

## “What would Jesus do?” (Part Three)

The coffee machine spluttered out the last of its dark contents into the plastic cup and Nigel handed it to Chris. He put another coin in the slot and pressed the café latte button. The machine whirred into action again.

He looked at Chris and said, “I’ll pray for you about that if you’d like.”

“Ummm... yeah, sure why not. Yeah... Thanks.”

Chris walked back down the beige corridor to his computer and spreadsheets. Nigel smiled to himself as he picked his latte up.

“Ouch.” He’d spilt a bit on his hand. He put the plastic cup down on the floor and wiped the back of his hand on his grey trouser leg. He hadn’t lost the smile though. *Who’d of thought I’d be doing this if they’d met me seven months ago*, he thought.



It had been a hard eighteen months for Nigel since he’d been challenged by the often overused phrase: *What would Jesus do?* Back then he had been a fifty-eight year old jaded minister – Rev. Nigel Smarton. That was until a homeless drug addict called Zoë stumbled into their church at Trussellbridge. Nigel hadn’t known what to do but thank God Maggie Clarke was in the church. This elderly lady took Zoë into her home and after a disturbing dream Nigel met with Zoë and saw her come to faith. It was a powerful moment in Maggie’s living room. Zoë went from strength to strength as she helped the church Youthworker, John Williams, with the Friday night youthclub.

It hadn’t been a smooth ride though. Michael Hodgkins had left the church, taking his Homegroup with him. They didn’t want to rise to Nigel’s challenge of being involved in the community. This thin, balding man had taken his cold heart to a church down the road.

But worse than this and hitting far closer to home for Nigel was the letter he received from Claire Henson. He had long held a secret affection for her, possibly because of their common link, having both lost their spouses to fatal, extended illnesses a few years previously. She couldn’t cope with the people that Zoë had attracted to the church and Nigel was actively encouraging to be involved. She and her three children joined the Anglican Church across town. However, she allowed her fifteen year old daughter to continue attending the youthgroup.

Then everything changed six months later, almost a year ago now. There had been a fire in the church one cold Friday night in January. Nigel arrived and saw young people huddled on the grass under blankets consoling each other as John Williams offered some words of comfort whilst they waited for their parents. The car banked the curb and Nigel put the hand-break on. He almost fell out of the door in panic and was immediately confronted by Claire Henson; fire in her eyes. Her attention was soon caught by the two bodies the firemen brought out of the church. She could see her daughter Claire’s face and ran to her. Fortunately, she was soon sitting up and hacking out a cough in between drawing deep breathes of oxygen through the mask.

Nigel came over and hovered around the edges until a fireman asked him if he could identify the person covered with a blanket. It was removed to reveal Zoë’s scorched face. Claire told her mum that Zoë had saved her life by going back for her and dragging her out of the building.

A few days later Nigel sat in the community hall on a gray plastic chair next to Maggie Clarke and explained to the church that the building was possibly irreparable and they hadn’t kept up with their health and safety checks which had been Michael Hodgkin’s job until he left.

Nigel had made a heartfelt speech that he could remember almost word-for-word even as he stood in the office corridor holding his café latte a year later:

“I am prepared to lead you and be your minister, but it will be a long, hard road. The insurance company are blaming us; we may have lost our building. If you want, I will lead a church whose motto is: *What would Jesus do?* We will live a simple faith of unity, worship, service and evangelism. We will be a church that welcomes women subject to bleeding, twelve year old dead girls and their fathers, religious ministers like me, godly women like Maggie, the addicted, like Zoë, and everyone in between. If this isn't what you want I will step down, you won't have to sack me.”

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The church continued to meet in the community hall on Sunday mornings. Nigel was there early with the youthworker John and a couple of the young people to set out the chairs. Whatever they did; flowers at the front of the hall, some church banners that had been rescued from the fire on the walls, it still felt and, more importantly, smelt like a community hall. The singing was a bit flat and was lost in the echoes of the building. They hadn't got a sound system yet and a few of the older folk couldn't hear a lot of Nigel's sermons.

