelling home from grocery shopping. The day was overcast and raining; it was a miserable old day.

Approaching the motorway round-a-bout at junction 4 of the M65 I was going to go straight across and take the back road into Darwen, but as I was about to enter I noticed a big white van, in the next lane to me was crossing the white line and coming into my lane.

'Hang on; this big guy is crossing into my lane, so I'm going to let him go'.

As I braked we heard a smashing noise and our car shunted forward, someone had just driven their car into the back of ours. On impact I had my head turned to the right, so was knocked a little dizzy, and suffered from whiplash for quite a long time.

Pauline got out surveying the damage but I was a little disorientated so it took me longer. When I did I looked at my Toyota Carina and saw that both ends of the bumper were trailing on the ground. Fortunately I had some string in the boot so tied it up the best I could in the rainy conditions.

The driver of the other vehicle who was in her early thirties said 'oh well that's what insurance is for'.

I looked at the front of her car to see what damage she had sustained, and could not believe it. Not even her number plate was damaged. I thought to myself that's impossible, her Renault Clio had hardly a mark on it whilst mine looked like I'd been hit with a tank.

I remember watching a film years ago, called 'Bad Day at Black Rock' and now when I have a bad day, which I might add is once in a blue moon, I remember this.

However that day was not one of my best days, it was indeed a 'Bad Day at Black Rock'.

My sweetheart had still not recovered from her illness; I was wearing my cashmere camel coat and had got black grease on the sleeve when tying up the bumper, my car was a write off and I didn't get the full value of it from the insurance company. Never mind tomorrow would be a good day.....

I got a new job which was a temporary post as a Briefing Officer in Manchester this would last until the end of March 2007. I started on the 21st of December 2006 and was

experiencing some headaches which I thought would progressively get better.

When they didn't I spoke to the team manager who was not very pleased that I had not told her beforehand about the car accident.

I had no idea that the headaches would get worse before they got better so had to give back word on the job because I was not safe to drive to work.

The Operation

I called to see Mammy on the 29th of December she was scheduled to have her operation on the 2nd of January. She was alright about this and would be glad to be free from the discomfort and pain.

I told her that we would be praying for her and the Lord would look after her.

'I believe that Vinnie.'

Mammy talked a lot about Jesus, more than she ever had on previous occasions.

I told her how Jesus had helped me when I was suffering; she told me He had helped her too. She had asked for help at a time when the suffering was really unbearable, and He had brought relief.

Hearing this it brought joy to my soul and tears to my eyes, I knew then every thing was going to be ok.

Pauline and I had a watch night meeting which took us through into the New Year, we reflected on the year gone by, which had not been our best, and committed the first part the New Year to the Lord. We called this 'first fruits', we were also looking forward to seeing Mammy alright and well.

She went into hospital on the 1st of January, the day before the operation. Pauline particularly prayed that she would be first on the operating list so that she wouldn't be waiting around all day.

She was the first one in, coming out of the operating theatre onto the recovery ward at 1pm. We knew Mammy would be exhausted from the operation and visitors would be restricted so I phoned Kerry, who lived around the corner from her to ask how she was. Mammy wasn't a bit frightened when going for the operation and had come through it well.

I was so thankful to the Lord that He'd kept His promise bringing her through successfully.

Pauline and I went to see Mammy the following day, she had lot of visitors. The nursing staff couldn't believe how big a family she had; it should have been three visitors at a time but because there was so many of us they didn't really bother monitoring too much.

She looked tired and weak; we were all ready to get her anything she wanted.

It was Max my younger brother, who lived with her and had done an excellent job of looking after her for many years that brought her all she needed.

On the 6th of January Mammy came out of hospital. We, as a family, felt that this was premature, but she was glad to be back in her own home.

On the following Sunday morning I suffered a really bad dizzy spell, and had to stay in bed the whole day, this was a result of the car accident. I was still unemployed and looking for work so I had to get signed off for two weeks until these dizzy spells passed.

I wanted to see Mammy, so Pauline drove me to her house the following Wednesday. I was surprised when I saw

her she was not looking well, so I prayed for her, we didn't want to weary her so didn't stop too long but left feeling a little concerned.

Mammy's Passing

On Saturday the 13th of January we received a phone call at 8am from my sister; Mammy had been taken into hospital because she had become very weak.

Pauline and I travelled to the hospital without delay to find a lot of our family had arrived already.

Mammy was on a hospital trolley with an oxygen mask over her face, I was amazed to see her extremely weak, semi-conscious state.

