

“What would Jesus do?” (Part Four)

Nigel always had this problem. He stood in the dairy produce aisle staring. He could never work out which cheese was the cheapest, well, he didn't want the absolute cheapest which didn't taste of anything. But all the other cheeses, well he just couldn't work out what was the best value. Some were half price but were they smaller than the ones that were larger and only a third more expensive than the half priced ones? In the end he just picked one: *Anne Widdicombe's Fully Coated heavy cheese.*

That'll work, he thought.

Nigel pushed his trolley round the aisles, the front right wheel squeaking, as he bought all the usual things. In the frozen meat section he stopped and watched as a couple of people chatted to each other. There was a longing within him, something rose that he thought he had buried.

The young lady wiped her eyes. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“No problem. That's what I'm here for.”

“See you Sunday then Reverend.”

“You can call me Tony.” Tony the vicar adjusted his dog-collar, a nervous habit Nigel guessed, and put two chickens for £5 in his trolley.

The position of vicar/minister/pastor, whatever you wanted to call it gave you a certain position in the community. Sure, Nigel had heard how the Church was no longer trusted and leadership wasn't respected at any level. But he knew that when you'd been somewhere long enough as the minister, as he had been in Trussellbridge, you become an integral part of the furniture. People say hello to you, or guiltily thank you for the Christening you did for them when they promised they'd come to church regularly and so the list goes on. When Nigel was Rev. Nigel Smarton, when he was a minister, he knew where he stood.

But now? Well, now he was confused. Nobody stopped him to chat to in the supermarket. There were no nervous prayer requests. No nods from across the street from parents he'd seen at the school nativity play. Nigel worked for an insurance company now. He knew it was not a bad job but he wasn't sure who it made him. On top of that he hadn't told anyone that he'd been a minister or even that he was a Christian. And it seemed the longer he went without owning up to his faith the harder it came to plop it into a conversation. Also, Nigel had misgivings because of the jokes he'd laughed at which he wouldn't have dreamed of raising the corners of his lips to when he was a minister – but they were really funny, even if they were a bit rude. His language had relaxed as well and he was concerned about some of the gossip he had listened to and passed on. What would people think if he said he was a Christian now?

Just another hypocrite aren't you, he heard in his imagination as they stood around him tutting.

Also, he wondered if he was a Christian now. He knew he could never lose his eternal place in heaven but if he died tonight he'd feel a bit like a gate crasher and the best party ever.

His mind was still embroiled in these thoughts later on as he fought with his shopping bags to try and get the key to his flat out of his jacket pocket. Just as he got the keys a bag dropped to the floor.

“Why does it always have to be the bag with eggs in?” Nigel muttered to himself. He got through the door put the bags down and grabbed some kitchen roll from under the sink to mop up the egg entrails. Then he sat down on the

couch and flicked on the television; the usual rubbish. His gaze was drawn above the screen that showed a portly man falling over a stuffed dog into a large vat of porridge, to the card with water crashing over rocks that Maggie had sent him. Since he'd opened the card last week he wondered why Maggie Clarke had continued to keep in contact with him when no-one else in Trussellbridge had bothered, especially as he hadn't replied to her calls or letters. And yet this faithful elderly lady had kept him in her thoughts and prayers even as his thoughts had drifted from Jesus and his prayers had grown stale.

He got up from the couch and made that groaning noise in his throat that men of his age seemed to do whenever they moved and their body didn't want to. He picked up the card and read it again...

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

Since reading it the first time Nigel couldn't get round the thought: *Who am I?* He'd always thought his identity was in found in Jesus. He had asked Jesus into his life. He had felt a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit, what some would call *baptism in the Spirit*, when he had led Zoë to Jesus in Maggie's lounge. This young, homeless addict had changed his life. He'd thought he'd never turn back into a dry religious minister after that experience. But now here he was; even further back than he'd been before. No church, no observable display of his faith at work, no prayer life and a disinterest in his Bible. *What would Jesus do?* Not what Nigel was doing with his life at the moment.

He wondered what Jesus thought of him. He knew from his understanding of the Bible that Jesus loved and accepted him but he just felt an overwhelming sense of unworthiness and this was making it harder for him to start talking to Jesus again. He was caught in a vortex of emptiness that nobody could see; he was a hard working, tax paying citizen. But, nevertheless he felt this barrenness keenly.

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Nigel was settling in well in his job and, to his surprise making some friends. The first few times he was invited out on a Friday after work with his colleagues he said, "No." But he got to thinking why was he sitting at home watching a bland sitcom on BBC1 about a supposedly hilarious yet ordinary family when he could be out enjoying life, or, at least, getting used to another version of life.