Nigel felt like a man stuck in quicksand. The more he tried to do the quicker he sunk. In an honest moment whilst shaving one morning he wiped the steamed-up mirror and looked at his reflection. *If I could get out of this I would*, he thought to himself.

Five weeks into their transition there was a knock at Nigel's front door. It was John.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course you can, you know you're always welcome here.”

John came into the hallway and shifted his weight from foot to foot nervously. He picked at the dead skin on one of his thumbs.

“Tea, coffee?”

“Ummm; coffee would be great thanks.”

Nigel went to the kitchen and turned back to John with a questioning look on his face.

“White with half a sugar please.”

“I can never remember. Must be a sign I'm getting old,” said Nigel as he went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. John followed him in and they stood in silence watching the kettle boil.

“Half a sugar, why only half a sugar? How did you come to that decision?”

“Sorry?” said John lost in his own thoughts.

“Never mind. Have you read *Three men and a boat?*” Asked Nigel.

“No. When was it written?”

“Oh, along time ago. Anyway, the men travel up the Thames in a boat. One day they are boiling the kettle and decide that it takes longer if they look at it.” The kettle clicked off. “Ah, there it is, we’ve proved their theory wrong then haven’t we,” said Nigel as he poured the water into the two cups – *World’s best dad* from his daughter Helen and *World’s best husband* from his wife Janice given to him many years ago now.

They stood by the kitchen cabinets...

“I wanted your advice Nigel.”

“Shoot,” said Nigel. The modern phrase fell limply from this fifty-eight year olds lips. Nigel cleared his throat to try and correct his attempt at bridging the age gap.

“Well, the Church Warden from *St. Mark the Absolutely Afflicted Church* in Bonnington phoned me on Tuesday. And, well, long story short, they are looking for a new youthworker. They have a great youthgroup and want to try and run a Youth Alpha Course and want me, I mean the person who gets the job, to get involved in the local comprehensive school.”

Nigel felt his breakfast lurch around in his stomach like a hurricane off the coast of America. He managed to keep a calmness on his face like a tropical beach at midday though.

“And how do you feel about it John?”

“I’m excited. I mean I like it here but I’ve been here a while now and what with the church building and everything being up in the air I wonder if I should, well... you know... think about the future.”

“Umm. Have they spoken to anyone else?”

“No, they want me to go for the job. They have head-hunted me,” John said with a proud smile. Nigel knew that John was finished in Trussellbridge; it was a done deal with Bonnington. And sure enough the months would paint that thought into a reality.

In the same week as this conversation with John Nigel received notification from the insurance company that they wouldn’t receive anything for the church fire – they were not covered.

At the next leaders meeting he informed them that John was possibly leaving and that the insurance claim had failed. He sank back into his chair feeling defeated.

“Well that’s a great shame,” said Valerie, who helped at the youthgroup as well as being on the leadership team.

“It’s more than a shame. What is God doing?” said another.

“I not so worried about God,” said Terry, a young man who’d been on the leadership team for eighteen months. “Look Nigel, I supported you through that whole Zoë episode. When Michael Hodgkins kicked up a fuss and dragged his homegroup away. When Claire Henson left and went across town. But we’re haemorrhaging at the moment.”

Silence. Terry carried on.

“You can’t say you haven’t noticed. There were forty-three people at church, in that hall, last Sunday. We used to get about a hundred people.”

“Well, where are they going?” Valerie feebly asked, feeling she was betraying Nigel by entering into the conversation.

“It’s a shame but I think we maybe need to part company,” said Terry.

*So you’re leaving as well* thought Nigel.

“When we first met in the community hall you said you would step down if we thought that was the right thing. Well I think it is. I believe you should leave. I’m not going to sugar-coat it with spiritual language. We’re in a desperate state and I think you’ve run out of ideas. We need fresh blood with a new vision for the future.”

“Do others feel the same way as Terry?”

“Well, you’re a lovely man,” said Valerie and tailed off starting to cry.

The other five people in the room nodded their heads.

“We’ll give you three months gardening leave with full pay.” Terry and the others had obviously thought this through.

Nigel felt an anger rise in him. “No that’s fine. I’ll leave you to it. Do you know the pressure of the job?! You haven’t got a clue, well you’ll find out now won’t you.”

