

“What would Jesus do?”

Part Five.

“So what do you think? Are you up for it?” Calvin sipped his coffee. He and Nigel were on a break. They spent most breaks together chatting these days. Nigel had been working at the *48hrFinance Company* for over a year now since he’d stopped being a minister. It had been a massive change for him; going from the closeted world of the church to the cut-throat business world, especially this last year with the economic crash. Would he have felt it as keenly as a minister in his study with his books around him?

“Ummm... I don’t know. Can I think about it?”

“Sure, no worries. Just let me know by the end of the month if that’s o.k. because we need to put the order of service together.”

“Ok, I’ll let you know in the next couple of weeks then, after my holiday.” Nigel checked his watch. “Better get back to it,” he said. He drained his cup of the last few mouthfuls of cold coffee and put the dirty mug in the communal sink for somebody else to wash up.

As he turned away Nigel felt that now familiar nudge to wash his cup up; and Calvin’s. Since attending the Alpha Course, where he pretended that he wasn’t a Christian, and then the church that ran the course Nigel had been introduced to the Holy Spirit as a living being instead of an abstract Biblical inconvenience. He was filled with the Holy Spirit one Sunday morning after church. He still wasn’t sure or comfortable with the terminology but did feel the power of God within him. Not in a *ZAP!* kind of way. Instead, just gentle nudges now and then on how he should act and a calm assurance that God loved him. If he had been like this as a minister how different would things have been?

Calvin’s request to share his testimony at the Candlelight service had disturbed Nigel and he struggled to focus at his desk the rest of the day. He answered the phones, dealt with complaints, sent off the correct forms to people, but he was just trying to work out how to tell his friend that he had kept a large chunk of his life a secret. Since doing the Alpha Course and recommitting his life to God on that cold wooden bench a year ago Nigel had tried to live like Jesus. But he’d put the problem of telling the truth to Calvin at the back of his mind. Where would he start?

I used to be a minister; a rather dry and stale one. That was until Zoë came to our church, a lonely drug addict who changed most of us – me the most probably. Then there was the fire in which Zoë died and we lost the church building. A few months later, as church numbers dwindled, I lost my job and came here. I pretty much lost my faith until a letter from Maggie Clarke got me thinking again. She was a lovely older lady in the Trusselbridge church, really filled with the Spirit and compassion of God. Why didn’t I tell you all this when you invited me to the Alpha Course? I was offended that you didn’t recognise that I was a Christian, so I thought I’d test you.

Nigel was dragged from his daydream. “Yes madam, I’ll have that form off to you first thing tomorrow.”

There was no way Nigel could tell the truth at church in the Candlelight service – it just wasn’t the done thing. Still he had a few weeks to think of a way out of it, ten days of which would be spent in Barbados attempting to put a tan on his pasty carcass.

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Nigel got back to his flat and the door met some resistance as he opened it. More mail than usual lay on the floor. Christmas cards. Before he opened any he felt guilty that he hadn’t written his yet. He made a coffee; white with two sugars and sat down to open them. There was one from Claire Henson, a widow from his last church who he’d

warmed to until she left over the Zoë situation. It shared the usual bland pleasantries of an English friendship that had gone sour. There were a few others and then one from Maggie Clarke with a Nativity scene on the front. He could almost hear her saying: “*I don’t want to see robins and snow on my cards, I want to see Jesus!*” Nigel opened the card:

Dearest Nigel,

I pray that you have a hope-filled Christmas and continue to live like Jesus. I am so glad you have found a new spiritual home. Abundant blessings. Are you doing what Jesus would do?

In Christian love - Maggie.

Was he doing what Jesus would do he wondered? Would he continue to keep his past a secret? Nigel ignored the nudge and opened the next card.

It was from his daughter Helen and had a robin and snow on the front. It saddened Nigel deeply that his only daughter had not accepted Jesus into her life. She was an independent, free-thinking young lady. She hadn’t rebelled at university and had a reliable job. She had a few boyfriends, but nothing serious at the moment. Nigel hoped she’d marry soon.

Dear dad,

Have a Merry Christmas. Do you want to meet up?

Love from Helen.

Maybe Nigel could barter with God and instead of telling the truth at the Candlelight service he could have his daughter round for Christmas Day and cook for her. Why, he’d even take her to church on Christmas Day. Surely that was an acceptable alternative for God? He picked the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hi Helen, it’s your dad.”

“Oh, hi dad.”

“Oh, are you busy. I can phone back if you’d like.”

“No, no, I’m not busy dad.” He heard the tv turn off in the background.

If I phoned more often our chats wouldn’t be so stilted he thought.