'I'm alright, I'm alright' she said straining to reassure us.

I was taken aback at her condition but speaking to one of my sisters out side in the car park assured her that Mammy wasn't going to leave us because it was not her time.

I said I felt no matter how bad Mammy's condition looked, she had a lot more years on this earth.

I was still having problems with headaches and dizzy spells, so returned home in the afternoon; during this time she was moved from A & E onto a ward.

Early evening we received another phone call, to say Mammy's kidneys had failed and she might not make it through the night.

Going back to the hospital, we found all her sons, daughters, grand children as well as her brother there.

I thought this is not it - this is not it - God is still in control and we mustn't give up hope.

The nurses allowed all the family to come into her room, some came and then went back out into the waiting room unable to contain their grief.

'Don't cry in front of Mammy you will upset her' someone said.

Molly was holding her hand and talking to her saying over and over again 'Jesus loves you Mammy'. Looking at me she said 'she can hear you.'

Indeed at one stage, with great effort, Mammy had put her hand to the oxygen mask, barely managing to lift it slightly.

'I'm alright, I'm alright' she said just as she had done earlier.

At that moment it was as if she was already with Jesus but had come back just to reassure her family

Molly moved away and Pauline and I took her place I held Mammy's hand and Pauline began to quote the 23rd Psalm personalising it for her.

'Mammy, even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death' – Pauline sensed that it was then Mammy went to be with the Lord.

Despite the fact that I was at her side I would not believe it. Someone said 'she's gone'.

From kneeling beside the bed I stood up, and held her wrist.

'No, I can feel a pulse'.

There was no pulse, just dismay, I could not believe she had gone, this couldn't be, I just did not believe it.

I was totally disillusioned and devastated; it wasn't Mammy's time to go these words went over and over in my head; I could not accept she'd gone, my mind could not take it in and my heart was overwhelmed.

The family around me had given way to their sorrow; the room was filled with cries from a grieving family. I put my arms around Kerry and her daughter because they were heart broken, torn in two by grief, as we all were.

After Effects

What a close knit family we were, we had a great love for one another and the inconsolable grieving would be deep and long.

Mammy left us on Saturday the 13th of January 2007 at 9:45 in the evening, a date we will never forget.

I could not accept that God had taken Mammy away from us it was so hard, my brothers and sisters crying so grievously, my nieces and nephews and her brothers and sisters so saddened, how could we stand the lost of one so precious.

Night after night I cried myself to sleep, still unable to understand why. Pauline was like an angel to me her voice full of love and consolation.

My brothers and sisters came together to console each other but I struggled immensely.

Unable to talk about Mammy or carry out any sort of small talk I could feel the enormity of our collective grief.

Even now three years on, the tears are still flowing as I'm writing and reliving the memories.

We met at Mammy's house and Fay asked if I was alright I said no and asked her come into the next room. Saying I found it impossible to stay because I would burst with grief, I asked her to give my apologies to the family and left the house by the front door to avoid having to return to the kitchen where they were gathered.

Throughout the following weeks I would be sitting at the dining table with Pauline and part way through our meal would bust out crying. This happened many times and on one occasion Pauline said with an enquiring tone 'what are you seeing?'

I told her that I could see all my brothers and sisters grieving and could feel their pain. Also, although it was wonderful to be part of a big loving family, I had become conscious that some of my seven sisters and four brothers might leave this world before me.

Six weeks later I started work in a neighbouring town with foster families, going out into the community; to assess prospective families and check existing ones.

When I was walking from the office to the car I would be in tears, struggled to drive, and would have to compose myself before I could go into their homes.

Fortunately the job was only on a part time basis as I had an immense struggle, trying to resolve other people's problems, when I personally was going through so much grief.

Investigations

As a family we were extremely angry about Mammy's death – and felt we should investigate the circumstances.

It seemed that everything had been going well, up to and during the operation, but afterwards things had deteriorated.

We contacted the local hospital and an enquiry was set up. We discovered that the operation had been a total success, but the after care both in the hospital and through the GP raised many questions. In fact we were left with the

certain knowledge that she should not have died, and the medical profession had much to answer for. However, I will now in hindsight bring a balance on the above and say God does not make mistakes.

Our minister phoned after he heard of our bereavement and inspired of God reminded me of that none of His children pass from this world without Him knowing about it.

The medical profession might make mistakes but the Lord knew when to call His child home.

Psalm 116:15 says, 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints'.

