ONE MINUTE
AT A TIME

Les
Norman
Takes Me One Minute To Write

Takes You One Minute To Read

And In That One Minute

Your Life And Mine

May Change Forever
For quite some time on an almost daily basis, I told a story to encourage the men and women in a worldwide community of pray-ers, senders, go-ers, do-ers and supporters of mission to the lost, the last and least of the nations.

My discipline was to be able to type the story in less than a minute and for a reader in a hurry to be able to get the idea in less than one minute. Of course, it might have taken half-a-lifetime to live the story beforehand.

Many requests have been made for the stories to be retold in a book, so now in my 65\textsuperscript{th} year and after 30 years at the same desk I have a little more time to do just that.

I asked readers to choose the stories they liked the best and here they are. So, if and when you have a minute of your own, send me a message to say hello. I will like that.

**Les Norman.**

[link to email: support@dci.org.uk]
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A SYSTEMATIC CONFESSION

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

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

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

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

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

Can two men sit side by side in a train for two hours and not say a word other than a good morning?

If the two men are English, it is perfectly possible, because Englishmen do not speak unless they are introduced.

I wondered why my young Brazilian friends were carrying their guitars, after all the train ride into Porto in Portugal was only twenty minutes. No sooner than the train moved away, the guitars came out and the passengers were treated to songs and smiles between stations.

Every song shared their faith, which got people talking and no one asked for money. The Brazilians were making the most of the opportunity and when the train arrived, the Englishman, who had not been introduced, quietly emerged, red-faced from under the seat and feared what might happen on the return journey.
Opportunity is impatient. It often comes disguised and rarely knocks twice. We do well to drop everything in order to take hold of a sudden opportunity, and if right now the future looks a little bleak, then today is a very good time to invite it or create it.

Some people even ambush opportunity en-route to where it is going, to possess the concealed treasure that it is carrying to whoever looks up and sees the stars.
AFTER SIXTY-FIVE LAPS YOU RETYRE

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

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

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

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

It is not just good manners to open the door for divinity and say, "After you, please," but it also makes perfect sense.
ALONE TOGETHER IS A BEAUTIFUL LIFE

When enough snowflakes hold hands a city comes to a white, grinding stop. This is the strength of alone together as one contemplative community says, trying to put their experience into words. For thirty years our work around the world has been the synergy of lots and lots of small contributions of time, skills, creativity and money from hidden men and women of all ages, backgrounds and nationalities and by no means the work of any one 'great' man or woman.

To you all I take my hat off in celebration of your trust and sacrifices which alone together with God's help have made the world a better place.

As the anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."
AMEN, AMEN AND PENDING

It is often said that the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. Wearing jeans instead of tunics and blogging on Facebook rather than a scroll will not save us from repeating the errors of our fathers.

Yet hidden in history is a power for good that can be harnessed.

For example, in just six weeks in the late 1800's, 100,000 people in Llanelli, Wales decided to follow Christ. Empty church buildings on every street corner still evidence the crowds of young people who prayed to take the gospel to the world, only to lose their own lives in the trenches of World War I.

How curious that 100 years later, this once derelict town gave birth to a movement that through prayer intentionally taps into a century-old heritage of unanswered Amen's.

World Horizons in Llanelli is filling the world with young people who live the dream that was swallowed by war.
Similarly, in Hernhutt, Germany, a sensitive visitor perceives the pregnant atmosphere left by 100 years of uninterrupted Moravian prayer.

In fact many an ancient ruin hides an invisible reservoir of centuries-old prayer waiting to be released from God's pending tray through you, through me, and through anyone who dares to say his or her own Amen to the Amen of history.
AND LEILA KHALID SMILED

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

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

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

Do Good Samaritan’s still exist?

A taxi driver emerged from ancient Samaria, looked, backed up and took a risk to fill his eight seats with nine strangers. As a Palestinian, Raoud could not enter the Jerusalem area, so he took us up and down hills, then through dark, narrow streets.
He by-passed Bethany at high speed to evade the military and his own people, until we finally reached Bethlehem.

Near the impenetrable 30-foot high graffiti-covered security wall, he slid into a dim alley. We had to leave, only to be threatened by shouts, guns and dogs coming from the Israeli military.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our laughter stopped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tea anyone?

Milk and sugar?
APPLE AND BLACKBERRY PIE

The man's eyes take on a dreamy romanticism and oblivious to all around him, he says, "I wish this could go on forever."

Slowly, the camera rises to show him seated in his car facing a stationary line of traffic to the horizon. Yet our VW Polo driver is so enamoured with his car that even sitting still and going nowhere fast, makes him feel good.

Not many things in life feed our soul like that, not even a VW Polo in gridlocked traffic comes near.

On the contrary we are drained dry by this generation's addiction to our Apple and Blackberry smartphones that deliver information by the second and demand decisions from us by return.

If there is no escape, then you and I have to make one.

Did time and space ever unexpectedly stand still for you in quietness alongside water or at sunset? Did a mellow peace that is out of this world ever fill your soul even for a few minutes?
Do you know what I mean?

We can't make the moment last forever but we can make time and space for it to happen again.

So why am I here writing on this side of the screen and why are you there, reading on the other side. Leave the Apple, the Blackberry and the Samsung and go for some God therapy for the real you that lives underneath all that technology.

That man you see sitting quietly in the distance, hands-free and his heart the same, well, that will be me.
APPLE, BMW AND GOOGLE COOL

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

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

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

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

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

Anyway, I thought I would tell you the story before the meteor strikes and brontosaurus like me go into the history books.
APPOINTED THEY DISAPPOINTED

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

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

Some weeks later, Juana, his wife for more than 50 years and a lifelong believer began to weep as she was tempted to question this last-minute change of heart. Yet before her distress became more than skin-deep, somehow, God opened time and space to her and showed Alejandro to her. Juana said afterwards that he was looking good with all unbelief gone and he was waiting for her.

After that she never grieved for one more minute in the two years before she joined him.
In our own loss God took us to this poem from 1919 written by Henry Scott Holland for the funeral of a King. It seems to be what Alejandro said to Juana, more or less. We thought that you might like to have a copy for yourself, or to give to a friend.

"Death is nothing at all, I have only slipped away to the next room. I am I, and you are you. Whatever we were to each other, That, we still are. Call me by my old familiar name. Speak to me in the easy way, which you always used. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together.

Play, smile, think of me. Pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without effect without the trace of a shadow on it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same that it ever was. There is absolute unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?

I am but waiting for you. For an interval. Somewhere. Very near. Just around the corner. All is well."
ASPIRIN OR THE AXE

Your e-mail from distant lands asked me to buy a car for you, and then you mention your eye-watering debts. Last week you joined a mission, but you need support and a four-figure sum to move your family across the country. Today you asked for school fees.

Yet sending you a Western Union transfer will be like giving an aspirin to a man who has fallen under a train. It will have no effect.

What is required is the axe that Jesus takes to the root of problems. And here it comes.

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

Is this God's work or your own good idea?
Am you doing this in God's ways?
Does God agree with your two answers?
Jesus says that if you seek first the Kingdom of God and His right ways then all that you need will be provided.

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

You asked for an aspirin and I have given you an axe but one will work for now and the other will work for a lifetime.

Best, don't you think, to suffer a little short-term pain for a long-term gain?
BAD HABITS ARE GOOD FOR BUSINESS

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

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

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

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

Humbling, but this is nothing.

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

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

The eye-catching sign on the main square in Bethlehem was intended to make the visitor feel at home. "We make you welcome just as we made Jesus welcome." I am not sure which Bible the sign writer for the local Chamber of Commerce had been reading, but as far as I know the welcome that the parents of Jesus received consisted of being pointed towards a stable. That was because there was no room on offer at the Inn or curiously, anywhere else in Joseph's hometown. These days a welcome like that would be on Trip Advisor before the evening. Something of an own goal for the Bethlehem United shops team. We smiled and welcomed Jesus all over again into our hearts, lives, family, future and finances. The living Jesus that is, not the baby that drives Bethlehem's commerce nor even the crucified Jesus of Jerusalem's history. Every Christmas a thousand, thousand preachers ask if we will make more room for Jesus than the Bethlehem innkeeper of long ago ever did. Now, we are not going to say no and make the same mistake twice, are we? However much the street poster tries to rewrite history.
BEWARE THE BITE IN THE FIGHT

I once drove halfway across Europe to be a go-between in an argument that was none of my business.

If you ever feel tempted to do likewise, know that it is like trying to grab a stray dog by the ears only to have it turn and bite your hands. Sure enough, true to the Proverb both parties sank their teeth into me.

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

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

Like David, Israel’s king long ago, I have discovered that the boundary lines fall for me in pleasant places. So long as I stay in line with what I know to do my creativity flows, my gifts make room for me and life is satisfying.
Cross the boundary lines and I fall into the hands of pirates and cannibals who capture me, boil me alive and spit out my bones.

To stay safe, be true to your call and never grab someone else's ears because unless they invite you they are just as likely to fight you.
BEYOND BREAKING POINT

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

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

Everyone nodded, now they understood perfectly.
BLOOD MONEY IN CONGO

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

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

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

In an age long past, another money-loving prophet called Balaam was also contracted to curse innocent people but failed because God refused to cooperate and did the opposite.

That is what God does best; he blesses and he does not curse. Not for fees, not for anything or anybody.
David, the Chemin-Neuf community and many others are working to reverse the curse upon these innocent children and show them the blessing of God.

We say Yes! Hats in the air for these people, cheers and shouts from us.
I am sure that life was terribly uneventful 40 or 50 years ago, apart from things like a World War, but these days we have extreme sports, extreme highs, extreme scams and many an extreme crisis so an extreme word was required by our extremely cool Facebook and Twitter generation.

Fantastic.

We say it all the time.

But why not.

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

Come on, someone blow that vuvuzela.
BOTTOMS UP

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

Or else.

You know the feeling.

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

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

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

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

The best bread is daily bread, it's the freshest, straight out of the oven and your mouth waters just thinking about it. This daily bread is yours for the asking. Daily bread is food for body, soul and spirit. There is enough for you and a lot more to give to others. Trust me, my last salary was in 1980 when I was 32 years old. Today I am 65 and by following Jesus there has never been one day without daily bread on our table. Curiously when we break it up and pass it on to others even more that we gave away comes in tomorrow's delivery. For me daily bread is not so much for eating but for delivering.

What do you think?
BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY

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

Back then, there was a day we were being driven by a couple who we knew had a home freezer overflowing with food. I wondered what conversational gymnastics would be required to bring up the subject of frozen bread and perhaps be given a loaf to try.

Instead, a Bible verse came into my mind, "I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." "Well Lord," said I, "there is a first time for everything. Keep listening."

The day never came.

Instead without appeals, fuss or marketing the mission or ourselves, we quietly talk to Jesus about things and leave him to choose who will respond to his voice, not to ours.
Inexplicably, we have always had enough to live on and many times more to give to others, but don't imagine this is because of our goodness, for it is not.

This is the extravagant, undeserved and unfailing goodness of God, a grace that is equally there for everyone. Especially for you.

Prayer is your one-stop shop when it comes to fetching bread for your journey.
CAFÉ CON WHAT IS IT POR FAVOR

It is very enriching to be able to speak a second or third language. My wife made sure that all three of our children did just that. It was different for me.

In school, they put me out of German, followed by French and enriched me in the girls typing class instead.

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

One evening, calling it prayer, I grumbled to God about missionaries allegedly waking up with the gift of tribal tongues. So why not me?

Of course, no such thing happened, yet the very next day and for the first time, I heard not a river of sound in Spanish, but distinct words.
So, when a man ordered a coffee, like a child, I repeated what he said - and the waiter brought me a cafe con leche.

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

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

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

Which just about sums up our visit to Lithuania itself.

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps that is what Calliope, Thalia and Melpomene are silently trying to say.
CASTLES IN THE SAND

With a mastery of several languages, an intellect that has taken him to Ph.D level, a sincere faith and an integrity beyond question my friend Philippe could easily have fled the harsh poverty and ever-present disease of Burkina Faso.

He could have made a name for himself in Europe or the USA, but he chose to sacrifice wealth to stay with his suffering people.

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

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

Yet in Philippe's desert nation you soon learn that although sand is easy to find it is a poor foundation for a home, a life or anything else worth having. Local native builders mix concrete into the sand to pour in solid foundations.
Wise men and women do the same because if you skimp on the cost of the sacrifice that puts the concrete into life, the day after the wind blows and the seas rise there is nothing left to see. Castles in the sand have to be built again tomorrow and the again the day after.

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

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

It fell and those were his few words.

Silence followed.

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

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

In fact nothing ever is.
CHILDLIKE IS WHAT CHILDLIKE DOES

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

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

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

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

That's what childlike is and does.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even before the grass in Eden needed cutting the gardener noticed that for man to be alone was not a good thing. In all the years since not a lot has changed, except to say a whole industry has sprung up to sell to this deepest of all felt needs. A thousand and one Facebook 'friends,' a similar number of followers on Twitter, mega-church on Sundays in an ocean of strangers and men and women still weep with loneliness on the inside. Let me help you. Beyond church, think community. More meaningful than screens and shopping, community is where people know you by name and call you if you are not there. It is where people accept you with all your faults, feelings and funny little ways. Author Margaret Mead says, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world." And your world and mine. Cold church to cheerful community is grey moon to blue planet, emptiness into loveliness. I am thinking community, a hidden place where transformation happens. Come looking with me, asking we will receive, seeking we will find, let's go knocking and find a door that opens.
COLOUR MY LIFE EVERYTHING

Celebration is more than an occasion. It is a rainbow attitude and one that Ebenezer Scrooge and his descendants know nothing about.

Honour a date, celebrate a milestone and wait not a moment longer to make someone, even just one, feel loved and appreciated.

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

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

Weddings and dinner parties were big in his diary, and he knew how to jump for joy when good news came.
Facebook and Hello magazine you missed it all by 2000 years, what a shame!

Celebration is definitely the way to put the colour back into those grey days, and I can tell you that where I live, it is definitely time to turn on the rainbow.

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

I choose life.
COME FOR TEA AT FOUR O’CLOCK

In the mid-1800's, David Livingstone was one of the very first Europeans who dared to explore the malarial interior of southern Africa.

He was a leader who wanted to find the way, so that he could show the way, and unlike many a contemporary he went all the way, despite considerable risk to health. Livingstone knew that life is led from the vanguard and not from the comfort of the rearguard.

One evening, as dusk fell on the high ground, the lights of 10,000 camp fires began to twinkle below in the inky darkness. Overwhelmed by the vastness, a companion thought out loud, "Where do we go first?"

Livingstone replied from his heart, "Onwards, anywhere, provided it be forward."

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

Onwards is the direction that we shall be taking today, given any opportunity at all.

If you would head in the same direction, then perhaps we could meet for tea down the road somewhere.

So, would 4 o' clock be a good time for you?
CONDEMNATION IS NOT FOR KEEPS

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

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

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

Push it and see.