“I have a pressurised job as well Nigel,” said Terry, “so don’t try and guilt trip me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it Terry.” Nigel picked up his papers, grabbed his coat from the peg and wrestled it on as he walked out slamming the door behind him. The problem was it was his house he had just stormed out of. What to do now?

Nigel ended up driving round to Maggie Clarke’s house. Would she be up at this time of night? He didn’t care as he rung the door-bell. He needed to talk.

A few minutes later Maggie came to the door in her dressing gown and slippers; pink with bobbles on the top. “Come in dear.”

“Well they’ve done it then have they?” she asked.

“How do you know?”

“Terry asked me if I’d talk to you. I said I’d have none of it and supported you 100%. If he wanted to... well... you know... ummm... sack you? He could do it.”

“What can I do now?” Nigel crumpled into Maggie’s bony shoulder and let out the pain of the last few months.

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In the end Nigel had accepted the church’s offer and taken the three months pay. He moved to a one bedroom flat in a town far enough away from Trussellbridge to theoretically help him forget about it. He’d been asked to think about another church post but realised he couldn’t face it; he just didn’t have the energy and couldn’t mentally and emotionally cope with another failure.

He unpacked his boxes and found a black folder; his *encouragement folder*. He had put anything in this that had encouraged him: A card thanking him for how he led a funeral, a note telling him he was doing a good job, a sermon that had “gone well” (whatever that means). He sat on the bed and flicked through them. Several of them were from Maggie, she was a good lady. *I must keep in touch with her* he thought. He came to one of the last ones. It was the sermon he’d preached the week after Zoë had collapsed in the church. It was written in Valerie’s hand. She always took notes in the sermons and as Nigel had done this one free from notes she thought he might like to remember what he’d said, especially as it was a “good one”.

The Bible reading was from Luke 8:40-56:

*Now when Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him. Then a man named Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, came and fell at Jesus’ feet, pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying. As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. “Who touched me?” Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.” But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.” Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.” While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. “Your daughter is dead,” he said. “Don’t bother the teacher any more.” Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.” When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child’s father and mother. Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. “Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead but asleep.” They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.*

*“The sharper among you will notice that this is the same Bible passage as last week. Last week I tried to preach from my mind. Today I am going to add my heart and soul to that equation. If you’d like to turn your attention to the screen, we are going to watch the start of a film called **Chocolat**.”*

Nigel remembered that the clip hadn’t worked and smiled to himself. He read on...

*“Sometimes, in the comfortable religion of life, people burst in who turn our lives upside down. That happened in the film, and it happened for us last week. Zoë disturbed our religion last week and God has rippled the waters of my soul. When that young lady,”*

He’d pointed at Zoë.

*“...laid on the floor last Sunday morning I was annoyed that she had interrupted my sermon. I stand before you as your Pastor this morning, and as one who is a poor reflection of Jesus. You see in the passage we’ve just heard, Jesus, the King of the universe, allowed an unclean woman, as the Jews would have put it, someone from the margins, to get so near him that she could touch him. He allowed power to leave him: and then, when a twelve year-old girl lay dead, he didn’t give up on her.”*

*“We live in a world where America could destroy the planet ten times over with its military power. And yet, just ten percent of their annual defence budget would wipe out world poverty. We live in a world of military strength, where we try our utmost to attain security; that is our focus. But Jesus lived a life of risk for those who lacked security. Whether we like it or not, there is a bias in the Bible towards people*

*who are poor. In the New Testament they are mentioned in one out of every ten verses. In Luke's gospel they are mentioned in one in every seven verses. James, Jesus' half-brother, mentions them in one of every four verses in his Epistle."*

*"Have we lost Jesus?"*

He could remember the absolute silence in the church as he'd let the question hang in the air.

*"Two thousand years ago our Saviour moved about in the dust, from obscure village to obscure village; are we too **saved** to live in the dust?"*

There had been silence again.