So on the third time of asking he went out with them for a drink and something to eat. It amazed Nigel that these people were actually pleasant to be around. He thought back to some of his "brothers and sisters in Christ" from Trussellbridge and wished they had been more like the folk sitting round him now who occasionally ducked outside and stood hunched in the slanting rain for a cigarette. As these occasions became regular end of the month events Nigel found himself increasingly in heated but stimulating conversations with Calvin Andrews. Calvin was a family man in his mid-forties, nearly twenty years younger than Nigel. He was intrigued that Calvin never moaned about "her indoors" or complained about having "been let out for once". He was here for every monthly Friday meeting with his wife's blessing it seemed. Also, he had no lines around his eyes. This annoyed Nigel whose face had looked like a relief map of Snowdonia since his mid-thirties.

"What cha' thinking?" asked Calvin as he brought back a couple of orange juices for the two of them. "Ooops... Sorry," Calvin said as he spilt some drink on the table.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got it,” said Nigel as he removed a rather dirty hanky from his pocket and mopped up the juice. Now he didn’t know what to do with the orange-ragged remnant in his hand. He put it into an empty cheesy quavers packet and then put them both in his jacket pocket. “What?” he said as Calvin stared at him.

“If you don’t know what was wrong with that my friend then I don’t know where to start.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment whilst the others were playing a computer quiz game in the corner, occasionally shouting answers and then hitting each others arms playfully when they got them wrong. “Seriously, I thought that was the capital of Australia...”

“So... back to my question...”

“What?”

“What cha’ thinking Nigel?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” What was he doing? Nigel was opening up about how he felt. *You don’t do this. You shouldn’t be vulnerable; you used to be a minister. Abort emotions now! Shut down mouth now!* He thought. “I guess I just wonder where it’s all gone wrong. You know... my... my life.” *I am still talking. What is wrong with me?*

“It’s never too late to change you know Nigel.” He kept saying Nigel’s name which was comforting but also strangely intrusive. “My life changed seven years ago. My marriage was down the pan, kids didn’t know me; didn’t want to know me actually. I was on big money, but long hours and heavy drinking came with that. But Jesus changed all that.”

The name *Jesus* in this pub sounded embarrassing to Nigel. *Oh nooooo*, he thought. *He’s doing the Christian testimony bit to me! I should be doing this to him.* Nigel tried to smile and scratched his forehead.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Calvin. “But don’t worry, I’m not about to get out my Bible and whack you over the head. Look, I am a Christian; I make no bones about it. Everyone knows at work and I don’t force it on them but when the subject of... well... life I’spose, comes up I tell them what makes me tick, what makes it all worth while. You know what I mean?”

“Mmmm...” said Nigel.

“Seven years ago I wondered where it’d all gone wrong and then I did this course.”

“The Alpha Course?” Nigel interrupted. He could feel himself bristling. The local Free Church in Trussellbridge had run Alpha Courses with all their hand waving and speaking in tongues. Nigel had avoided it although he’d been planning to do one before the church fire and death of Zoë put an end to that idea.

“Yeah, that’s it. You’ve heard of it?”

“Yes... I think so.”

“Well, it starts a week Tuesday at the church I go to; just a kind of supper where you come along and find out about it. I can come to the first one with you if you want. I could come to all of them if you’d like.”

“How long is it?” Nigel was burning inside; *How dare he think I’m not a Christian!* but was also beginning to enjoy stringing Calvin along.

“Oh, about nine weeks I think.”

I bet he knows I'm a Christian and is trying to draw me out. Well I'll play along then!

“O.k.; I'll go if you go to all of it with me?” *Let's see how he deals with that curve-ball...*

“Great, we can go straight from work, maybe bring another more casual shirt to change into... not that that one isn't fine, I mean, yep, o.k. ... ummm.” Big sip of orange and change the subject. “So who d'yu think will win the big game this Saturday then Nigel?”

Nigel went to the restroom and wondered what he was doing. As he washed his hands he caught his shirt in the mirror. He'd take a fresh shirt in his bag for next Tuesday...



Calvin and Nigel turned up to the Alpha supper. By now Nigel had realised that Calvin wasn't trying to tease a confession of faith out of him – he just didn't see faith in him in the first place! Truth be told Nigel enjoyed the Alpha Course. The food was excellent and the talks by the young, cool and gifted minister were inspiring. But the best part for Nigel was the conversations in small groups. He had never actually listened to the questions and concerns of people who said they weren't Christians before, apart from Zoë of course. Some people had genuine questions. Others had shocking church experiences from earlier years that they wanted to explanations for. And there were others who just wanted the food and friendship and by week six they were wondering what would happen when the Alpha Course finished.