Life is waiting for you outside.
CONDENSED SOUP

Isn't it strange how you notice how that everyone else is ageing, but you never consider that the same might be happening to you?

Our Monday small group has been meeting since 1984 to answer the call to go to unreached, untaught or uncared for peoples, and because we cannot go to them ourselves, we send others.

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

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

That gets my vote, let them come.
You know, I always like the way that Campbell’s manage to condense a litre of their soups into a very small can - just add water.

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

What do you think about that?
CONNECT THREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sooner or later everyone who bought from our car showroom seemed to be upset about something. Raised voices and rancid comments left me scratching my head.

Our products were first-class and the employees were honest and hard-working, but they did have this unfortunate little way of telling the customer whatever he or she wanted to hear.

Delivery on Friday at 5 o'clock? Yes, sir.

Ready by noon? Certainly, sir.

The part will be here tomorrow, madam. It was not, of course.

I solved the problem with one sheet of paper, some words in large letters and a photocopier.

That evening I pinned these words at eye level to every service counter: "Never make a promise that you cannot keep."
A year later we walked away with a National Customer Service Award simply by displaying hundreds of hand-written commendations from customers who found us to be as good as our word.

That was all they wanted, the same as we would expect for ourselves.

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

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

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

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

We don't always get it right because living out unconditional love is really hard. Only God is good at it but with his help we can close the cupboard door and love where it matters in marriage, ministry and managing our attitudes.
CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER

Whoever chose their time and place in history to be born? Who decided the colour of their eyes, their hair and skin, their shape and size?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The idea is the same: People are invaluable.

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

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

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

Look over your shoulder. Is someone, anyone following you?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sees people like you and me stop their yawning.

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

Politicians and preachers take note.

Please.
DESIGNER CULTURE

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

Do some churches buy a culture as well?

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

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

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

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

Either get it back or live without it.

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

Oh dear, did that happen?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now what about that thought that startled you, that flash of genius that you had?
DID HE GET THERE BEFORE YOU?

You try your hardest and someone gets there before you. How bad does that feel? One ancient story tells of the man who had been lying by a pool for 38 years, where once in a while the natural spring water would bubble up with mineral properties that would cure a man. It was however strictly first in, first healed. Our long-stay patient has his reasons. "First," he said, "I have no-one to help me. Second, I am trying to get ahead of everyone else, and third, someone always gets there before me." The question he was answering was, "Do you want to get well?" The man that was asking was Jesus and for this patient, all three reasons were true, at least the way he saw it. The same reasons might be true for you and for me as well, but he had Jesus at his side and so do we. Five minutes later when our paralysed man walked away his excuses fell away and life came his way. So, are you as tired as I am of trying and competing? We need to look away from legends, doctors and the bankers and look to Jesus where real help comes from. Five minutes from now things could be on their way to being very different.
"That man will reach the top of the ladder but he will walk over people on the way up." The words of a pastor on his first visit to Africa startled me as we whispered across a shared bedroom late at night. I listened and wondered what he saw in our young host. Half a lifetime later the man in our whispers is the earthly saviour of his tribe and the head of his denomination, but not terribly popular with the people he stepped on to reach his position. So, how did my travelling companion know? Call it instinct, some would say intuition. Or does God sometimes share a tiny fraction of what he knows about everyone and everything, past, present and future? The Bible calls it a word of knowledge, often heard by sensitive men and women who capture whispers from heaven as they swish through our minds. Knowing this and with the wisdom of years, these days I slow down and consider what I am hearing on the inside and I weigh the idea. The whispers help me to be more right and less wrong. Happily, my friend never did say, "I told you so."
DIDN'T YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE THE CONDUCTOR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Either way there he is waving to get your attention and you never saw him there until now.
DON'T GIVE THE LOCUST THE LAST LAUGH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's go one step further and say that if to fear God and keep his commandments really is the duty of all mankind, as the ancients concluded, then we really have some catching up to do there as well.
EMPTY THEOLOGY IS NOT RECYCLED

We were already late, and the traffic was impenetrable. My driver slid his tiny car into one of Barcelona's narrow streets making both of us instinctively squeeze our arms against our sides. Another turn, and we were almost there. Then we met the rubbish collection men working at a very leisurely pace. Before I could mentally despatch the men into a dark eternity, my driver began to pray a blessing upon them. He thanked God for their hard work and their willingness to be dirty and hot and clearly meant every word. The longer I spent with Dan Smith the more I knew that if could not be like Jesus, then instead I would settle for being like this kind man. Not once did Dan Smith set out to influence me with words, but what an influence he had. So much so that 34 years later his words still guide my attitudes. Seeing the incredulous look on my face as we waited behind the rubbish lorry he said, "Jesus went around doing good and healing people, so I reckon if I do the first part, then I might get to see the second." As we slithered past the lorry, I emptied some of the rubbish from my heart into it and quietly tossed a packet of empty theology after it.
EXCELLENCE DOES ITS OWN ADVERTISING

Punctuality was never one of its strong points, but this morning we who waited patiently at the bus stop had reached the obituaries in our newspapers before we decided to walk.

Turns out that the bus company collapsed overnight with huge debts and 200 job losses.

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

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

Any enterprise is built through wise planning, becomes strong through common sense, and profits wonderfully by keeping abreast of the facts.
That's from the richest man of his day, 3000 years ago. In fact his book Proverbs is jam-packed with cutting edge secrets to give you an advantage in business.

Find it in the Bible, which just goes to show that God has always wanted you to succeed.

One bus company boss evidently preferred to read the tabloid newspapers and sadly, today his face will be as red as his buses.
EXCELLENCE SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

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

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

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

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

So here it is for you and for yours:

There is hope.
FAKE IT TO MAKE IT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seize the moment and focus on doing that one thing superbly well and before you know it, as fast as everyone else is, the race will be yours.
FERRARIS ONLY HAVE HORSE POWER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finishing well comes at a price!
FIRE IN THE KITCHEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You may have never heard of Rees Howells from Swansea in Wales but he was one of the great characters of the last century and to be sure he was an unusual, single-minded man.

Nevertheless God found him appealing, so much so that many inexplicable, crucial turning points in the Battle of Britain are openly attributed to the prayer days and nights that he led.

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

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

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

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

The Blackberry is switched off. The iPad is having a rest. We are packing our bags, taking the dog to our friends and then taking ourselves down the road.

The old has gone and for us it is a new season. Somehow it seems more important than ever to start the journey from a place of rest and not rushing in without further thought.

I always used to think that the Sabbath meant Sunday yet I could never see how Sunday could be a day of rest when it was usually busier than any other day. So in the end there was no day of rest.

Later I came to understand how much easier it is to work six days after taking a day of rest for both mind and body.

It took me years to realise that the Sabbath is a priceless principal and not just the 24 hours between Saturday and Monday. The Sabbath, OK call it your day off, is a gift from God to end the 24 x 7 working week of his people.
Back then it was slavery in Egypt, today only the technology and the fashion worn by the boss has changed.

So to start our new season we are going to give the Lord and ourselves a week of sabbaths with extra stillness at our end to eavesdrop on the silence of eternity that is so pregnant with words.

As Frank Sinatra sings it so well, "Only Fools Rush In." And we did, but not this time.
FREE TIME TRAVEL APP

The strangest of things. Yesterday I drove past a road in a part of our city that I never visit although I used to work in that area 44 years ago. Waiting for the traffic lights to turn green my eye was drawn to the name of a side road where I visited some people once or twice all those years ago. I remembered two of their names. The lights turned green and I drove on.

Later that memory came back to me in vivid Technicolor with cinema-style all-round stereo and 3D reality. I was 'there' again and for maybe 20 minutes I was totally unable to throw off the sights and sounds until I asked Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever to re-enter 1970 and switch it off.

The event that I relived was of no importance at all.

Neither have I met the people since so how can glimpsing a street name trigger such a powerful memory?
Where did it come from and how is it possible to almost feel long lost sensations?

What complicated and complex creatures we are with depths that no man can measure. Fearfully and wonderfully made as the Bible says. The fact is that God has put eternity where time and space stand still or are no more into the heart of man.

That is until someone clicks Play Again.
FRIENDS BUT NOT ON FACEBOOK

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

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

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

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

Or how many.
FROM NOBODY TO NOWHERE

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

Once from less than two metres away, I overheard two brothers, both friends of mine, saying some tough things to each other.

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

Today the shovels were out.

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

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

Forgiving is - for giving.
GLUE FOR BROKEN DREAMS

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

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

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

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

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

No matter how hard I tried, the reservation system refused to proceed because my subscription to the Camping Club had expired. My association with them was at an end and so were my benefits.

Similarly, I read today how Barnabas ended his association with the apostle Paul over a different way of seeing things. Being the older and more experienced, he thought that he knew best and said so.

The trouble is that by evening time, Barnabas had left both the room and the pages of history while Paul went on to fill them.

That is what happens when you end an association with where God is moving. I have done this three times. It was the will of God, or so I told myself, but more likely looking back, it was impatience.

Either way, I will not be doing it again, and neither should you, because the benefits of being in the right association are too many to lose, and we are not talking about camping here.
But because our God is forgiving, and mercifully he is the God of the second and third chance, we lived happily ever after. Eventually.

So believe me when I say that it is best by far though to renew your commitment to God and the association he has put you in, right now.

Before the price goes up or the membership is closed.
GOLD IS GOOD BUT STEEL IS BETTER

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

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

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

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

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

Worse still, Rowland Evans, the founder of World Horizons, promised that a more uncomfortable ride could not be found.

Let me tell you all about it.

Paul, the first-century missionary, wrote that from his own experience, funding mission begins by the work of your own hands which provides for your own needs. This is hump number one.

Those same hands of yours will inevitably need to help to get your companions started in their own life of faith. This is the second hump. The third hump is for your hands to provide for the poor because in the words of Jesus, "it is more blessed to give than to receive."
So, like Rowland Evans I also have a strange looking constant companion tied to the garden gate, and a sore bottom.

The good thing about these camels with three humps is that they live a long time but to be honest, I am looking for a good home for my ageing friend who has never failed to provide for my family, friends and for the poor. He eats very little and has lots of miles left in him.

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

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

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

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

All of which, my wife says after serving over 20,000 meals, not all at the same time of course, makes life in the kitchen a whole lot easier.
GRACE WEIGHS IN LEAVES ME AMAZED

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Because it is sufficient.
GREEN BUT FRIENDS ARE BLACK

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

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

Personally I'm ground floor and going up. Come with me and bring someone with you, let's go up together.
HATS OFF TO UNSUNG HEROES

Take a visionary, a man or a woman who sees what no-one else even glimpses. He knows the way to get there and has a passion and a fire that illuminates the world. The trouble is that the visionary fire tends to leave a trail of burned-out loyal people behind them. So the visionary needs a caring figure at his right hand to heal the wounded and the man himself. Now, a visionary loves to see but hates to do, and a pastor loves to care but loathes to organize. So they both need a man for whom heaven is digital and spreadsheets are sublime. A man or a woman who listens, learns and leads by serving and supporting. If this is you, then it’s hats off and three cheers to you my friend, the unsung hero behind mega-growth in the market place and the ministry. Even so, I have seen how easy it is for us to rely on figures and ignore feelings, and make papers more persuasive than people. That’s why the administrator needs the visionary to keep him focused on divinity and humanity. And why the pastor with a box of Kleenex may just need to call by the admin office after the visionary has passed by.
HAVE WE MET BEFORE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I had won precisely nothing.

Better gifts by far, which can be enjoyed every day of the year, are the gifts that God gives to us to make the world a kinder place. One old proverb says, "A man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men."

These were the very words that a godly man whispered in my ear many years ago when poverty and obscurity were my only reward for following the call of Christ.
What he saw in me I do not know, but this is what I have discovered for myself: If you will accept the gift God has given you and use it - and neither hide it nor display it, then your gift will make room in life for you too.

Imagine for a moment the sharp cutting edge of a snowplough as it pushes all aside to make a straight path for you to walk down. That's God's gift at work, and believe me, a gift like this beats socks and lottery tickets any day.
HENRY WILL YOU PLEASE THINK TWICE

My caller telephoned to say that he was divorcing his wife. He says that it will be the end of the matter but little does he know. It is just the beginning.

You can legally separate people but the lawyers' bills will bring the first of many tears to your eyes. Losses have to be swallowed and if children are involved, maintenance has to be provided until they are grown.

All those years, the man or woman whom you divorced will still be in your life, and you will have to get along. Worse still, if everyone goes for a win in court, you can be sure that the accusations will be remembered forever. The end of the matter, I don't think so.

You know, this is one reason why God hates divorce; I do too. I still have vivid memories of what happened to me nearly 30 years ago.
In the end, it is very likely that my caller will hate divorce as well.

Knowing both parties I gently suggested that there is still time to grasp a hope of reconciliation. I said to ask God for help, get counsel, patiently seek peace and try one more time.

What I know is that the cost to pride of healing wounds today is far less than the cost to two souls, minds, memories, bank accounts and children in the many tomorrows that have to come.

Famous divorcees excepted of course. I don’t think so, do you?
Last week, an 89 year retired pastor drove 50 miles to see me face to face. Half way through the journey, he realised that he had left his hearing aid on the kitchen table, so he returned home. When he finally arrived, he was still stone deaf until by sign language, we agreed that hearing aids work better when put in the ear rather than kept in the pocket. With communication renewed, he had something good to tell me. I listened. I learned and for sure, I will lead better for what I heard. Way back in the old days, another older priest told a child called Samuel that when he heard his name whispered he should reply, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." This is quite contrary to the popular notion of, "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking." True, my deaf pastor friend may hear far fewer words than most of us do, yet in silence he hears his Master's voice and because of that when he speaks he has much to say.

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

Speak soon.
HONESTY IS NOT THE BEST POLICY

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

"It is not," he said categorically.

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

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

And so it is.
HONG KONG SUNDAYS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On this basis I should live forever.

Yet when I heard God through his word saying, "My son, give me your heart," I knew that I had found the best cardiac surgeon of all.
HOW TO KEEP WARM AT NIGHT

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

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

And that is not something that is easily broken.
HOW TO LIGHT UP THE WORLD

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

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

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

It was you.
HOW TO LOOK GOOD IN YOUR SIXTIES

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

The line for passport control was long and grumpy. You don't enter or leave Israel easily and they have you check-in three hours before your flight.

We were the next to be questioned, when an Orthodox Jewish man brusquely pushed in front of us, passport in hand.

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

I spoke quietly, "Take my place."

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

Almost 2000 years earlier, another Jew by the name of Paul declared that God had opened his heart and his home to
those of us who are called Gentiles, in order to make the Jews envious.

However, they did not seem very envious to me.

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

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

So how?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

i-Have to go now.
IF YOUR HORSE IS DEAD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INVISIBLE UNTIL YOU LOOK
IS CARE COOL, QUAIN'T OR WHAT

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

Mega is cool but community is quaint.

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

It is about another 'C' word altogether.