*"This week I want to ask the Homegroups to do something."*

Nigel smiled as Michael Hodgkins pained expression caught in his memory. He'd made it very clear that his Homegroup were going to be studying the book: **"Seven magnificent Martyrs from the Old Testament who are possibly in Glory."**

*"I want you to think about what we as a church could do for those who are poor. I don't just mean those who don't have money, but also those who are spiritually poor, time poor, or identity poor. I will meet someone from each of your Homegroups after church next Sunday and listen to your thoughts. Any group that isn't represented will not receive Homegroup material from me after Easter. I am serious about this."*

This sermon seemed like it had been written in a different era by a different person. How had the spiritual fervour and vaporised so quickly in Nigel's life. He folded the sermon in half, then tore it in two and put it in the bin; followed by the entire black folder. That chapter of his life was over.

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Nigel got a job working in finance for **48hrFinance Company**. They were a web company and he didn't need any financial skills for the job, he just had to sit in front of a computer monitor and respond to requests. He would fill in the blanks on the screen and the computer would do the calculations. He drove to the office each day and soon became engulfed in the business of the place. An open planned office with nowhere to hide and every person's statistics updated on the large plasma screen at the end of the office. Nigel's boss, Miss Patterson would prowl around the office like a lion waiting to pounce for the kill. Although he was ashamed of himself Nigel really struggled having a woman as his boss. He realised how male dominated his church's leadership had been...

The only respite from Miss Patterson and the plasma screen performance came in coffee breaks and at lunchtime. Nigel sat in the canteen and ate his packed lunch whilst reading a novel. He could clearly remember preaching and telling his folk to have their quiet time at work as people might ask what you were reading and you could then share your faith with them. There was no way he was bringing his Bible here; he wouldn't know what to say if asked what he was reading!

He was a third of the way through the novel: **This book will save your life** by A.M. Homes. It was a Christmas present from his daughter Helen. He'd always been too busy for novels what with his periodicals and religious tomes. But this one had really grabbed him. It was about Richard Novak, a wealthy man in his late fifties (like Nigel) living in L.A. One day he suddenly had chest pains and was rushed to hospital for various tests. A nurse asked him who he wanted to phone to let them know where he was. He thought and there was no-one – his ex-wife

would be inconvenienced and his teenage son wouldn't know what to say. Richard Novak starts thinking about what he has done in life, why he's done it and where it has got him to.

Trussellbridge may not have been Los Angeles but Nigel found a certain kinship with the fictitious Richard Novak. Where was his life going and what had he done with it up until now? But more than that he felt alone; since moving he hadn't found a new church. He'd been to the local one, walked in sat down, stood when told, listened when expected, sung when requested and left without any real human contact. *Had his church been as unwelcoming and inward-looking as this place?* he thought.

After this experience he decided he didn't really need to go to church to be a Christian. This feeling, which he knew wasn't right, found support in that fact that he didn't receive any contact or support from Trussellbridge Church apart from Maggie who wrote to him regularly. She had aged dramatically in the last couple of months. She had given up driving because of all those "boy-racers". And of late she'd found hearing on the phone difficult.

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One evening in September as the nights were beginning to draw in and the cold started to pinch around the cheeks Nigel got in from work, exhausted as usual. He was too old to keep up this kind of job for much longer. He picked the mail up from the welcome mat and, as he walked into the lounge, opened a letter with Maggie's familiar frail scrawl on the envelope. It was one of those Christian cards with water crashing over rocks on the front.

*Dearest Nigel,*

*I hope this letter finds you well and please forgive my spidery handwriting. My arthritis is really playing up. I was praying for you this morning after reading my Bible...*

Nigel looked at his Bible; dusty and ignored on the bookshelf behind the television.

*I felt God gave me something for you. He wants you to know that your identity is in Jesus not your job. Jesus died on the cross to bring you into unity and relationship with God. You can find your identity in Him just as Jairus' daughter and the woman subject to bleeding did. I won't forget that sermon or the phrase that you helped me live by: *What would Jesus do?**

Nigel wished he could forget the sermon and the uncomfortable feeling in the base of his stomach because he'd stopped asking: *What would Jesus do?*

*This letter is sent with my agape love – Maggie.*

Nigel struggled with sleep that night.