When Mammy left this world she passed through a door and Jesus was that door.

She entered joyfully into Gods eternal kingdom the Lord and his angels rejoicing at her coming.

I suffered immeasurably about the loss of both Daddy and Mammy. I had wanted to keep them here on this earth, thinking if I believed hard enough it wouldn't happen, all because I couldn't face loosing them.

The fact is when the King calls a person home they cannot refuse to go, neither would they want to.

However we can come through our trials stronger and wiser, the key is to keep on trusting and never, never ever give up; this is what I personally have experienced.

Chapter 24

In Conclusion

Looking back I remembered an incident that occurred when my first marriage was on the verge of breaking up. I recall being in a night club with two of my friends, and as the evening was getting on I was in a sombre mode bemoaning my fate and holding a near empty beer glass.

I gripped the top and began to squeeze until it broke in my hand sending beer and broken glass to the floor. My friends looked at me in disgust seeing the blood running from my hand. 'You're not right in your head' was the comment from one of them.

From that time on they distanced themselves from me and who could blame them, my life was heading on a down hill trend, it was as if I was sliding down a dirty greasy slippery Helter-Skelter Ride and had no power to stop.

I was travelling down picking up speed, living in a drunken stupor, leaving my stomach behind.

There was nothing left that I could grab hold of as I had burned the bridges between me, my family and friends, it felt as if there was only one thing left to be done, let go and slide into the black hole and be swallowed forever.

Never in my wildest dreams could I have expected what took place next.

The hand of Jesus came and took me from what seemed like my inevitable fate and lifted me far above all my circumstances, setting me on a high place.

I was no better than a dead dog in all my filth and Jesus gave his life to save me.

You see, at just the right time, when I was powerless to help myself, Jesus died for me, wretched man that I was.

Very rarely will anyone die for a virtuous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die, but God demonstrated his amazing love for me because while I was still in my messed up life, Jesus died for me.

His love knows no bounds and I believe that nobody has sunk so low that God cannot rescue them and my desire is to be there and tell anyone who will listen, that if He can do it for me He can do the same for them.

If I had carried on the way I was going in self destruction I would have finished up in the criminal system and be dying of alcohol poisoning.

I believe God has a plan for all our lives, but not everyone chooses to enter into it. Looking back I can see the way I have come but I know I still have to live the rest of my life looking forward and trusting in my God.

I know that he loved me the way I was before I found Him, but He loved me too much to leave me in that state.

In the early days of my Christian walk I often wondered why Christians had to go through trials and some very difficult times but as I matured I realised that Jesus wasn't just interested in saving us he wants to change our character, to be like his.

I always thought that people who suffered stress and had to have time off work were weak. Now I have experienced 'Burn Out' and been off work for ten months with stress, I will never see it the same way again.

Also we could have lost the shop and our home, so I am now in a position to empathise and identify with those in a similar position and show them compassion.

The outcome of this situation was our mortgage was cleared and we had money to spare.

Pauline and I have high expectations because we are on the Kings Highway - that is the Highway to heaven where there will be a rapturous welcome when we arrive home.

'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him'.

Eagle Ministries

I studied theology and related ministerial topics at a Bible School and in 1987 was ordained and licensed as a minister of the gospel. As co-pastor along with three others, one being my younger brother Paul, I was in charge of ministry of helps which was in fact the framework of the church.

Blackburn Christian Fellowship, founded by Jack and Pauline had Sunday meetings in Roman Road Community Centre; we had morning and evening services as well as Sunday school in the afternoon. My job was to set up the chairs, sound system, OHP, organise ushers and make sure ever thing ran smoothly. Along with Pauline I also produced news letters organised events, ran weekly house groups and preached at some of the Sunday services.

Some years later, after we were married and the Lord had moved us on from BCF, we had a vision to set up a Christian charity. We had a desire to promote the Christian Faith, not only in word by teaching Christian principles, but also in action by being prepared to bring relief to people in need, hardship or stress, including those who were aged or sick.

We were not sure as to what the name of the charity should be. I thought of one name and Pauline didn't agree, and she would think of a different name, we could not agree so we prayed about it.

One day we were walking on Beacon Fell and out of the blue a Bible passage came to me from the book of Isaiah asking the question.

Didn't we know and hadn't we heard that Jesus was the everlasting God, the Creator? It also told us that He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can figure out. It went on to remind us that He gives strength to the weary and weak. Those who hope in Him will renew their strength; in fact they will soar on wings like eagles.