Does anyone up there care about me?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet everyone on all sides is the loser because the super-glue of commitment is the inexhaustible fuel of longevity and the motor of achievement. Commitment creates the character that holds people and society together from the inside out.
When Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her own Diamond Jubilee, a sixty year commitment to the nation was honoured by a world of people.

Three cheers, your Majesty.

Three cheers Brian and Brenda, and three cheers to you for your commitments. As Her Majesty would say, "We are seriously impressed."
IS THE PEACOCK RIGHT TO BE PROUD

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

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

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

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

Now it was my turn to go quiet.

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

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

By believing them we make sure it is.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Did you ever abandon a plan the very day before all the uncertainties vanished with morning mist of the next dawn? I did. More than once.

There may be a day to let go, but there are lot more days in the calendar to hang on in there, to hope, to pray, to watch and wait one more hour.

My eldest son climbs vertical rock faces without ropes and for James not letting go is literally life or death.

Our Jack Russell terrier would lose his teeth before he loses his bone. Both define tenacious.
Maybe for you tenacious means that you don't quit your job today because that bully could be gone tomorrow, and likely will be.

It means that you don't walk away from marriage or ministry on a bad day because if you pray, you have no idea what changes will come tomorrow.

What I do know from a long lifetime is that when it comes to having no regrets, it is best not to let go just before dawn.

Just as God, the most tenacious of all, will never let go of you.
JOHN LACEY DIED TODAY

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

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

Almost to the end we thought that he would win yet in an unexpected moment he was gone.

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

This is true.
We will see John again and until then his example, his love and Christian values will guide his family and ours.

By his giving to help the homeless and to world mission, especially through helping to fund a clinic for the poor in Ghana that he passionately supported, John's life will save many lives.

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

John would agree with that.

So do I.
KISS ME NOW AND ALWAYS

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

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

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

Keeping it simple isn't stupid.

It is actually really good sense.
LAUGH AT YOURSELF

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

People love it.

They know that you are not perfect.

Just like them.
LIFE IS NEVER FASHIONABLY LATE

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

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

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

'Carpe diem,' I say to myself:

Seize the day, because life is never fashionably late.
LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

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

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

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

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

Like you and me.
LOOK NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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

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

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

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

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

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

Likewise, when did we ever read in God's manual for living that at the age of 50*, leaders should step down and let younger people learn the ropes from their seat. My mentor did exactly that and is still travelling the world.

What I know is that when he is asked, God has a way of turning our many years of stories, experiences, learning, joys and sorrows into the real and ultimate point of our lives. In sharp contrast to the deckchairs, pills and vacant demented minds offered by the retirement industry.

Our later years can be the most effective and rewarding of all.

Jeremy, 66 and his wife Gladys know this. They have moved to the Negev in Israel caught up in a prophetic passion to bless Israel.
Jim at 68, and Marie, go the Crimea to teach young church leaders and children. This week, Terry at 70 is in Ghana with his wife Ann arranging long-term care for malnourished children. Miguel and Maria Carmen also at 70 are teaching throughout South and Central America, and when she retires shortly, our friend Carmen will go to work with the poor in Bolivia, forever.

Late starters at 50 onwards we may be, one and all, but the God who fits a thousand years into one day will not be leaving us bored anytime soon.

* Numbers 8.25
LOOKING FOR A BREAK HERE IT IS

Unemployment in Spain has hit 27% and almost twice that figure for young people. So, if you happen to be in your early twenties and have never had a job, frustration is your closest companion. One proverb writer from years ago perceptively observed the truth that "unrelenting disappointment leaves a man heartsick, yet a sudden good break can turn life around." In unemployment, only faith and hope effectively soothe frustration and a man or woman with a family to feed should give God no rest until he makes a way where there is no way. Revealing a dry path through a towering ocean of obstacles when enemies are snapping at your heels is a God-speciality. This month, our young friend Jason was chosen for the only job on offer in the profession he studied for at University. He might have swept the streets had there been a vacancy, but the same God of the Breakthrough that answered Israel's king David 3000 years ago pointed Jason in the right direction. Now think about this: The very next breakthrough could have your name on it. Ask now.
LOVE IS BUT I AM NOT

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

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

They say only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun. With the temperature nudging 40 degrees C that day, even the dogs stayed home.

The Englishman however was alone with his troubled thoughts and leaning on the parapet of a crumbling bridge over a single-track railway line which stretched endlessly from horizon to horizon.

The tracks vaporised and reappeared in the shimmering heat haze. Only two trains a day mournfully rattle through Villarquemado, Spain heading for distant Zaragoza and neither one has stopped here for maybe a quarter of a century.

Close to midday I opened the soul-soothing book of Psalms and saw this: "The justice of your cause will shine like the noonday sun."
For sure, I had a cause and the cause was causing some heartache. Yet now, in one life-defining moment, I knew how God saw the future.

Before daybreak this morning, thirty years later, people in two different nations had let me down badly but unexpectedly I remembered the promise.

I recalled the eye-watering brilliance of the noonday sun in Aragon and I breathed again. We haven't seen light like that in our work yet and justice is not yet done for the poor.

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

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

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

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

Disempower the harm in adverse, contrary winds by steering your soul with skill through the storm and see how you emerge not bitter but better, and sooner than you thought possible.
MAKE MINE A MAX

From the smallest of hesitant beginnings we are thirty years down the road with providing free training for leaders in the developing world and helping to get their projects started.

You can be sure that we have given it some thought and some energy, yet I know that anything can still get better.

As the global economic crisis bites harder than ever on the poorest peoples of the world, we who have must maximise what we do and what we give to minimise the hardship that millions of men, women and children face every day of their lives.

I believe this, I look for it, I hope for it and I pray for it. Yes please, as the ad says:

“Make my life a Max.”
ME, MYSELF AND I

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

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

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

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

In the early days of our funding people for mission, years ago, I was always surprised by the applicants who gave me instant e-mail or fax replies right up to the day that their money came through.

Yet a week or so later when you wanted to know how things were going, "the Internet is down, or the power is off, the PC has broken or the phone was stolen. No 'thank-you's, receipts are promised 'mañana;' the creative accounting of how the money was spent would impress even the Wolf of Wall Street. The beneficiary might even report himself dead - which is one of the more reasonable excuses.

A wiser man than I once warned, "If you don't like excuses or being ripped-off then don't get involved in handling money."

For sure, knowing when to stop before the excuses start, saves you from sending the Mafia round. Better still is to hear Jesus say, "God desires mercy not sacrifice."
In Bible days, the sacrifice was killed and it had no future.

So when everything in me wants to take the knife to a project and say excuses means no second bites of the cherry, mercy stands up to counsel patience, prayer and perseverance.

After all, in 1978 when I presented twelve excuses about why I could never follow the call of God, I fully expected to be roasted on the church sacrificial fire.

Instead, people who knew mercy made a way, and now I must do the same.
MIND THE MIND THAT IS SET IN CONCRETE

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

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

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

You can smile. I did. Pilar did too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This however is God's plan and a test.

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

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

Josh Groban sings:

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

This is how it happened to me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Over half a long lifetime of working with emerging leaders across all five continents I have observed that sooner or later God allows three great tests come the way of each and every would-be man or woman of God. The first test is poverty or insufficiency. Yet while a young leader stays focused, passionate, sacrificing and calling out to God for his daily bread, he is safe and Jesus gets him through. Next or perhaps even at the same time comes obscurity. This is when no-one notices you or your hard work. Lesser mortals often get noticed instead of you, yet while you serve from the shadows and persevere for the love of people, and do it all for Jesus, God keeps you safe from pride. Then one day the much desired breakthrough into prosperity comes your way. Trust me when I say fear this day, for on no other do men fall quicker, harder and further. In abundance and ease, with money in the bank and applause in the air, needing no more help from God or man, how many leaders and public speakers lose their way, by not understanding that what a man does with prosperity is the biggest test of all.
NICE TO MOVE TOGETHER

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

My body is in bed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Because there is no future in the past.
NO MEDALS FOR REUBEN

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

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

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

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

Are you coming or are you not?
NOT ALL THAT GLITTERS IS GOLD

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

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

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

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

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

Going places together.
NOT EVERYONE IS AS ENTITLED AS ME

Truth to tell I am entitled. I am entitled because my early life prospered the Scottish whisky industry to such an extent that they should give me a medal. Because of all the unusual behaviour that this excessive liking led to I am fully entitled to an early death. Failing that a chronic illness or a prison record would be a reasonable entitlement.

Certainly to a lost eternity of endless regret I am surely entitled. It would be only fair and reasonable. Yet in the middle of it all God came looking for me who had a glass in his hand at that very moment. He spoke sense to my soul, took me in hand and keeps things that way to this very day, thirty-seven years later.

The one that is entitled is Jesus. Entitled to my life and my love, and you know what - it's his.
NOW WE HAVE ALL GOT STATUS

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

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

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

I am sure that in heaven and on earth fingers hover over the Like button. To 'Like' you that is.
ONE DAY AT A TIME
IS SUCH A SWEET FEELING

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

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

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

Matthew 11.28 The Message.
ONE LETTER PUTS THE WORLD RIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No-one believed that we were so unreliable, yet even one year later it was hard to find even the one in a hundred. As one of the ones who saw it through I now know that if you are going to see life bend your way then every day you have to get hold of the dream by the scruff of the neck and by purposeful, prayerful and intentional living you point it in the way it has to go. That's the unless. In fact, nothing less will get us to where we know we were born to be.
ONLY ONE OF US WILL QUIT

Say the word tenacious and everyone has a dog story and so here is mine. In a pulling match our Jack Russell will win every time. At 1/20th my size she will hang on even with all four feet off the ground until I admit defeat and let go. Only my friend John, a young family man, is more tenacious. In the face of a terminal diagnosis which is measured in weeks, in all of my life I have never known anyone who is more tenaciously hanging on to life. John grips the promises of God and the hope of his power through every kind of prayer, involving everyone, everywhere who is willing to say Amen. Daily, even by the minute John chooses life and right now he looks good and he sounds good. He is working a full day, eating well, gaining weight, starting a third business and only winces with pain at the price of travel insurance. Being tenacious means that we insist on what is right until what is wrong loses its grip and quits. So go John go, and you too. Go man - go. Go lady - go. As Churchill said in 1941, "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever give up."
PANTS ON OR PANTS OFF WHICH IS IT TO BE

Today I intended not to wear my trousers in response to an email from a pastor from Chile, who said that to wear trousers is to contradict Scripture.

God forbid, I do not want to do that. However, the cool wind and rain persuades me to delay. If future e-mails become too hard to bear then I shall borrow a long skirt and present a more biblical male appearance, but then in Bible times the ladies wore the pants.

Oh dear, I am confused.

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

When thousands of people shout Amen to cultural prohibitions, it only goes to show how much we like to believe that keeping a set of rules pleases God.
Rules, rather than working hard at the real business of relationship with him and each other.

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

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

Please.
PAUSE NOT PAWS FOR A DOG STORY

With one look, I knew that the day had dawned brighter on the outside than on the inside. A cup of tea generally cures most things, so I took one up to my wife Pilar who was in bed trying to find a joint that did not ache.

The time was 8 o'clock in the morning. "I'll bring the dog up to keep you company." Now, Sweetie was more arthritic than her owner, even less mobile and a little heavy, so Pilar said no. Wistfully she added, "If I had a small dog, that would be nice."

Paws, I mean pause, let 30 minutes pass.

Now, you know when someone hurries to your door before breakfast time it is not likely to be good news.

An elegantly dressed lady enquired, "Would you like a dog?"

Such a thing was not foremost in my befuddled mind at that moment so she turned to leave, but not before Pilar's words from half an hour earlier paraded across my mind.
"Wait," I said and by lunchtime, Lottie was in our kitchen. "Oooh, so sweet," my daughter Lizzie whispered. "Aaaah, look at her" murmured Zack, her husband. "So small," said my wife. Sweetie moved her tail and that was that.

They say that God knows our needs before we even ask, and he does.

What I know is that some days he gets up very early and delights to meticulously arrange even small dogs. The only remaining question is the one that Jesus put to two men in Jericho, and still asks today:

"What do you want me to do for you?"
PEGGY LEE SINGS FEVER

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

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

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

Whatever it takes to express its inextinguishable love.
PENCILS SNAP PAPER CRUMPLES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Only the mistakes are mine.

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

So there we are, that is how it happens for us, most days.
PICTURE MY POTENTIAL WILL YOU

In those days half a lifetime ago, a girl who got into a mess saw two doors. The first was the door to her home closing behind her, followed by the door of a railway carriage opening.

Years might go by before she came home. Before we married, my wife who was barely surviving herself financially had not one but two knocks on her door.

Overnight her rented room in Barcelona became home to two young ladies each with a suitcase, shortly to be followed by two babies making life a struggle for all five.

Nevertheless, God has a gift for every newborn and that is potential. What we do with that potential becomes our gift and our thanksgiving back to him.

From that inauspicious beginning a generation ago, the baby girl, now a married lady in her late 30's, cares for child mothers as young as 11 years old, and their babies in Bolivia.

The boy has a family of his own and is a well-known musician and worship leader in Spain and Mexico.
The contradiction is that although we enter this world naked, we are richly if invisibly clothed with a potential that no amount of disadvantage can extinguish. Have faith in God, believe in yourself and now that you know what came with you, see what you can do to let it out.
PLAYING A SYMPHONY FOR SOULS

Dr Kevin Dyson, 73, has been our friend, mentor and senior consultant for twenty-five years, he and Joy presently live in Australia. Below God himself and the angels but above Google, Kevin probably knows more about everything than anyone else in the world. Catching up with news this week, Kevin told us this: "I am going over to Cuba as a result of years ago when you gave me a copy of your book 'The Tree of Life' in Spanish. Our dear friend Dr Nahum Munoz took the materials to Cuba and as a result 4000 house churches were planted over the next few years, followed by a BA level Bible College. Now the leaders want a graduate level program from us. Over in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia I am helping train some 20,000 new church leaders which is very exciting stuff and keeps a young guy like me awake at nights dreaming of what can happen next. The Bible School there has trained 900 pastors to BA degree level and they in turn have planted 2700 churches and 5800 fellowships without pastors." We said to Kevin that news like this is not just music in our ears but an entire symphony playing in our souls. You can hear it as well, can't you?
POLITICAL SPIN AND PROPAGANDA

If you ask young people in a London street to name a Christian they admire you may easily get a 'dunno mate.'

Yet give it a few more minutes and a few more people and you will hear one name over and over again. Billy Graham? Joyce Meyer? Phillip Yancey? 'Never erd of em, mate,' they say.

You can guess who is number one for them and for millions of older people too: It is Mother Teresa. They never met her and they probably can't even tell you a word that she ever said, but people recognise one thing when they see it: Genuine goodness.