One annoyance for Nigel was that when people dropped out of the course the leaders didn't follow them up.

“We don't do that,” said Nigel's Group Facilitator.

“But why?” asked Nigel one evening.

“Because we told them we wouldn't at the start of the course. Anyway, most, if not all, folk on this course are invited by friends from the church. It's the friend's responsibility to maintain their friendship with the people that have decided to step out of the course. If they genuinely care about the people they've invited then they will continue the journey of life with them. My job is to show people Jesus, not force them to believe what I believe. I show them Jesus and they, and you...” Ouch, that hurt Nigel... “make the decision for yourself.”

After another session Nigel's Group Facilitator was asked how he kept his friendship with Jesus fresh. “Oh, I don't know, lots of things, books, prayer, the Bible, long walks, good films, friends, silence and church, to name a few. In fact, I've got some books in my bag that you can borrow. I meant to get them out last week but forgot as the conversation went on so long.”

“Please borrow one,” he said as he laid them out on the table.

Nigel grabbed a small paperback, *Seeing God in the ordinary* by Michael Frost.

“Don't forget,” people looked back as they were leaving. “10:15 for a 10:30 start here on Sunday morning if you want to come. I'll wait out front for you all in the hallway so that we can sit together.”

This commitment made Nigel feel nervous. He got home and immediately began to read the book he'd picked up. The end of the first chapter felt like a nudge from God to go to church on Sunday:

Jesus is then the only image of God and the only example to us of how God would live life if God was one of us.

Often young people are urged to ask “What would Jesus do?” whenever confronted by a choice for good or ill. WWJD t-shirts and jewellery can be seen in many youth group gatherings. If God is a creative God and God’s kingdom is the place where God’s creative processes are unfolding, how can we know what these processes are and in what ways can we get involved as God’s partners? Ask, “WWJD?” and then live as Jesus lived.

*This, of course, answers the old question about the importance of the Bible. How can I know what Jesus would do if I haven’t made him the object of my devotion? I can truly know what God in human form looks like only through a thorough and regular study of the Gospels. In this respect, every Christian ought to be regularly re-evangelized. That is, Christians must immerse themselves in the **evangel**, the gospel, over and over and over.*

Just when I think I can justify an action I find delicious but destructive as a creative process in my life, the question “What would Jesus do?” should be ringing in my ears. The incarnation, God in human form, provides me with a template for gauging what creation should look like. It’s not always simple or clear cut. I cannot in every situation be sure I know what Jesus might do. That’s the poetry of this approach. There’s no simple solution. Instead, there are danger and excitements and a variety of possibilities.

Nigel struggled to sleep and, strangely, was looking forward to church on Sunday.

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Sunday came and Nigel was there at 10:26, dangerously late for him, although he noticed the place was half empty when he stuck his head round the glass-panelled double doors. Also, he was wearing jeans and felt a little guilty. His grandmother wouldn’t be impressed: “Would you visit the Queen like that young man?” he could hear her saying as she clipped him round his seven year-old ear.

The service was the normal recipe of prayers, notices songs and hymns that Nigel had dished out over the years. But he felt as though he was being fed Scotch-Broth, or breathing in the aroma of fresh bread on the windowsill on getting home from school, or catching the smell of fresh coffee after the Alpha meal – all comforting, all familiar and all beneficial.

In Nigel’s many years of preaching he had seen several people fall asleep in the pews. How he’d longed for a Charles Haddon Spurgeon moment. That great Baptist minister of the nineteenth century, the Prince of Preachers, who had actually had someone drop dead in one of his sermons. How he’d often wished for that kind of power and for it to be unleashed on the same people frequently on a Sunday morning.

Nigel had come to see that church-goers didn’t listen to sermons for one of two reasons. Either because unfortunate delivery meant they couldn’t hear them or poor content meant they didn’t want to. Nigel had come to realise over the years that his delivery had been fine. He’d lacked a bit of fire to his content.

The preacher standing before him this morning seemed to have neither and yet, at the same time, both. He didn’t lead the service but after standing and thanking those involved in it opened his impressive leather Bible and read from Colossians 4:2-6:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

The preacher looked up.