I said 'Eagle Ministries' to which Pauline replied 'what did you say?'

'Eagle Ministries, we will give the charity the name of Eagle Ministries'.

We had a peace about the name, it seemed right and the passage of scripture was very meaningful, so Eagle Ministries was formed in 1993 and registered as Charity Number 101740.

It is a non-profit making organisation working on its own initiative or with local churches. We have been involved in promoting events such as family fun days, football tournaments, walks, car rallies, coffee bar outreach and other activities involving social skills with Christian based principles.

Eagle Ministries is also involved in evangelism and teaching having promoted gospel tent missions, Alpha courses, given teaching on prayer ministry, stewardship, marriage matters as well as running home groups dealing with day to day issues relating to well being, stress,

budgeting, everyday life – all based on Biblical ethics and principles.

The aim of Eagle Ministries is to see that people have the opportunity of hearing the good news of the gospel and come into a relationship with Jesus Christ through the rescue plan outlined in the Bible.

Then to equip them to grow in their faith, by learning about Him and what He expects from His followers; applying that knowledge to 'life' and be able tell others, by example and encouragement.

Life Changes

When I think of how my life was changed from the inside to the outside and diverted from a life of crime and disorder.

Changed from the inside by God reaching into my heart, to the outside where that change could be seen. This method of change is the key, and I have heard many a testimonies to this fact.

Hardened criminals, drug addicts, alcoholics, violent offenders, people who make this world a worse place to live in.

What would you say if all the unruly people you know had a life changing experience and were determined to make up for all the wrong they had done?

This is exactly what happens in revival and I have a vision for this to take place in my home town.

Did you know that God has moved over the centuries in revival power leaving a marvellous legacy and many wonderful testimonies? There has been the Welsh Revival, the

Hebridean Revival and the revival which took place throughout England during the time of John Wesley.

After a revival impacts the church it has an effect on people outside the church, on people who cause crime and disorder, as they come under a great conviction about their wrong doings. This continues until they have put things right with God and begun to follow a life of truth and integrity.

Our nation has got into such a state because we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has gone our own way turning our back on God but the Lord has laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all. He was despised and cast off, unwanted by men, a man who knew great sadness, and endured suffering because of our sin.

What did we do, we hid our faces when He was despised, and we did not respect Him.

Jesus took up our infirmities and accepted our sorrows and was pierced for our wrongdoings, He was trodden down for our wickedness and the punishment we deserved was put upon Him.

He now offers the gift of eternal life but with any gift it needs to be received, unpacked and accepted.

We all live once and when we die, then will come the judgement when we will all stand before the Almighty Sovereign God.

All people, both the great and the small, will have to give an account of their lives on earth and if their names are not found, written in the Book of Life, they will not enter into God's Kingdom, but be eternally separated from Him, even thrown into the lake of fire, because they failed to accept His forgiveness.

All those years ago I still vividly remember the revelation I received which started my search.

It was the day as I was leaving my parents house closing the front gate and about to walk down the street. I saw the judgement seat of Almighty God and came under enormous conviction knowing beyond a shadow of doubt that I was going to hell, and knew I had to get right with God.

Therefore, when I speak about the above it's not just what I have read it's because I have experienced this personally, and now I know that hell is not the place for me but heaven to meet my Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus.

Continuing

Does my story end now – no it certainly does not – this is just the beginning of a different phase of our lives.

Pauline and I currently worship at a local Church of England where we run different groups and have made lots of friends. We are also outreaching with the good news of the gospel into our local community, through Eagle Ministries.

We have a hope that is steadfast and sure – one day we are going to see Jesus, but until then we are content to live in His kingdom, doing the things He gives us to do, rejoicing in knowing Him and His power.

Have I learnt from my past? – Yes I have, and am now in the position of being able to share this with others so that they might benefit from my experiences.

It is said that the difference between wisdom and knowledge is this. Knowledge is when you learn by your mistakes, wisdom is leaning from the mistakes made by others.

It is my hope and prayer that you too will learn from the things I have written and not make the same mistakes but come to know Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour.

Guess what – if this happens we will meet one day in heaven.

Author Biography

Vin was born in Roscrea, County Tipperary, Southern Ireland into a large Roman Catholic Family. When he was 5 years old they moved to the North of England.

After completing his education he worked in various jobs and had a life changing experience in 1981.

He is a licensed minister of the gospel and currently a Director of Eagle Ministries.

Married to Pauline, he has a daughter from a previous marriage, three step-daughters and 13 grandchildren up to date.....

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