Weep tears of perplexity all you architects of PR, propaganda and political spin for your message is forgotten in a fleeting moment yet the unspoken words of an elderly lady still crosses continents, enters hearts and speaks volumes even from eternity.
PROMISING PUTS ON THE POUNDS

Years ago I learned the weight of a promise made when my first mentor, Andrew, agreed to speak on a Sunday in his home town of Nottingham, in England.

He forgot that he was already booked to speak in Poland the previous week and the following week.

To keep his promise he drove back to the UK, spoke as promised for forty minutes and then turned round and drove back across Europe.

I looked, listened and learned that integrity means keeping your word even when it hurts.

The lesson has served me well.
PULL THAT TRIGGER WILL YOU

Last week our friend Claude invited us to dinner. Soon, he said, I will ring you. We know that we will never get to eat his fine food. We never do with Claude but he is a great guy.

Like people you know, Claude takes aim, he looks you straight in the eye, but he never presses the trigger to execute the plan. We will only miss a meal, but what a tragedy it is when people miss a real opportunity saying they will do it "mañana."

Tomorrow is always the most elusive day in the calendar.

So what have you and I been aiming to do for the last few days? Or weeks. Or months?

Isn’t today and even right now not the right time to pull that trigger?
RECIPE FOR BREAD AND FISH

Between the great writers, inventors, artists, thinkers, philanthropists and myself there is more than a world of difference. I envy their genius in design and the work of their words, brushes and music. I am awestruck by the way that some famous names give away millions of dollars to make the world a better place. At their side you and I have but loaves and fishes. Plural but possibly in the singular – one loaf and one fish. However, if you will thank God for his gift to the world that is you, allow yourself to be broken by what breaks God's heart and begin to give away what you have in your hands, what you will see next will shock you. Trust me when I tell you that on any given day, you and the gift that you are, however insignificant you may feel, will somehow invisibly multiply to be enough to satisfy everyone that God brings your way, with plenty left over for you and yours. Others may cage, control and copyright their gifts to watch the cash roll in, but the man who gives away his bread and fish feels richer than them all. And sleeps better too.
REJECTION REJECTED AND THIS IS HOW

When your Dad is swept into eternity on your tenth Christmas and your Mum follows not long afterwards, everything you think and do after that sub-consciously is to fill that emptiness. In your teens you marry for all the wrong reasons but when the girl grows up, she leaves, adding to the suppressed damage that weeps deep down beyond where pills reach. Rejection and fear of more rejection ooze up to the surface uninvited and colour every decision you make, or more likely, do not make. You long to be accepted yet rejection throws many a pity party for you and tells you and your guests to come clothed in misery. On the other hand Jesus also says, 'Come as you are,' but not stay as you are. Trust me here because this is my story. I listened to the words of Jesus and although it is true that rejection still stalks me from the shadows, its whisperings are pale and unattractive at the side of the unconditional acceptance and the healing and love that God gives. Take it from me. Reject and eject rejection. Accept acceptance. You will never look back.
SCREAMS, APPLAUSE AND THE BUZZER

What does it feel like to be weighed on the scales and found wanting? Especially if the scales are on a platform, the judges are watching and the audience scents blood.

You expected screams and applause on Britain's Got Talent TV show but you got the buzzer. Three times. It can happen on a pulpit too and the Sunday audience is even less forgiving. Ouch!

Personally I have always thought it better to die to self in private than to have it happen in public. Find a friend who will be honest with you about your gifts and where you are at, and let God's word be a mirror to you.

In the Psalms and Proverbs you get to see yourself like never before from the inside out and hey - when the sight or the sound is not so good there's no buzzer and no cruel words from God's panel of three. What you do get is hope, help and a future.
SEEING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Call it intuition, call it a second sense, call it a gift if you will, but it seems to me that perception is not a lot to do with what you first see about a person or the words that are first spoken.

Perception speaks on a much deeper, inner level where even the silence between words somehow tells you more than ears hear and eyes see.

Filtered through life, experience, prayer and a life lived in the Holy Spirit, perception may still be misunderstood without adequate time and reflection. Nevertheless, genuine perception as opposed to opinion, is rarely completely wrong.

Being able to 'perceive' is a great asset to every man and woman.
SHIPWRECKS STILL HAPPEN

The sea was smooth for the time of year and the breeze was fair. The ship owner sensing money to be made said, "Risk it." The captain relying on experience said, "We go." The majority at the bar counter looked at the horizon, felt the wind and said, "Whatever."

Only one man fresh from time with God below deck and seeing neither the forecast nor the sky said, "Stay, it will be a disaster." All of them ended up in the sea with the ship at the bottom but one man saw it coming.

Is this the Costa Concordia story, shipwrecked off Italy in 2012?

Actually, it is Paul crossing the same Mediterranean in the first century. I am learning to ask for the same wisdom that Paul found and put into action what 'they say,' lest the next ship to be wrecked is mine.
SILENCE, SCENERY AND A SHEPHERD

Silence, scenery and the shepherd are the active ingredients listed on one brand-name therapeutic remedy for frazzled nerves that everyone has on the shelf.

Why is it that no-one opens it until too many days of running on empty finally brings them grinding to a halt with burn-out? Prozac may be today's quick fix but the three S's of Psalm 23 - silence, scenery and the shepherd when taken as needed restores your soul and trickle charges your serotonin level as well. Better still by far when taken regularly.

Works every time for me but then again, with 3000 years of good reviews on parchment, paper, pulpit and Trip Advisor this is no surprise.
"Silver and gold have I none." For a lot of people today this confession would be taken to be a description of non-significance in this life. Yet when a Bible character named Peter admitted this particular 'personal failure,' he didn't stop there but passed on what he did have.

What he gave away so transformed another man's life that we still talk about Peter to this day.

So I take my hat off to the millions of believers and church leaders in the developing world who have little silver or gold. You who we know have great faith, depths of wisdom and impressive survival skills that we here know nothing about. I say to you, pass these gifts on and you will be men and women of great significance in your nations.

They say that Saint Peter the penniless made it to being the first Pope and who knows if you might do even better. I hope so.
SOME PEOPLE ONLY COLLECT STAMPS

In 1984 my friend Miguel Diez took me through the back streets of Spain as he collected in the drug addicts, prostitutes, traffickers and AIDS victims and filled his own home with damaged boys and girls.

In 1985 I took him through the bush of Burkina Faso and not long afterwards he returned to collect in the very poor. Then he went and blazed a trail of compassion through Latin America, South America, the USA, Europe and Asia.

So far he has collected 58,000 of the worst, the poorest and the most neglected people in 67 countries. He gives them a home, community, meals, clothes, employment and his faith.

Hats off to a collector of more than stamps.
SOMEONE FETCH THE SHERIFF

Get a little overtired and some of those bad habits of yesteryear creep out of the woodwork uninvited. To relieve the stress we might just make them welcome if no-one is looking, but if they come, they come intending to stay.

Grace from God and some will-power will send them back into the past but that might take a while. So between now and then call in the law, put yourself behind bars and throw away the key.

Catch yourself in the act and arrest yourself. What I mean is put in some Internet filters and road blocks to bad districts. Tell someone you trust about the temptations, ask them to pray with you and check how you are doing.

Do this and it will not be long before law catches the bad habits and grace offers you some better ones.
SOUND, LIGHTS, FANGS AND CLAWS

The smiles hid fangs and beneath the velvet gloves were X-men claws, newly sharpened for the occasion. The cameras lit up. The TV screens flickered, and the live show was on. I was on the panel. Along from me sat Miguel Diez, a man following Jesus, who controversially reaches out to street peoples in Spain and another 56 nations caring freely for more than 50,000 men, women and children. A man who is admired by many, envied by others and criticised by not a few. "Who are you," one man in the invited audience asked into the travelling microphone, seeking more trouble than information, "an apostle, a prophet or a businessman?" The perspective on life that Miguel Diez has is this: "I am the donkey that carries Jesus," he replied gently. "Every morning Jesus puts his mantle on my back, and I take him to where he wants to go. He does what he alone can do, and we carry on." In the heavily charged silence that followed all you could hear was the muted mechanical whir of fangs and claws returning to their sheaths. Perspectives changed. Suddenly, Jesus had a choice of donkeys. I ordered straw for supper.
SPOCK YOU AND I HAVE THE SAME PROBLEM

Last week I e-mailed my friend Virgil in Spain and by the end of the e-mail that I had written, I said to him that I did not know which had clicked more: the mouse or my hand.

On Christmas Day my hand decided it would no longer work. This is not the RSI injury caused by the overuse of a computer mouse. I know about that from years ago and use a flat mouse pad, with a gel wrist support and if I feel a twinge coming on, then my Dragon dictation software saves the day.

This was different.

I could feel the tendons getting all tangled up and my fingers got stuck in the Spock position. That makes it very hard to carve the Christmas turkey when you have to use one hand to bend your fingers on the other hand.

Injections, splints, surgery - everyone diagnosed their favourite cure but yesterday I read that when Jesus came across a man with a withered hand he said to him, "Stretch out your hand."
As the man did so he was instantly healed.

Today the ten-minute podcast which I cannot possibly start the day without, focused on the very same story.

How strange is that?

So, looking around to make sure no-one was watching, I stretched out my hand as well. You see, on Christmas Day it was not just my hand that withered, my writing withered as well.

And as you see, it is back again.
STILL SITS ALONE

I just wish it could go on forever.

I mean those occasional moments when the Blackberry goes to sleep, the Tweeting stops, the emails quit for the day, the children go to bed and a Christmas night stillness descends on my noisy world.

Still is a place. Still is the velvet darkness. Still waits for you in the early morning but often sits alone. Still walks by the sea with you and speaks silence to your soul at sunset.

In still you hear the whispers of God and your own replies. Clothed with still you enjoy priceless, unashamed luxury.
STIR THE GIFT NOT THE MARTINI

When people of retirement age meet together, generally everyone has a story about their cruise, the caravan, the camper or last Christmas in Cancun. That's OK. They all worked harder than I did, for longer and they all did better by far. Enjoy all of it, because at our age my friends, today has no manufacturer's guarantee of tomorrow. Rest by all means but to be complacent, to call it a day, never. Complacency extinguishes the driving force that paid for the cruise in the first place and stifles creativity. Contentment is fine and gratitude is better. Yet best of all is embracing the call of God to leave the world a fairer, healthier, saner and safer place for our children and especially those of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Personally, I do suspect that when the ageing apostle Paul urged young Timothy to stir up the gift in him; it was only what he insisted to his own soul every single morning. After all at Paul's age, the Aegean is as good as the Caribbean, and a deck chair on a Greek island is as comfortable as a deck chair anywhere else.
SUPER FOOD FOR STREET PEOPLE

Getting people off drugs is not necessarily a long job. Keeping them off though is much more demanding. What we learned on the back-streets of Spain thirty years ago helping hundreds of young people to come out of the drug culture of those days, is that treating the whole person is a key therapy to long term freedom.

Feed an empty spirit with the super-foods of love, faith, hope and worth. Feed an empty soul with friendship, acceptance, music, blue skies and green fields. Feed an empty body with good food and fill empty hands with worthwhile work. Do this and it will not be long before positive choices begin to be made as God's super-food for the soul builds a fullness which overcomes the gnawing emptiness that was the problem to begin with.

May I gently say that if you know someone who needs help like this at no-cost, ask Google for Remar or Betel and contact them.
SUPERSIZE YOUR ABILITY

Ability by itself tends to create a few winners and many losers, yet it is easy to multiply your ability by turning it into availability.

Have time, an ear and patience for someone, especially a stranger and this may be the most precious gift you can give. So go ahead, avail people of your ability and enrich them by what you can do or say.

We all know people who have more raw ability than we do and it is best to thank God for them because the world needs them. Instead of fretting, concentrate on your availability because if you do, you will have a lot of thank-you's coming your way.

Think about it, the knock on the door or the phone call that interrupts and irritates you so much might actually be the doorway into the best work you and I do today.
TAKE AIM, FIRE, FLEE

When Tom Okello, now Bishop Tom, was arrested and stood before Idi Amin's firing squad in Uganda's bad old days he neither flinched nor backed down in his faith.

He heard the word to fire, he saw triggers pulled yet the bullet that was heading for the spot between Tom's eyes was miraculously slowed down until Tom could observe its trajectory and move his head to avoid it.

More shots were fired and the same happened.

The third time the soldiers fled.

Courage, they say, is not the absence of fear rather it is keeping your head steady and maintaining your course.

Courage is not quitting even when you are terrified.
One of the best things I ever did was way back in December 1984, when a man I had met invited me to visit him in Burkina Faso. He told me to fly to Ouagadougou, an unfamiliar word which for all I knew could have been a capital city or a recipe. In the end I went by myself because no-one else would go with me citing mosquitoes and the white man's grave as the historical attractions worth avoiding.

What I saw, heard and felt in the following two weeks included arriving an hour too late to save a child who died for lack of 50 pence to buy medicine, kept me wide awake on the Air Afrique flight home. The desert sky was smooth but I was on an unstoppable roller-coaster of emotions that was then turbo-charged by arriving back into the frenzy of Christmas shopping and meal table excess. I never recovered and to this day I never want to. Never underestimate Lady Compassion. She has teeth and once they have bitten into your heart, life has to change.
TAKES THREE TO MAKE A PERFECT PLAN

Between any flash of genius and a full order book or completed project sits one nigglng little word: How.

Only three letters but they have the curious power to bring out of this world corridor conversations right down to earth. Consider that before the How can be formulated a What must come – exactly What is it that you want to do?

Follow What with a Why is that, then say When, Where, for Who and with Whom alongside you.

No answer How and this will enable you to calculate How Much.

Trust me when I say that when you can answer all the five W and the two H questions honestly and diligently, you have got a perfect plan that will have the people reaching for their wallets to get behind you and to turn your genius into goods or growth.
TALKING TURKEY

The supermarket checkout line was so slow because everybody pushed a trolley that was overflowing with every kind of food and drink. Everybody that is except us with our "Reduced Items' that didn't sell the day before.

This was the first year back home from the mission field for Pilar, our two growing boys and myself. It was two days before Christmas, 1983.

Only Jesus knew that our cupboard at home contained no more than strawberry jam, flour, rice, a few tins and some tomato sauce.

We prayed, said nothing to anyone, and waited to see what God would do. On Christmas Eve the extraordinary happened. A young businessman brought a turkey to our door for no reason that he could explain.
The turkey was so enormous that it would barely fit in the oven and so from then, until the New Year we ate roast turkey, turkey pizza, turkey curry, turkey stew and even slices of turkey with jam between them.

Unbelievably exactly the same thing happened the next Christmas except to say that a neighbour brought us a Christmas cake which was very nice, with turkey of course.

These days we have the privilege of making every Christmas special for hundreds of poor men, women and children in the developing world, but back home the very same businessman, now not so young, still comes to visit once a year. He passed again by this week.