“What is our message? Our message is a mystery and that mystery is a person. The Church has flattened the prose of our faith into neat points...” Nigel didn’t understand that sentence but stuck with the preacher. “Paul tells us in this passage to proclaim our message, the mystery of Christ.”

“My friends we will not always get neat answers. For sure we have logical answers to many aspects of the Christian faith but sometimes we have to acknowledge that there are limits to our understanding and we have to hand our intellectual baton on to our faith in the poetic mystery that is Jesus.”

The preacher spoke at length but kept Nigel engaged.

“Firstly, we must proclaim the mystery of Christ in our prayers. Paul says: Be watchful and thankful. The wonderful mystic Simone Weil, who tried to live like her Lord until her death in 1943, once said: *Prayer is simply coming to attention*. Prayer isn’t just about asking for things, although that’s part of it. Rather, it is about being aware of who God is and what God is doing in every part of our lives and the world around us.”

Nigel realised he had begun praying again since starting the Alpha Course.

“Secondly, we must proclaim the mystery of Christ in our lives. I grew up with a Christian faith that divided everything into two categories: Sacred and secular. Reading my Bible, praying, going to church five times on a Sunday; these were sacred things. Going for a walk, watching a film, reading a novel, eating a nice meal and so on; these were secular things. It didn’t mean they were necessarily evil, but they were neutral and my time would be better spent in sacred activity. The problem with this line of thinking is that it isn’t Biblical. The Bible tells us that God is everywhere and is involved in everything. This line of thinking can also lead us into inviting God into our church services, prayers and Bible readings as if God is some fashionably late guest who might honour us with his presence. But by inviting God into these areas we are saying he isn’t necessarily present in the rest of our lives; or, at least, not as powerfully. God is as powerfully present with you at the school gates as He is in this church. God is potently present with you in your chores around the house in the same way that He is in your prayer times. God is wonderfully evident in your workplace just as much as he is in your Bible readings. This is a mystery, but it is true! Jesus, our message, is the King of the heavens and the earth. The King has not abdicated his throne and handed his kingdom over to another. He is with us right now.”

The preacher paused and looked again. Nigel felt a tingle of emotion.

“And our King, in some mysterious way, will be with you tomorrow at 11:05am, wherever you are and whatever you will be doing. Let us not choose between the sacred and the secular but rather embrace them and offer our whole lives to Jesus.”

“Thirdly: Now here’s the tough part. As well as proclaiming the mystery of Christ in our prayers and in our lives we must proclaim the mystery of Christ in our words. Let’s take an example: A work colleague. You pray for them regularly, you *simply come to attention* and they begin to change. As they change they look at your life and see a difference. The problem is, in our world that knows little of the mysterious Jesus, what will they put the difference down to? They have no Christian vocabulary on which to build. **You** must provide it for them. Using simple words tell them you will pray for them when they share concerns, don’t be ashamed that you follow Jesus, don’t hide

from discussions about faith because you don't know all the answers. After all, we embrace a mystery for which we have some, but not all of the answers. In faith we put our hand into the hand of Jesus and walk with him through this world and into the next."

"Pray, live and speak the mystery that is Jesus."

Nigel had to get out of the church as quickly as possible. He dodged his Alpha Group Facilitator and walked out into the grey, cold morning as cars flew by him busily coming from or going somewhere.

Nigel ended up on a bench in a park looking at the square yard of ground in front of him. A sparrow flew down and landed, bobbing its head, looking for food.

Still looking at the sparrow and feeling the cold dampness of the wooden bench seep through his coat and jeans Nigel prayed out loud.

"Jesus, I don't get all this. I am angry with you about some things. I don't know that I'll ever get over losing my lovely wife Janice seven years ago and a little part of me doesn't like you for taking her. I don't know why Zoë came into our lives at Trussellbridge and why I am not a minister of your gospel now." He cleared his throat as a young man jogged past with his ipod cutting off the outside world. But this I know. You love me and lived, died and rose again so that I could be cleansed of my sin, become your friend and join you in your kingdom movement. I want this again and I know I won't be building your kingdom from a pulpit, but instead round the coffee machine at work... Ummm... Amen."

Relief flooded Nigel as tears streamed his wintry cheeks.

He hadn't worked out how he would tell Calvin he'd always been a Christian or that he'd been a minister, but he was sure he'd work that out by January 2010. For now he was going to embrace the mysterious message of Jesus, finding his identity in Him, and always ask himself *What would Jesus do?*



A few weeks later he was in a rhythm of praying, living and speaking the mystery at work, especially with Chris, a younger man who worked on the computer next to him.

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.