“I got your card. Mine’s in the post...” (He lied. That familiar nudge.) “Well, I’ll post it tomorrow.” (Great, now he had to write it tonight.) “Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to come to me for Christmas. You could come down on Christmas Eve if you like, sing some carols at the Candlelight service, and then I’ll cook you a slap-up Christmas lunch?”

Silence...

“It’s just, well, in your card, you said it would be good to catch up.” He then realised that she meant just to meet up for a meal at somewhere like *Pizza Express* over the Christmas period.

“That would be... ummm... nice dad. Ok, yeah.” He could hear her warming to the idea.

They chatted for a few more minutes and then he put the phone down and realised that he’d never cooked a Christmas lunch; that had been his wife’s department until she died. Since then he’d been invited out by a church family each year at Trusselbridge. He’d worry about the food later; he had cards to write now and a suitcase to pack for his holiday.

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Calvin picked Nigel up early on the Saturday morning and took him to the airport. Nigel was there nearly three hours early for his flight to Barbados. It was a cold end of November day and the sky was filled with low grey clouds. Nigel would be happy to leave this behind for ten days.

The flight was long, the children loud and uncontrolled, the in-flight films disappointing Jennifer Aniston offerings but the food was a pleasant surprise. Nigel looked down to see the blue Caribbean sea dotted with islands. And then they descended over Barbados. The Captain of the plane told them the temperature and time on the ground; it was comfortably warm. When Nigel got out of the airport the heat hit him and made him feel sleepy. He got a taxi to his hotel, had a shower and then napped briefly before his evening meal. That night he ate red snapper with rice and peas followed by fresh mango.

The hotel put on various outings for people who, like Nigel, were on their own. He took full advantage of them. Amongst other things he went diving one day. The boat cruised up the side of the island protected from the huge waves of the Atlantic stopping at a couple of shipwrecks. In the water Nigel swam with a turtle which tried to bite him when he touched it. After lunch they all dived into the water and the captain decided it would be funny to play theme tune to *Jaws* over the speakers. It made Nigel smile and also swim back to the boat quicker than he would have done.

Nigel had enquired about churches and found out that there was an early morning service near his hotel: A small, wooden pink church whose car park backed onto a line of trees that fell away to golden sand and the crisp sea beyond. He’d check it out, it would be fun.

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Nigel arrived at *The Church of Jesus the Good Shepherd*, an Anglican Episcopalian church, ten minutes before the service started. The sun glinted against the pastel pink wooden boards of the church as Nigel climbed the steps and looked inside. It was near empty; had he got the wrong time? No, an elderly lady walked up the aisle to the door and handed him an order of service with a broad smile.

“Welcome! You are going to be blessed today young man.”

The service began on time and lacked the clichés of vibrant music and dancing in the aisles that Nigel had hoped for. *Had he come for a show or to meet with God?* He felt that nudge again.

The thin, black elderly Rector, Rev. Beverly Sealy, stood up in the pulpit, opened his Bible and began to read from Isaiah 11.

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD - ³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; ⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

⁵ Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

⁷ The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. ¹¹ In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea.

¹² He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.

¹³ Ephraim's jealousy will vanish, and Judah's enemies will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim.

¹⁴ They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east. They will lay hands on Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them.

¹⁵ The LORD will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea; with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River. He will break it up into seven streams so that men can cross over in sandals.

¹⁶ There will be a highway for the remnant of his people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt.

(Isaiah 1:1-16)

“Bored already!” The Rector shouted at the congregation. “This is the Word of God passed down to his servant Isaiah hundreds of years ago. So sit up straight and listen as the Holy Spirit descends and speaks!”

“Mrs. Mable, wake up your husband.” An elderly lady nudged the man next to her.

Rev. Beverly Sealy looked at the man: “George, lay off the rum or it will kill you.”

This was a direct style of pastoral care Nigel thought to himself. The Rector prayed and then launched into his sermon.

“This passage from our Lord is about Christmas, which we will celebrate a few weeks time. It is also about now and it is about our eternal future.”

“The shoot coming up from the stump of Jesse is our Jesus. A tiny, frail shoot growing in a teenage womb, laid in a manger, fleeing to Egypt, growing in obscurity. But all the time the roots are deepening and a Branch that will bear fruit is growing. The Branch? Jesus and us; his Church. Do you remember your first frail, at times faltering, steps of faith? When you came to Jesus you were probably like a tiny shoot.”