We talk turkey of course.
TELL ME YOUR DREAM

In our first training school, there was one meeting a year that got everyone excited. The same words that Joseph spoke to the baker and the wine waiter, we said to our students: "Tell me your dream." Because as Solomon intuitively knew, "In the heart of man are deep waters, and a wise person draws them out." Nerves and tears mingled with beautiful far-sighted dreams that day, and the hearts laid bare always left everyone deeply moved and hopeful. We thought it was important for students to declare a dream that was their own because any time you see someone pursuing a midlife career change, you can be almost certain that they have been living someone else's dream, and lost their way. It is never too late to lower the bucket down into those deep waters and pull it up full. I do it all the time. Patiently filter your words through the Cross asking for God's will and not your own and then follow your dream. As the wine-waiter and the baker found out to the joy of the first and the dismay of the other, dreams of this kind have a way of coming true.
TEMPER TEMPER

It seems to me that nine times out of ten the people that get our backs up actually want just the same thing as we do. A better world, a better service, a better church or whatever. They just go about it a different way.

However, it is tolerance not temper that gets us closer to them. When that happens there is every chance that we will find a new friend. Even when the only agreement between us is disagreement, iron still sharpens iron on both sides.

Fighting is fatiguing but tolerance conserves our energy for the real enemy behind all anger, contempt and disunity. For him and what he gets up to there's no tolerance.

Zero.
THAT ELUSIVE BEST

Henri Nouwen was restless, terribly busy yet feeling that somehow he was on the right path. Pére André, his mentor told him to keep a careful eye on the difference between the urgent and the important, saying: "If you allow the urgent to dominate the day, you will never do what is truly important and you will always feel dissatisfied." He went on, "Henri, to be surrounded by urgent things is your character and your way of living. You moved from Harvard University to rural France to get away from a busy life, and now life here is as busy for you as Harvard ever was. The issue is not where you are, but how you live. Wherever you are. This means a constant choosing of what is important and a willingness to leave urgent things for later." I look into the mirror of Henri Nouwen and I see myself. I am also highly experienced in turning a solitary life as a writer into a wearying whirlpool of busyness. I also miss opportunities by allowing the good to be the enemy of the best. Today, I know it was important to write this for you. So, I will now go and deal with the urgent. Henri Nouwen and Pére André would be pleased for me.
THE BELL AND BICYCLE PASO-DOBLE

The bicycle was in the distance; it was coming but there was time to cross the road. My wife stepped out and the cyclist rang his bell. My wife stepped back yet there was still time to cross. She moved back into the road; again the cyclist rang his bell. She hastily retreated only to find that I had crossed the road. She moved to follow me but ringing became insistent so she stepped back. Then forward. And back again. Finally she dashed over the road after a kind of paso-doble two-step dance in an epitome of indecision that the cyclist will remember to this day. Her mind was not set. James, the first pastor in Jerusalem called this being double-minded and he said that this guarantees that you will go nowhere. Minds are funny things, more soul than body, elusive and invisible yet they can be open, closed, changed and even transferred from one person to the next. In fact, according to Paul, the apostle, the mind that was in Christ Jesus can also be in you. Now that is a mindset to die for as they say, but no need for drastic measures, all we have to do is to follow the instructions in the book.
THE BEST IS YET TO COME OR IS IT

Every journey whether across the world or across the day, consists of three parts:

The anticipation.

The adventure.

And the appreciation.

That is the beginning, the doing and the remembering.

For me the anticipation is by far the most enjoyable part. My imagination and hopes are loosed, admittedly not always to be fulfilled, but hey - let's enjoy the beginnings, take the doings as they come and makes some memories for winter nights around the fire.

Even if the only memory you keep is the relief you felt of finally coming home.
THE BILL FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

The bill came from Barcelona City Council for a fee to deregister Pilar's first car, an ancient Fiat 600 that reached the end of the road not recently but 33 years ago.

And then it got worse.

The bottom line included an eye-watering 11 years of parking fees incurred while the office prepared the paperwork.

After some weeks of serious prayer to the God of all justice asking him to act, Pilar's sister who lives in Barcelona went to pay the bill, expecting her next stop to be the bank to ask for a loan. However, and for no given reason, instead of taking the money, the cashier disappeared into a back room and returned a minute later to say that this once, there was nothing to pay.

From the heaven when cars go, a smile.
THE CHOCOLATES THAT CHOOSE YOU

‘Life,’ as Forrest Gump in the film of the same name ironically says, ‘is like a box of chocolates because you never know what is coming next.’ For our friend Johnny Auguste in Haiti the box opened on January 12, 2010, as buildings collapsed like packs of cards when a massive earthquake devastated Port au Prince and the nation. By the end of that day, Johnny, mostly unemployed and living alone, became the father to twenty-one small children who lost their own parents in one catastrophic moment. Four years later they still eat at his table and live under his roof yet not one penny of the billions of dollars in aid and relief has come their way. Today Johnny sent me the latest photos of each boy and girl proudly holding their end of year school reports. The children look good. Johnny, you are a hero but just like the dollars, I fear that the medals will be a while in coming, but hear what Jesus says: "Whatever you do for someone overlooked or ignored, you do it for me.' And you do it for me, Johnny. In fact you do it for all of us.
THE COUNTDOWN TO YOUR IGNITION

Five, four, three, two, one - ignition, and an eternity later we hear NASA say, "We have lift-off." Familiar words that are part of the experience of the millions of us who held our collective breath as the Space Shuttle emerged from massive flames and inched itself into the Florida sky.

Back in another century, John Wesley would say, "Catch fire for God and people will come from everywhere to see you burn."

It is the same thing.

Ignite a man with belief, enthusiasm and passion and what he says and does become very compelling.

A man asked his atheist friend why he was going to hear D L Moody the preacher. "You don't believe what he says," the man argued. "I do not," his friend replied, "but Moody does and so do thousands of others. I have to find out why."

So, who will press the button to ignite my quiet convictions and move me towards my God-ordained destiny? What will it need, or who will it take to ignite your ideas?

Five, four, three, two . . .
THE DAY BEFORE TOMORROW

It is not just the latest science fiction blockbuster on Screen 2. The plot that has me on the edge of my seat is all about the destiny of the six billion people who are alive and the next billion who are coming soon.

What I am seeing is that today not tomorrow is the time to send our hopes, prayers, plans and ourselves around the planet to take God's love in a hundred and one different ways to the lost, the last and the least on every continent.

I often think that the video player that projects this 3D wide-screen movie on the back of my mind has a replay button that is stuck in the on position. But that's me. Sometimes I need to watch a film a few times before I get the plot and understand the end.

Not this time, though.

Got it. Now to do it.
THE DAY THE LIGHTS WENT OUT

There was never a time and motion manager like me. It must have been instinct because no-one taught me to target, set goals, prioritise, measure and evaluate but doing so made my business prosper. It will do the same for yours. I was 19 and they put me on TV. Then the miners went on strike for close to a year. Fuel was rationed, electricity came and went and my forecasts became dimmer than the lights.

So set your goals but hear Jerusalem's first pastor, James, say this to you and to me: "You who say we will do this or that, go here and there, do business and make money - why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow."

So, having a plan B is good but better still, take James' advice and add this to every goal: "If it is God's will." Because when it is God's will there is not a recession deep enough to sink your ship.

Or your shop. I know this.
THE EDGE IS NEARER THAN YOU THINK

More than 1,500 years ago Celtic followers of Jesus emerged from Europe's heartlands as Roman soldiers drove them and their faith west to the fringes of pagan Britain, Ireland and France.

Modern Celtic believers are still comfortable when God takes them to the edges of life just as Jesus allowed himself to be pushed to the edges of first century society and found a welcome from the ordinary men and women there.

Often it is only when we dare to go to the edges that we truly get to talk to others heart to heart. This is because men and women who are on the edge of loneliness, anger, despair or more positively, an adventure seem to recognise another who comes over to them and for them.

Some you pull back and others you push forward, either way it is on the edge where truly precious things of life and faith are passed on.
At the edge, we see horizons that are denied to those who stay where they are comfortable.

From our own years with the street people of Spain and with the very poor of Africa, we know that the edge which is never very far away, is always a place of spiritual renewal.

Theirs and yours. You come alive.
THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES

When in Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale, the Emperor wore his splendid new clothes, everyone could see the real man underneath.

Yet the Emperor believed the story that only the unfit, stupid and incompetent people would notice the truth. A child put him right.

Could it be that some of our secular and spiritual leaders might do well to visit an honest tailor and exchange their see-through white stage suits and crowns for the clothing of genuine nobility?

Who knows but a childlike friend might care enough to whisper some truth in their ears in private and save them, and us, from a red face in public?
THE FALLEN KING

But who will pastor the pastor? I don't know how many times over the years a well-known leader has fallen into the age-old traps of gold, glamour or girls. It has happened this month. People close to him saw it coming but no-one dared to say anything. The man who was once approachable is no longer teachable but who is to blame?

Success can make the top such a lonely place and in the end, applause can echo around an empty soul. I am sure that leaders long to have someone pull them back from the edge, but who dares touch the anointed? So, if by any chance you have more secretaries and security around you than a rock star, then allow me to very gently ask you this.

Would you consider putting a gate through those barriers and give the key to a friend or two and give them time and permission to say absolutely anything? Ladies and gentlemen, we need God, and we need each other. What do you think?
THE FINGER THAT POINTS AT YOU

Many years ago, I was a speaker at a youth camp held in the cool air of the Genting Highlands in Malaysia. Youth was an elastic word; you could be 40 years of age. One afternoon I was swimming in the outdoor pool but my mind was on the next session, and my heart was criss-crossing the world. A businessman shouted to me, "You know David Shearman, don't you?" I did. In those days he was my pastor, but how did this man guess that? He said, "I saw the way you were praying as you swam, and I saw you walking the corridor speaking to God. David Shearman does that. I met him in Hong Kong and now I do the same." That is influence for you. As powerful as any spoken leadership, the influence of one man had quietly developed two other men who lived at opposite ends of the earth. Not everyone can be a salaried leader, nevertheless at home, at work and through global social-media, we can lead powerfully for good through the influence of our attitudes, lives and words. In fact, you might be the best and maybe the only book on leadership that some people read.
THE FRUIT IS IN THE SEED

My wife is forever planting microscopic seeds some of which turn into tender shoots. I can see her through the window right now, she is in the garden. Soon the flower and vegetable beds will bloom, a tribute to her and to those infinitesimal, vulnerable specks which she planted. I think that gardening must be a passion in heaven, after all God put Adam in Eden not in Manhattan. Jesus knew all about seeds too and spoke about how they have to go into the ground, and die. He said that only the death of the outer shell can release the life that God alone has invested within, which then brings the blossom and the fruit. A gardener indeed. I have learned that a creative idea is also a seed which is best buried in God through prayer. Even I know to keep my hands off, to leave it alone, let it die, and not dig it up to see what's happening. Let the idea resurface when God knows that it is ready and then with patience and all that tender care which my wife knows so much about, you will have something beautiful to see. Tiny seeds planted in good soil bring wonderful displays of colour and splendour to gardens - and into lives, families, businesses and churches as well.
THE GIFT THAT YOU NEVER KNEW YOU HAD

On our DCI Monday evening together we talked about a rarely mentioned calling that is open to everyone and with no upper or lower age limits. Even when the apostle, the prophet, the evangelist, the pastor and teacher pass by largely unnoticed this quiet and unspectacular ministry has a way of succeeding. In 1 Chronicles 33, King David puts names to all the most important offices in his kingdom. Of these, only one man undoubtedly came and went with less pomp and ceremony than anyone else, yet what he did helped to make history. Hushai was the king’s friend. Precious to the giver and priceless to the receiver this gift of your friendship plays a major role in making us who we are. Not a day goes by that we do not try to be a friend to others and they to yet more people. In fact, when it comes to world mission, nothing we do is more effective than making time for people, listening to them, praying for them, believing with them and staying close by them to see what God does. You can do that over the hedge, over a cup of tea and these days over the Internet. You will never be more welcome.
THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN

For those of us who are trying to turn uneducated men and women in the developing world into trained leaders the search for authenticity and integrity is as difficult as finding the legendary Holy Grail. The adventure is as scary as any Indiana Jones story.

Character, communication, competence and 'chemistry' are the measures that we employ to identify the man or woman who is genuine.

Such rare qualities may initially be buried deep under layers of acting to impress but once detected they can often be dug out like gemstones.

Given time and dedication any rough diamond can be cut and polished to reveal a real jewel in the crown of servant leadership which comes to be admired by all.
THE LADY BABY

A more hopeless looking woman you will not find. She would neither lift her face nor speak more than one downcast word. Her pastor asked me to pray for this poor lady because in her Mossi culture, a barren wife lives in unspeakable disgrace, and this was the problem.

The only bigger dilemma was that my own wife back home was in the same long-term predicament, living with the sadness but not in the shame.

At a time like this to have faith for an answer or even to believe that God is listening is helpful. I had neither. The pastor had less than me, and the woman had long since lost hers.

So we prayed in hope with two unconvincing Amen's at the end, mine and the pastor's and then nightfall mercifully swallowed us.
Ten months later, a scrap of a paper torn from a school notebook landed in my letter box overflowing with a joy that crossed the earth to announce the birth of a lady baby.

Never underestimate the power of hope when it is clothed with prayer because not long afterwards another 'lady baby' was born. We called her Elizabeth, which means God has kept his promise - as we hoped but scarcely believed that he would.
THE LADY IS NOT FOR TURNING

It was Margaret Thatcher, the Iron lady, who said in 1981, "The lady is not for turning."

She wasn't and she didn't.

The applause lasted 5 minutes and the echoes only faded away 9 years later.

The lady was of a certain disposition. Back then I would have been no different in my own way, but I think that I am finally learning that life has only a few non-negotiables.

Listening, yielding, being persuadable and flexible makes for a more pleasant life. Friends tend to stick around and return your calls.

To be honest if you don't turn when you should, your hand will soon be engaging reverse gear.
THE LAST MINUTE LINE DANCE

People with undisguised dismay were moving literally en-masse towards the departure gates, most of us having underestimated the marathon distance from the car park to the low-cost airline terminal. Eight flights were due to leave within thirty minutes and the boarding lines were almost indistinguishable in this cocktail of anxious clock-watching and highly-stressed humanity. We inched forward only to find we were actually about to board a flight to a town in the Balkans whose name I could not even pronounce. The indefinable mass of passengers to the right, sensing our likely defection into their space instantly closed ranks, hissed, muttered and sent us to the back. As the last people to board, we had the joy of sitting in the last remaining middle seats, widely separated from each other and worse still, from our sandwiches. All of which made me think that if we want to reach our God-given destination in this life and the next, we had better find the right line while we have time, and not leave it to the last minute, because for sure, following any other crowd will certainly take you to somewhere else you may not wish to go to.
THE LINE YOU SHOULD NOT CROSS

There is a line that you should not cross. If you do cross it, miserable things happen to you. Worse still, if you look over your shoulder and see the line behind you, you are definitely on the wrong side. The dark side.

Our friend and translator Georgina gave us permission to tell you what happened to her last Sunday morning. She wrote, "I had so many problems that I just broke down. For three hours I took refuge in a dark corner of a Catholic church and wept and wept until I felt better and comforted by God's assurance."

You can put weight on a spring and it will stretch. Take the tension away and it will return. However, apply too much stress and the spring will still expand but metal fatigue sets in and the spring remains extended and unable to return by itself. To save the spring the load has to be removed and heat applied to enable a rewinding.
Even less fun is mental fatigue which leads to the need for restoring our minds and souls. Yet there is an effective preventative vaccine in the four letters of REST:

R. Recognise the silent predator of stress who stalks you.
E. Enter into silence and solitude for a while each day.
S. Six days you may work, but choose a seventh and stop.
T. Take Christ's rest that is both given and found in Matthew 11.28.

Now, if the line is already close or crossed then this is what we know: God's remedy to restore your soul is time in green pastures and by quiet waters. Here, the Shepherd corrects you with his rod and hooks his staff around your aching neck muscles to pull you out of the shadows and lead you back into the sunlight on the other side of the valley.

More than poetry, Psalm 23 is God's prescription for a weary soul who is on or over that line. For him or her time off will definitely be better sooner rather than later.
THE MAN WHO MADE US WHO WE ARE

The occasion demanded that we unzip the fabric of time and space and step back into the early eighties.

We were among the many guests at a reception for David Shearman, our first pastor and mentor, to honour his retirement after an amazing 45 years of leadership.

People we had not seen for twenty-two years continued the conversation where we had left it, as if it were last Sunday. We smiled at faces that we recognised across the room only to discover that these were the sons and daughters of the parents we knew. Stories were told, memories swirled, and even critics were credited with having been more right than wrong.

It was David Shearman and his wife Dorothy, who in God's hands made us, and many others like us, into the people that we came to be. I don't think two days has gone by in the intervening years of separation when I have not heard David's voice echoing in my mind, usually quoting a Bible verse, and I have known what to do.
Our early years were filled with the wisdom of larger than life men and women of God who opened doors for us and pushed us through.

This makes us worry about who is guiding the young, cool i-Phone packing leaders of today who seem to have more image than inspiration and know more about salary than sacrifice.

Then again, I remember that more than a few people worried about us.

Maybe they still do.
THE NIGHT THE LEAST LEARNED THE MOST

Hands with the texture of sandpaper shook mine and sat me down. Gradually into the gloom lit by oil lamps came unwashed men and women in rags. Walking in barefoot with open wounds from travelling by starlight across dry, thorny ground alive with snakes and scorpions. To the beat of hands rapping on a box and a man shaking stones in a can they sang their hearts out to God with smiles that illuminated the night. Contentment and thankfulness was written across their faces.

The 'nasarra' the white man, me, the reason for the gathering, wished the earth would open up and swallow him but it did not.

The apostle Paul once wrote, "I have learned to be content." Notice the word 'learned.' That night in Burkina Faso the one from far away who was the least content of all learned the most of all, and has never forgotten the lesson.
THE NOT SO MERRY-GO-ROUND

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

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

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

And again, until you pass.

You might suspect a kind of holy conspiracy.
THE ONE-WAY TICKET

I have studied it, prayed it, stood at the front to say yes to it, preached it, taught it, written it, given to it, sent people into it and believe me, paid a price for it. Yet when a teenager came forward to read a verse that appealed to her from the Bible in last night's church meeting, she turned to the final four verses of Matthew's gospel, chapter 28 known as the Great Commission.

As she spoke the Holy Spirit whispered in my soul, "You have forgotten all about it."

No-one else would know that, no-one would guess it, not even me, but it is true and I know it. In all the humdrum, everyday issues of life, church, health and holidays, sending funds and repelling frauds and charlatans how easy it is to be consumed by the what and forget the why of the Great Commission. Dust and ashes are the appropriate clothing for today. A one-way ticket to return to my first love is required.

We have missed each other.
THE PIANIST AND THE PUPPET

Some years ago my daughter Lizzie aspired to play the piano and captivated by her enthusiasm, I signed up as well. Our teacher was the amiable and aptly-named Mr. Terry Toon and in his home, we steadily progressed from Pluto through Pacabel to Polkas. In the exuberant style of Liberace in the TV shows of my childhood, Lizzie would practice at home not even glancing at the music whilst giving me a dazzling smile. We both knew only too well that my playing, alas, was that of a puppet on a string plonking the notes of the piano.

Today I aspire to other less musical heights, not least finding that place where we bear the 'much fruit' for which Jesus has chosen us. To aspire may well make you and I perspire to acquire the potential hidden by God in our lives. Not to continually aspire is actually a self-imposed early retirement at any age with vegetation and stagnation never far behind. I am sure that David Livingstone knew this when he famously said, "Onwards, provided it be forwards." Yes, I aspire to this and I hope that you will as well.
THE PRETENDER IN THE PACK

In a matter of minutes, money was going to Mauretania to fund a project that looked great and would do good. References checked out - yet, yet? Yet - what? Moments before I pressed Send to make the transfer an e-mail arrived from an unknown American resident who told me this: "The man you have been enquiring about is not who he says he is. He stole from me, he lies, the woman he is with is not his wife and - he smokes." I saw the smoke as well; from my locked wheels and burning rubber as the brakes slammed on. Sure enough, the man was right and so was the absence of peace that was shouting deep within me. John Maxwell warns that the strategy in some places is: "Fake it till you make it and sooner or later people will accept you for who you are not." Let me tell you what saved us then and has saved us many times since is this from God's word. "If you are off the track to the right or the left, you will hear a voice saying Stop." If we are listening that is. If we want to hear. Just as well then, that it is not just cars that come equipped with brakes. Do you know what I mean?
THE POISONED CHALICE

The chalice was a poisoned one. The smiling professor at the University in India graciously invited me to speak to several MBA classes and the faculty staff to coincide with my one-day visit to his city. Only ten minutes before the assembly the professor whispered, "By the way, this is a fundamentalist Hindu campus and they know you are a Christian. One word about Jesus, just one, and we are in big trouble. I will lose my job. They may beat me." They say that courage is not the absence of fear; it is doing what has to be done in spite of fear and it continually replenishes as you rise to the challenge. All I know is that for sixty minutes, I used one Bible principle after another about management and integrity in professional life without mentioning the source or compromising either my faith, their faith or the heavily perspiring professor. The assembly thought it was magnificent stuff. Courage of course is a thing of the heart, happily for me the podium hid my knocking knees and trembling hands. Bon courage to you my friends, God is there when you need him.
THE POLPERRO MYSTERY

Polperro, in Cornwall, England is a quaint, picturesque village by the sea, where in 1984 we were loaned a rustic fisherman's holiday cottage down by the harbour.

That week I walked the cliffs but I saw neither sea nor sky. Why, because I had found the story of George Muller or more truthfully, the book had found me.

Two centuries earlier when smuggling was the name of the game in Polperro, not far away in Bristol, George Muller was feeding, clothing and educating thousands of orphans without once asking for money. Over a long lifetime and in a thousand and one financial trials, George Muller relied on God alone and recorded every answered prayer.

It was in Polperro that I dared to put an impossibly wild, unanswerable prayer of my own before God, and just as quickly dismissed my words as wishful thinking.
Indeed, 30 years later I am no George Muller yet looking back I realised today that in all this time, the bank account that we use to continually bless the lost, the last and the least of the earth has never run dry and not one appeal for funds has ever gone out.

I can't explain this but I think George Muller would smile knowingly.
THE PSALM OF FAGIN

I have always been taken by what I call the Psalm of Fagin in the musical Oliver Twist. It goes like this: "In this life one thing counts, in the bank - large amounts. Charity is fine, subscribe to mine; you got to empty a pocket or two, ooh."

Avoid Fagin like the plague and every arm-twisting prosperity preacher that sings his song, but charity is actually fine. Charity changes us, and adds dignity and nobility to our lives, it makes our faith visible. Yet with so many appeals and emotion-stirring sob-stories coming at us from all directions, how do we ever choose who to give to?

For me, the key is to engage with opportunity rather than to simply meet need. Serious giving into a God-given opportunity will change a life or many lives and is far better than throwing a few coins into every bottomless pit of human misery that is expensively marketed in full-colour and costs more than you will ever give.

This is what I know for certain:
If you ask God in Jesus' name for enough for yourself, and a very great deal more to give to others, then you will find that this prayer seems to have an automatic answering service at the other end of the line.

A delivery may be expected forthwith.
THE REAL ISRAELI QUESTION

As I see it, there is one ever-present and insistent question that hovers over Israel, superseding all others.

There is no question that Jerusalem is a world-class tourist attraction, and it is unquestionable that Israel is a treasure of history like no other.

There is no doubt that as a political power Israel provokes many questions as it seeks to defend its people. You might question the differing theology of the one hundred and one different groups that simultaneously tour Israel, the Biblical nation.

As you stroll amongst the sights of prophecy fulfilled, who does not silently question when the outstanding words to Israel will happen?

Yet there is one penetrating question that is put to the soul with echoes from the time that Jesus stopped Peter of Galilee in his tracks.

Jesus asked him, "Who do you say that I am?"
That is the big question which is asked if you apply to become an Israeli citizen. Give the wrong answer from the Jewish perspective and you may as well tear up the application right there and then.

However, write that Jesus is a historical figure, a prophet or the reincarnation of an alien and before you know it, Tel Aviv is your home.

Peter knew better.

"You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," he declared. This truth may never endear you to your Jewish family and friends, but these words unlock far more than a home in Jerusalem.

These words unlock eternity in your heart.
THE REAL THING IS NOT ALWAYS BOTTLED

What makes close to 100,000 young people travel from the four corners of Europe and sit on the cold winter floor in silence? Walking in Barcelona, Spain, we literally stumbled across their gathering and after a while we sat with them. The teenagers began to sing haunting melodies in one language and then another accompanied by simple acoustic music, until an 80-year-old monk rose to speak to everyone. So gently. For three days, Brother Roger, the founder of the Taizé Community in France, assassinated not long afterwards, pointed the young people towards Jesus. You know, for all the billions of dollars that we spend on mega-churches and TV ministries, what happens if you ask Europeans in the street to name three influential Christian leaders? The answer is invariably Mother Teresa, Billy Graham and Taizé. I think this is because young people perceive them to be the real thing, Men and women that pay a price because they know what they believe and live what they say. Of course, by that definition, you and I can also be influential, no caffeine, dollars or hype required.
THE ROAD RUNNER

‘One’ is a very appealing word which gets you round all kinds of complications and conflicts around the table. Just do it as the Nike brand says.

However there is truth in an ancient African proverb, "If you want to go fast, then go by yourself, but if you want to go far, take others."

Years ago, my youthful patience ran out so rather than wait my turn and the eye of my boss, like the Road-Runner from the Looney Tunes cartoons I pressed the pedal, went through every gear in the box and made it to the horizon in a cloud of dust.

One did it. All by myself.

I have regretted that journey ever since. Just like the infamous Esau, I also discovered that no amount of tears can get your place back once you choose al-oneness over togetherness.
These days I understand the advice that Paul, the apostle, gave to young Timothy when he said to take what he had learned and give it to reliable men, and tell them to pass it on to other faithful men and women.

If any One could make it alone it was Paul, but he knew better than to try. I do now.

What I do know is that if ever a Road-Runner becomes a team player, effectiveness goes exponential, and anything less really is a Looney Tune.
THE ROPE THAT PULLS YOU TO THE TOP

Commitment is the friend that ropes himself to you and pulls you up the mountain of reasons to quit. Commitment is the machete that hacks a path through the jungle at the foot of the mountain. It is the spade that digs a tunnel under it. Commitment is why we keep our word to God, to partners, to people and to ourselves even when it hurts.

Often trampled underfoot by shallow celebrities and characterless politicians, nevertheless being committed by our words makes us solid and dependable. It defines our character and proves our worth in marriage, marketing and ministry. When you are committed you face that mountain that was not there yesterday and you say, "You move or I start to climb, trek or dig. Either way I am coming through."

See you on the other side.
THE SAFETY NET FOR THE INDECISIVE

First, we were going, then the dates changed, and we were not. Not long afterwards, the travel dates were restored, and so we were going. Then we were not, but now the conference in Israel is on again, and we are going. We think. We hope. Maybe it won't happen after all. Was James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem writing about indecisive first-century tourists, when he said, "Double-minded people end up with nothing, at least not from God." These days air tickets increase in price by the hour so it is very easy to dither and dither until you can't afford to go anyway. However, if you are a believer who struggles to make a decision, God has a safety net for you. You gather the facts, you pray and you decide. If you are wrong, God's promise is that you will hear a voice behind you saying, "No, you are off track, walk this way." The only decision you then have to make is to follow that quiet, unhurried voice, one that has saved me from imminent folly more times than I remember. The same voice that may be trying to save me again, and you too, right now, but are we listening?
THE SELECTION PROCEDURE

There was a knock on the door. It was late and at first glance there was no-one there.

Then I looked down from my dizzy 6 feet of height and noticed a diminutive lady in her middle years measuring in at 4 feet something carrying a suitcase nearly as big as herself.

"I'm Christine," she said. "My husband died and I had a stroke. I got over both, sold up, gave stuff away and flew in from New Zealand today. I asked around till I found you because I heard you needed some help." We did.

We quietly expected the young, tall, dark and handsome to come our way but God sent Christine. She became an incalculable blessing.

You see, God looks at the heart, not at our outward appearance, be that stroke-affected, ageing or whatever. That was the day that we learned a different selection procedure altogether.
THE SILENT BIRTH OF WORDS

Someone once found George Bernard Shaw looking downcast and asked why that was. "I have only managed to write six words all day today," was the reply, "and I can't even put those in the right order." We writers are funny people. When it comes to solitude, we are in there with the contemplatives and the hermits except that we come out in the evenings. Like them, we work with words, in my case words spoken to God, followed by words written to people.

Solitude is where we hear our muse, find our inspiration and rendezvous with creativity. I listen for the One who makes my hand the pen of a ready writer. In solitude, even the pitter-patter of the dog puts timid concentration to flight, and the ring of the telephone is akin to nuclear obliteration.

Jesus knew that public ministry is birthed in private silence. He only entered the clamour of human need in between the serious business of time alone. Jesus got it right. Solitude is intentional. Like a pearl of great price, solitude, once discovered is to be forever treasured.
THE SLOW ROAD TO SUDDENLY

Between Galilee and Jerusalem, nothing happens very quickly. You think it does, because in the Bible, and other contemporary ancient texts, Galilee and Jerusalem are frequently mentioned in the same line.

We suppose that Nazareth is just down the road. We never imagine that Capernaum where Jesus lived is 193 kilometres away from Jerusalem and even driving quickly on good roads the journey takes three hours.

Jesus walked.

The prophets walked. In fact, in Bible days, everybody walked at the pace of the elderly and the ladies with babies.

For Jesus and his family, to go to the Temple involved walking for a week with a lot of hills on the way.

This means that in total contrast to the pace of life today, people had time to think, to pray and to calm down.