“The kingdom of God, God’s reign and activity, starts like small shoot as well. Jesus ushered it in and spoke of the mystery of the treasure buried in a field, of seed in a field that could be snatched or strangled, of yeast mixed through the dough, of the tiny mustard seed, of wheat struggling amidst the tares. We’d love this kingdom to come with a flash and a bang: Lights, camera, action! We long for the picture Isaiah gives us of the kingdom of God in verses 6-16. We long for the dramatic. We’d like to see a wolf and a lamb live together, a leopard and a goat lie down beside one another, a calf and a yearling and a lion together being led in some wonderful pageant by a child, a cow and a bear feed together as their babies cuddle up with each other for warmth. We’d love to see a lion eating straw like an ox. To be sure it would take a while to feel relaxed about our children playing with cobras and in a viper’s nest. But we’d get there as we climb the holy mountain together. A mountain where there is no hint of harm or destruction. And we will climb this mountain to Jesus not just with our friends, but with those who were once our sworn enemies. Judah will climb with their enemy Ephraim, jealousy erased from both sides. Rivers like the Euphrates, that divided nations will be broken into tiny streams so that people can cross towards the mountain in their flip-flops!”

“But all this will happen when Jesus comes again and, like a banner, draws all that is his to himself, as it says in verses 10-11. So do we just sit and wait in the holy bus shelter we call church for Jesus’ bus to turn up? George Eldon Ladd puts it another way in his brilliant book about the kingdom of God: *Does mankind have a destiny? Or do we jerk across the stage of time like wooden puppets, only to have the stage, the actor, and the theatre itself destroyed by fire, leaving only a pile of ashes and the smell of smoke?*”

“We are not marking time; our lives do make a difference, they will not be ashes and smoke because we have a destiny. We live between the times of Jesus’ comings. Jesus came and ushered in the kingdom of God although we do not see it fully. We see shoots, not the holy mountain. Friends; we spend too much time looking for the holy mountain now when we should be encouraged by the shoots from the stumps of life! They are not ashes and smoke, they are shoots from the stump of Jesse! Do you see that shoot as a Christian buys a KFC bargain bucket for Willie the town drunk and then sits down and eats it with him? Do you see the shoot as that Christian keeps praying for her loved ones even though they are far from God? Do you see the shoots of the kingdom of God in the world around you and in your life?”

Nigel shifted in his seat.

“These shoots are a taste of the holy mountain. They are glimpses of the power of God’s reign – the kingdom of God. We should expect to see them, to taste them, to experience them. You see, we should actually experience God’s activity, God’s kingdom, in our lives now. The problem is that we always look for the holy mountain experiences; people pay to go and hear about them at conferences. And if we’re not careful we miss the shoots of the activity an evidence of God’s kingdom that grow all around us. You may not see a lion eating straw like an ox, but you might see someone give an elderly lady a lift to the midweek lunch at the church down the road. You may not see the cow feed with the bear but you might see a movie that moves you with its glimpses of God’s eternal love.”

“As Christians we often focus on the holy mountain when Jesus will come back and we can climb to be with him in heaven. For sure Jesus wants to get us into heaven but I believe he wants to get heaven into us now! Did you hear that? He wants to get heaven into us. We should be a bit of heaven on earth.”

“Now I know what you’re thinking. *But Pastor I am such a weak Christian. I sin, I doubt, I often don’t think about Jesus between Sundays because life is so busy.* I know all of this my friends because I’m the same. I am like you and you are like shoots growing out of the stump of Jesse. Let’s stop pretending to have all our junk together. Let’s lower the draw bridges and allow one another in. Let’s protect the shoots that are growing instead of looking for the weeds in each others lives.”

“George Eldon Ladd challenges me with these words: *Has the realization gripped you that the very life of heaven itself dwells within you here and now?* Later he writes: *This is what eternal life means. This is what it means to be saved. It means to go about every day in the present evil Age living the life of heaven.*”

“And then one day heaven will come down to earth and we will climb that mountain together. And I believe that as we climb amidst the wolf and lamb and leopard and goat and calf and yearling and lion and ox and cobra and viper and child and cow and bear and reconciled enemies we will be able to look down and beneath our feet, growing between our toes, see green! The holy mountain of the life to come will be covered with the shoots of our kingdom of God intentions in this life.”

Let us pray...

All heads bowed except for Nigel's. His heart was racing. He had not heard of the kingdom of God in such clear terms before. He needed to talk with Rev. Beverly Sealy before his flight home next week. He grabbed the Rector after his iced tea and arranged to meet with him on the Tuesday morning.

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Nigel then phoned Calvin.

“Hello... who is this?”

“Oh, sorry Calvin it's me, Nigel. Have I woken you up?” He realised it was the middle of the night in the UK.

“Yes, but don't worry about it. What did you want?”

“I'll share my testimony at the Candlelight service.”

“Great. Ok, we'll talk about it when you get back Nigel. Have a safe journey home; good night.”

In the blazing sunshine Nigel walked down to the seafront where he was greeted by golden sand and a stiff breeze.

I'll buy a KFC bargain bucket for lunch today he thought.