There was time to get over things, time to change your mind and time to get ready. There was time to find a better way and find peace.
There was no 'beep beep' and a Reply button followed by another 'come on' beep a minute later.

It may be annoyingly true that as J John says, "God has two speeds, slow and very slow," yet it is also heart-warming to know that at journey's end when time has been spent and silence has worked on the soul, the Lord has a way of suddenly being there.

Suddenly is a God word. Even so, for all of us who feel pressured on every side, to go slowly, to enjoy or even see the scenery and be patient as we travel towards God's sudden coming may be a personal Via Dolorosa.

Our Cross can be heavy but fear not, Jesus is on the way, but remember, he walks slowly not because our need is not urgent, but to give us time.
THE SPLENDID GARDENER

How can one tree give good and bad fruit at the same time? Worse still, how can people including me, be both decent and dreadful within minutes?

A while ago, we bought a young Salix tree which blossomed well until several fast-growing branches from another kind of tree indecently emerged from the trunk and overpowered it.

It turns out that the original Salix sapling was grafted onto a stronger root which had returned to life, so a gardener was called in to do some serious cutting.

You know, Jesus calls his Father the gardener and if I call him, this Gardener will come by to cut off all the disorderly shoots that spring up uninvited from my old life that caused me so much heartache years ago.

Moreover, this Gardener regularly clips away at all the unruly 'good' ideas that I graft into life, which have a way of overwhelming the real person that I am called to be and what I am supposed to do.
He even prunes the good stuff for me so it gets better, and at the end he says, “No charge.” Life stays focused.

This splendid gardener is not in Yellow Pages. You have to find him under prayer. Just look his way, ask or leave a message, and before long he will be along to see you.
THE STING

For sure no writer likes the rejection slip. Maybe no 'Likes' on Facebook is the same bitter pill for ordinary mortals.

When it is your CV, or your application for University or a Members Only club or even for church membership that they say No to, then the rejection hurts like a hornet sting and the pain lasts even longer.

Yet why look for acceptance where you do not belong? God's ointment for the sting is coming to see that some doors are closed by his hand and locked by his key to save us from being where we do not need to be.

Rub that in gently, several times a day until the pain goes.
THE ULTIMATE PERSONAL TRAINER

Between teaching and training, there is a world of difference. For three years my friend Philip listened to good information and made copious notes, which he memorised for examination time, and graduated from Bible School. One day later, with growing horror I watched him filling the waste bin with his notes. Philip was not convinced that repeating academic criticism of Biblical texts to demon-worshipping, illiterate, poverty-stricken villagers in West Africa would do a lot of help to them. On the other hand, a trainer shows you what to do. He explains everything and afterwards he says, "Now, you have a go, later come back and tell me what happened, and we will talk about it." Jesus, the ultimate personal trainer did it this way and so did Paul. They called it discipleship, apprenticeship, or coaching, and the learners changed the world. Why is it then that these days almost everywhere, any Bible School you go to, chooses to teach rather than train. When people clearly need revelation and not more information, I wonder why we think that we know better than Jesus and why we favour our methods over his?
THE TRIP TO JERUSALEM

The Trip to Jerusalem is an Inn close to our home, where in 1189, the Crusaders took their final drink before leaving these shores to stain the image of Christianity forever.

Our own trip to Jerusalem took place 824 years later. Now late was the word of the day because the train to the airport was delayed by almost two hours and the flight from Manchester to Tel Aviv left without us.

This would have been the end before we started, except for a rescue mounted by the travel insurance company and the ever-optimistic help of Jacob, a Jewish man who works at the airport and extraordinarily lives in the same street where my family had their home fifty years earlier. In the end I am sure that he would have taken us home with him but instead we drove a long way south in a hire car to catch a flight to Israel the following morning.

On a day like this when everything is up in the air and your hopes are on the floor, you lean upon the promise:
"The Lord watches over your goings out and your comings in, to keep you from all harm. His faithfulness reaches to the skies."

These words that once calmed nerves at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport 30 years ago in tense days of hijackings and bombings lose none of their power with the passing of time. Once believed, they are the best travel insurance of all. We would never leave home without them.

Neither should you.
THE UNFINISHED PORTRAIT

The unexpected happened. The most unlikely young man hesitantly stood up and apologetically said, "God wants me to tell you that you have unfinished business in Spain."

Four days later, as if to underline the announcement, six young people from Barcelona descended upon us without warning, on their way to a concert by the Rend Collective.

Ismael designs jet engines for Rolls-Royce; Keila is developing art, drama and music in Germany, Mark and Ana are learning to lead worship in London's famous HTB church, the home of the globally acclaimed Alpha Course and Marc's brother, David and his wife Esther already follow Jesus in Barcelona. One and all, they are passionate believers.

Our bi-lingual daughter Lizzie, and my wife Pilar used her gift of being Spanish to make sense of seven excited people all speaking at once. That God has unfinished business in Spain is 100% certain.
The tourism posters that smile with Christian familiarity belie the fact that only 0.1 to 1% of the population are actually committed believers.

What is just as certain is that it will be young people like our six visitors that complete the unfinished portrait.

Who knows, but perhaps our unfinished business will be to take care of them.
THE VICTORIAN AND THE RUSSIAN

My father was born in 1894 which made him a genuine Victorian. My mother came from a large Jewish refugee family that fled Kaunas, Lithuania, then part of Russia, five years later. Sadly I never really knew either of them.

Knowing the story though makes me really appreciate how the Bible patriarchs travelled life together as one big family of all ages. Many African peoples still do this and we who abort unwanted babies and put unplanned elderly relatives into care homes, dare to call them primitive.

I don't think so.

I worry though, when I see so many preachers and businessmen wandering the airports and hotels of the earth all by themselves. I fear the wolf is never far behind.
THE WAY TO STAY ON TOP

When she was at University, our daughter Lizzie joined a charity fund-raising team to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. At dawn on the third day she was the first girl to the top with an icy river of tears frozen to her cheeks. Her nose was bleeding, she was frozen half to death and shaken by seeing stretcher cases being rushed down. When I asked if she was frightened, she replied, "Only one thing scared me, and that was the night before when we camped near the summit under a clear night sky. We could see the universe lit up from horizon to horizon and it was terrifying." The lesson is this: Up on the pinnacle whether that is on Africa's highest mountain or in business, career or ministry, it is good to fear God who got you there safely through the costly ascent. By walking with him, and being forever thankful for the privilege, you can stay on top for a lifetime, but lose the awe, the wonder and the responsibility of living in rarefied air, then as many a one from ancient days to now, has found out, and every step will lead you down. Now, after such a long climb how sad would that be?
THEOLOGY, DO-LOGY AND KIDOLOGY

What makes a busy lady drive miles every month to visit an 88 year old lady who no longer knows who she is or who has come to see her.

Why would a man drive the length of France to pray with another man who is dying of cancer even though they have never even spoken before?

This is love with nothing in it for the lover, emerging from deep inside with an irresistible compassion. Yet even this 'agape' love is paralysed unless lips, hands and feet complete what the heart starts.

In fact, I am long convinced that any theology that cannot become a do-ology, is no more than a kid-ology. And the person that I am kidding or fooling the most - is me.
THERE’S A PLACE FOR US

We pastor many but we never trained to be pastors. We have been in missions for over 30 years but we were never missionaries. We look too much like shepherds for the sheep to sit with us yet we are too 'sheepish' for the shepherds to be friends with us.

With our split personalities and permanent identity crisis we have slipped through the local fellowship net times beyond number. Knowing how this feels makes us go the extra mile to welcome everyone whom God sends our way from around the world.

Sheep and shepherds the same.

In West Side Story they sing, "There's a place for us somewhere a place for us .." So you go find yours, wish us well as we look for ours and hey - perhaps we will meet down the road somewhere.

You will be welcome, the kettle is always on.
THEY KNOW WHAT YOU ARE THINKING

Back in 1999 BG, Before Google that is, when Yahoo was a new born and Twitter something only birds did, we were stuck. Prayer for what might be next only brought the 'Internet' word.

Back then this was hallowed ground for academics, common ground for porn stars and holy ground for no-one. So allowing God to win, we put 12 pages from our School of Mission on a website and considered our obedience, a better word would be ignorance, to be complete.

The funny thing is that more people came our way in the next week than we had seen for years, and 100,000,000 page visits later they are still coming. Superficial it is, limited for sure and make of social media what you will, but Facebook by population is the world's 3rd biggest nation. Think about this: With a click of your mouse people all over the world get to know what you think and believe.

Is that opportunity or what?
THICK FOG HAS A WAY THROUGH

When the writer Thomas Merton didn't know where he was going, when he couldn't see the road ahead and when he was struggling to know himself and was uncertain of God's will, he found the path.

He did this by reducing every choice and uncertainty down to one desire alone: To please God in everything.

This gave him the peace and the confidence that God would get him on the right road even if he knew nothing about how he got there or where he was going.

I know that eerie lost in the fog feeling. Merton's way out sounds good to me.
THREE TOGETHER STAY SANE

For me community happens (but never enough) when I get to be part of a small, wide-open group. People who are patient and know me by name. They bear with my failures, never elevate me for my occasional successes and better still, they allow me to care for the other people in the group who I also know by name and story.

People go to a church for a thousand reasons but they generally stay because of just one of them. That reason can be summed up in one word: Friends.

Not being alone, because beyond the church is community. As Eugene Peterson said, "A private, proudly isolated life cannot grow. The two or three who gather together in Christ's name keep each other sane."

And we do.
TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Where I live they will not let you be yourself. I tried it and they said no. You must be either employed, self-employed, unemployed, a corporation, a trader, a partnership, a non-profit, a prisoner, unemployable or one of the Royal family. The last one seemed the most attractive but they said not.

Instead I signed up to live my vision through a charity or NGO, a non-profit outfit in the language of the Americas. I thought that I could be more myself and see if anyone else wanted to be the same as me. We could follow the call of God together. It is very hard not to be put into a box by officialdom and not to be labelled because society works by valuing what you do more than who you are. Be a sovereign, be a servant, be like Jesus, be all of these things but above all be yourself. Be true to who you are made to be. Be as unique as you are, wherever you are, and be sure that out of your being will come a doing that makes a difference. As Shakespeare said through the lips of Hamlet, "To be or not to be, that is the question." If indeed it is, what is your answer?
TO OWN IT IS TO FIX IT

You can circle round a problem and examine it from all angles. You can hope that someone else will fix it for you. You can paint over it or even pray that God will take it away. In the end though, it will not be solved until you bite the bullet and take ownership if it.

Own the problem, take personal responsibility for it and you will fix it just like the people who own a dream tend to get to live it. Ownership is a great word because it changes everything. People listen to an owner but often disregard a tenant because ownership says you have given your life to something. You are serious. Your money is in it, your weight is behind it and you believe in it. Ownership means you are committed.

By a quiet decision you have become formidable, irresistible, implacable and strangely attractive.
TO WIN IT’S COMPLETE NOT COMPETE

In my first ever game of schoolboy Rugby I got so hurt and frightened that I never played it or watched it again until fifty-two years later, our daughter organised a charity event with the local Rugby Club. On the day, two of her volunteers stayed home and our phone rang. After collecting the money I got to see the game and do you know, I enjoyed every minute.

I saw that without teamwork this game is nothing. Our team worked and won 48:16 which made me think. For me teamwork begins with my wife, involves my family and extends into the people who support our work. It flows on into our partners in the developing world and expands into their own local teams. Without teamwork I am one man as alone as I was in my schoolboy Rugby match facing a horde of grim faced men intent on crushing me, but with teamwork we do the business.

God himself is a team of three working together in harmony and when I see what he can do, I wonder why anyone would imagine that he or she could do better by working alone?
TODAY I SAILED ON

Every voyage of discovery begins with anticipation and the expectation of creating a sensation at the destination.

However, on the journey there will be many a day like the ones that Christopher Columbus recorded in his diary when all he could write was, "Today we sailed on." That was one long day for sure and so was the next, and the next and the one that came after that. At times like this when a day feels like a month what you have to do is stir up the vision inside of you and keep speaking it to yourself.

Every morning you raise your sails and you pray for the wind of the Holy Spirit to blow.

This is what I know. Do that and one day a whole new world comes over the horizon and makes you glad that you sailed on and didn't turn back. So, whether your next voyage is an inner expedition of self-discovery, an exploration of God or one which needs a passport and a ticket, I wish you well.

Bon voyage mon ami, sail on.
TOUCH TELLS ALL

The eyes and the fingertips of the cashiers in the banks are trained to detect counterfeit notes through the monotonous training of handling an endless stream of genuine notes.

So we also come to truly understand the priceless value of loyalty by the painful texture of disloyalty when it happens. Eventually, like the cashiers I guess, you can feel it coming like Jesus surely did with Judas.

Yet Jesus never humiliated or rejected his disloyal friend even to save his own life. He suffered the ultimate betrayal but he never compromised his own loyalty to the friend that he had chosen.

Something for me to remember next time one of the people we support goes walkabout.
TRY THE RIDE IN THE BACK

Did you know that the Chief Executive of a well-known name with over two million followers hanging on to his every word, still takes care of every last detail, personally? How long can that go on? No worries, his father-in-law, a sheep farmer, came to visit and made him realise that working non-stop all day, every day is a bad idea. Worse still, having people waiting instead of working, makes even less sense. "Choose leaders," father-in-law said, "train them, organise the people and delegate the jobs. You handle only what others cannot, but have some leaders learning at your side." The company was Exodus Inc. The CEO is Moses, the father-in-law is Jethro, no MBE from Oxford but plenty of common sense instead. Yet the oldest management problem in the world is still with us. Leaders feel good about being busy, I am what I do is the mantra and they feel indispensable until the chest pains hit. Like Moses, someone also told me that the fastest way into the promised land is to release the gifts in the people around you, and then allow the people to drive the company there. You never know, you might like the ride in the back.
TURBULENCE AND THE NERVOUS FLYER

If you are one of those people for whom a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, then landing at Spain’s Bilbao airport is never going to be relaxing. The runway is short with a cliff edge at the end and hills and sea all around. You have apartment blocks to one side and if you are really in the know, the remains of a Boeing 727 that did not make it are just below. When unexpected turbulence sent us sideways seconds from touchdown, I got to see the TV in a lady’s apartment and my friend Richard who was on his first flight, and for whom ignorance was definitely bliss, leaned over and took a photo. In my heart I heard the words, “My hands are under this aircraft,” and a moment later we landed with loud applause from rows 1 to 35. Let me pass on to you the gift that settled the turbulence in me from that day to this: “The Lord watches over your coming in and your going out now and evermore.” This is from Psalm 121 and, “Your faithfulness reaches to the skies,” is Psalm 36.5. Unlike airline tickets, the promises of God are fully transferable, just change my name to yours. Believe what you have just heard and grip that coffee cup when the wind blows. You will be OK.
TURN OUR WORLD UPSIDE DOWN PLEASE

Many years ago BC, before computers that is, we were the first people in England to sell used cars that came with a free 12 month warranty. We turned the car buying market upside down and it made us.

On that first Saturday we sold every car in the showroom and buyers waited in line down the street. In 1999 when the Internet was still in its infancy, we were among the very first to put some free Bible studies on the emerging web. We turned the world of expensive Bible Schools upside down and saw more students in one week on-line than we had seen in all the previous ten years on-site. Then along came Google and Yahoo and the world became our parish.

In today's world, when China churns out millions of identical fashions and every High Street looks the same, uniqueness sparkles. People will go a very long way to have what no-one else has, or to hear words that no-one else speaks. Producers, politicians and especially preachers please take note and turn our monotonous world upside down please.
TWO THOUSAND YEARS LATE

Whatever you expect, Israel is not what you expected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And looking back, it was not.
UMBRELLA KINDNESS

The Vineyard churches did some serious research and discovered that the average man or woman in the street needs to have six positive encounters with people who follow Jesus before they will consider hearing why that is and maybe doing the same.

So, being courteous can give a passer-by or a casual shopper one of those six 'feel good' moments that they think about, remember and act upon.

Be kind and the chances are that one day someone will see a new face in church because they found their way there by following the fragrant trail that you left behind.
UNWAVERING TO THE FINISH

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

Very few of us like to confront others, and we feel even worse if the confrontation comes our way. We English hide behind niceness and we will do almost anything to avoid biting and being bitten. In fact we can be nicer than God himself who never sweeps things under the carpet.

Yet looking back how much do I wish that good people had bitten the bullet and confronted me with my imminent mistakes instead of being so 'nice.' Instead I learned the long, hard way.

This is what I know: To tell me is to bless me. These days I will lower my heart, bite my tongue, soften my words, hang my tail between my legs, listen, say thank you and then go and ask God in case you are right.

God tends to answer that kind of prayer pretty quickly. In fact you might have been his messenger, Gabriel being so busy these days.
WE NEVER WON A RAFFLE UNTIL NOW

A while ago, one of our family gave another the gift of an exquisite Oriental tea set made in wood, and now before our eyes, there it was. It had become a prize in a raffle at a fund-raising event! Believe it or not, we bought five tickets and after a lightning prayer one of them won back those cups and saucers and we gave them a good home. That's redemption. It means buying back what is lost. When two youngsters that we know in Cuba sold their wedding rings to keep themselves going in the call of God, we bought them from the money shop and put the rings back on their fingers. What a fantastic feeling that was for the young couple. And for us too! You see, years ago when I sold myself into a life of total loss, there was no way back, it was Jesus who bought me just as I was. An unlikely purchase indeed, at a terrible price yet he redeemed me, forgave me and put me on the right path. In gratitude then, if I can ever redeem anything or anyone from loss, and return him, her or whatever to where they rightfully belong, well - you don't think twice about these things, do you? It is a ticket that always wins.
WHAT DO YOU SEE?

If you want people to follow you then you need to know where you are going yourself. They will need to be convinced that you have both a destination and a benefit in mind before they join you on your journey. They will want to know how you intend to get there.

"What do you see," was the question that God put to a young Jeremiah a long time ago. It was the vision in his heart that God was trying to draw out. Jeremiah had the right answer.

So, what do you and I see?

By looking straight ahead, we only see what everyone else sees but now raise your hands to ear level and wiggle your fingers. You can see them - yes? This is what I know. It is right there on the edge where you are not looking that you might well see something new. Somewhere to go, someone to be, something inventive and innovative that no-one else has seen. Vision, you see, is wider than most people imagine it to be.
WHAT KODAK AND MY HEART HAVE IN COMMON

Waiting upon God is vital in order to see him, to hear his quiet words and to receive a vision from him. The amount of time spent before him is also critical, for our hearts are like the Kodak films that we used to buy for our Brownie cameras. The longer the film is exposed and the more light that we let in, the deeper is the impression. In the same way, for the vision that God wants to impress on our hearts, we must sit in stillness at his feet for quite a long time. Without a vision, that is an impression from God, the people perish, insists Proverbs 29.1, and actually the first one to perish and that usually through boredom, is the one who has never been quiet enough, long enough to hear the call to follow Jesus and serve him. Just as the troubled surface of a lake cannot reflect a clear image, it is only when we 'calm and quieten ourselves' as David learned to do and tells us how in Psalm 131, that we begin see the picture developing before our eyes. Now, if you will, say cheese and I will select f2.8, open the shutter wide and get you into our hearts for all time.
WHATEVER HE CAN DO I CAN DO BETTER

In the vivid imagination that I am gifted with, I am the hero of a thousand scenarios, any one of which would make Bruce Willis green with envy. I save people from imminent disaster on land, sea and air and follow that with a maestro performance on the stage. Naturally, everyone who ignores me in real life is written into the screenplay or into the audience so that no-one misses my true value. Now, hand such an imagination over to God and you give him a blank canvas on which to paint his portraits of you and your calling, and his hopes for the people that he brings your way. While it is true that eye has not seen, and ear has not heard and neither has mind imagined what God has got prepared for those who love him, he does reveal himself by his Spirit. So not everything you imagine is fantasy. Some of what you see in the back of your mind is actually prophecy. You just have to learn the difference, otherwise you get a really unholy mixture of Die Hard and the church, and that really is a Mission Impossible.
WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE IT?

The young man was panic-stricken. He was cutting down a tree when the axe-head flew off and went straight into the river. "It was borrowed," he said aghast. Elisha, his mentor, took it calmly, "Where did it fall?" he asked, knowing that hidden within this particular question was the answer to more than the loss of a borrowed axe-head.

When we lose it, go back to where the blessing, the inspiration or the provision was last seen and face up to why it vanished. Locating where it fell and admitting why that was, is always a great first step to getting it back again.

Where did you last see it and what happened there and then? Elisha listened and prayed, and the axe-head floated back to the surface.

I have found more than few lost things this way and only lost a little unwanted pride in return.
WHEN IT FEELS WORSE THAN IT IS

It makes me smile to hear people saying that they are losing their mind because that assumes they had one to begin with. Worse still when I say it, imagining that I have some sanity left to lose. Why are you looking at me that way, I'm the normal one!

You know, on those days when fear gets in the driving seat, predicts the worst and the world wobbles, what has saved me and brought me back from the edge a hundred times over the years is knowing that, "God did not give me a spirit of fear, He gave me the gifts of power, love and a sound mind."

Yes, a sound mind, capitals, bold, underlined, and highlighted. This is one gift I don't intend to lose.
WHEN NOTHING HURTS ENOUGH

To know what 'On Top of the World' means listen to the Olympic gold medal winners being interviewed one minute after crossing the finishing line. What you saw in the final seconds tells you that when you are winning nothing hurts enough to stop you.

I bet it did hurt though, and more than once in the previous five years, or for the London 2012 canoe guys, the previous 15 years of training, 7 days a week.

Winning takes a moment, blink and you miss it. Yet becoming fit to win and staying a winner means daily discipline and a perseverance to rise above the average and the mediocre.

Winners learn to get past the pain and to be extraordinary in whatever life we are given.

With God's help that's a race we can run and win.
WHEN YOU NEED SOMETHING TO HANG ON TO

It is 33 years since we promised that for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, we would love each other until death us do part. The worse, the poorer and the sickness has all happened and we have kept our promises. We married in Barcelona in a tiny Iglesia Evangélica in the days when I knew twenty words in Spanish and Pilar knew even less in English. So, when all went quiet and every eye looked my way, I said ‘Si’, not knowing whether I was saying yes to Pilar or agreeing to pay the church mortgage. Promises can be risky. Solomon, the wisest man of 3000 years ago, always said that two are better than one, and a three-fold cord is not easily broken. How many times in 33 years have we have gripped that third cord, the presence of God, as if it were a strap in a swaying bus, lest the sudden jolts knocked us off our feet. You know, the third cord has a way of wrapping itself around your hands and holding you safe. This is what we know, it is never too late to ask for a third cord in your marriage. In fact, would asking right now be a good idea?
WHO PAYS THE BILL?

It is like inviting old friends to a reunion in a smart restaurant of their choice, yet with every exotic course you increasingly fear the bill at the end. When it comes you find the words 'Paid In Full' written across it. Evidently, someone else in the party enjoyed the occasion that they said, "Charge it to my account."

It has happened to me. Grace is something like that only a million times bigger. The believers of yesteryear declared grace to be: God's Riches At Christ's Expense, or in other words, a lifetime of supply from an inexhaustible treasury of spiritual and material riches. The expense voucher is signed every time by Jesus who does not want us to work for his blessing or try to earn it, repay it or deserve it. True, not every one of us finds it easy to accept this extravagant giving by God or to live with the humility that it commands but know this, the trickle of God's provision that is sufficient for one person becomes a torrent for the man or woman who will take God's grace to the waiting millions.
WHY I SOLD OUT FOR A FEW SHEKELS

My companion at the dinner table overlooking the Mount of Olives confided his pleasure at having been able to borrow twenty million Euros at a time of severe reluctance in the banks to loan anything at all.

He will use the funds to balance the cash flow of a number of small and medium-size businesses. Very uniquely, each company releases its profits to care for poor children in the developing world.

The next morning, I was a back-seat passenger in a car taking my dinner companion to catch a flight. On the way, he asked the driver to make a detour in Jerusalem to visit an out-of-the-way currency exchange agency.

He returned with a knowing smile having gained an extra twenty Shekels over the usual rate. Even with twenty million Euros waiting to be spent, this man took my breath away by being concerned to gain a few more banknotes for his Israel director.

Where I was born, aged men understood why this man took the detour:
"Take care of the pennies, lad," they said, "and the pounds will take care of themselves." Jesus put it this way, "Be faithful in a few things, and I will put you in charge of many things."

You know, being faithful with little is not really so hard, but it takes a genuine greatness to remain equally faithful at the top.

As we shook hands at Tel Aviv airport to say good-bye I quietly did another exchange transaction.

My values for his.
WHY HIS HOW MUST BECOME HIS NOW

The lady asked, "Now, how many of you have a bread maker in your kitchen?" Maybe twenty-five hands went up. "How many of you know how to use it?" Nearly everybody kept a hand up. "Now, how many of you have made bread this week?" Only three hands remained in the air.

Do you get the idea? The knowing did not translate into the beautiful smell of fresh bread rising from the kitchen.

The people following Jesus did not say, "Teach us how to pray." A thousand and one books, CD's and conferences can do that. They actually said, "Teach us to pray." Instead of a 'how to' they wanted a 'now do.' As John Maxwell says, "If you learn, then you can earn and in the end, you can return." Return benefit that is, to society. On the other hand when we only learn and never do anything with it, there are no returns for anyone. Procrastination is a habit that is long past its sell-by date. Let's learn now. Pray now. Do it now. Change now. When the knowing of how becomes the doing of it now, you smell the fresh bread cooking. Mmmm, nice.
WHY I GOT TOMATOES NOT CUCUMBER

Language-learning tapes tied my tongue in knots and grammatical tenses left me feeling like a time-traveller lost between the present, the distant past or some dim future. To me, even the beginners in the language school sounded like eloquent orators. I was haunted by schoolboy memories of being expelled from Latin, German and French and sent into the girl's typing class.

If I said 'buenos días' followed by my three words, I would end up buying a kilo of tomatoes instead of a cucumber and leave with a face as red as the produce. Worse still, when we first met, Pilar spoke no English and the only way that we could talk to each other was by finding verses in our different language versions of the Bible and pointing at them.

Now, I had heard the stories of missionaries who allegedly woke up one morning speaking in the tongue of the local Orinoco tribes so with more frustration than faith I put this to the test and prayed.

Needless to say, nothing happened.
Or did it? Because later that day and for the first time I could actually distinguish what people were saying. Instead of a waterfall of sound, I could hear individual words. When a man said, "Quiero un café" and got a coffee, I repeated what I had heard and I got a coffee as well. Three months later I spoke to a group for a full twenty minutes.

People were very kind and some even said that they understood. We smile but there are times when a really wild, it has to be God-or-bust kind of prayer is all you have left.

And at that point it is all that is needed.
WHY I HAVE STOPPED READING THE BIBLE

Last week I was asked to talk for 15 minutes to a small group about how I read the Bible. The truth is that I have long since stopped reading the Bible. I said so and an embarrassed silence followed. Women looked away, the men looked down. The leader looked annoyed.

The other half of the truth is that these days I allow the Bible to read me and I listen. This is a very different experience indeed and if you will let me, I will tell you what we talked about.

For almost 30 years, I have read one Psalm every day because of the unique way the Psalms slowly draw prayer and worship from my soul. I like to add a chapter of Proverbs, for example for today June 20 I opened chapter 20 and found the timeless wisdom that I certainly need more than ever before.
After worship and wisdom, I turn to the word of God and to avoid getting stuck in the books that do not appeal to me personally, I vary my spiritual diet, like this:

On Monday I read a chapter or two of Bible history beginning with Genesis and continuing weekly until I reach Esther.

On Tuesday I read Matthew, Mark and Luke's account of Jesus.

On Wednesday it is epic Poetry and Prose from Job to Song of Songs.

On Thursday I follow John through his gospel, letters and Revelation.

On Friday I go into the prophetic books from Isaiah to Malachi.

On Saturday I open other people's letters from Romans to Jude and read them.

On Sundays Acts shows me what a live church with a mission looks like.

We would not want you to think that we manage to follow this plan every day because sometimes tiredness gets in the way, distractions come and journeys have to be made. Having said that, if all else fails we keep the Word for Today in the bathroom.
WHY I LOVE THE MIDDLE SEAT

Most airline passengers really dislike the uncomfortable ride you get in the middle seat. I am different because I like to sit in the middle. You see, for over 30 years we have been training and equipping leaders, mainly in the developing world. We like to get them going with their vision but we never provide a life-long cushion. For sure, the gospel is free, but to do what the gospel asks you to do for others costs a man everything. So what we do is put together trusting people over here with trusted people over there. I am the man in the middle seat. I make sure that the spenders on my right intentionally honour the givers on my left. I make sure that the givers on my right hand don't get taken in by the big talkers on my left hand. I used to be one man in one place doing one thing, but by joining hands with the man on the right and the lady on the left I become the con-du-it which means they can-do-it. I have seen the world change for the better one person at a time and this is what I know: Someone is looking for you as much as you are looking for them. Two together can make history but allow me to be in the middle, please.
WHY INTELLIGENCE IS LIKE A DIAMOND

Twenty years ago I watched as a young man, who had been one of my most envisioned and passionate students in the very first School of Mission, was sidelined for church leadership because one or two others were quietly considered to be more intelligent. He took the disappointment well and the disappointment took him closer to God. Over the years the ones who were chosen were also noticed by others and they moved on. Now, intelligence is always thought to be a measure of the intellect but I have learned that like a diamond, intelligence has many faces. My friend did what he could do: he maintained his integrity, he never complained and he took time to sharpen his intellectual intelligence. However, in silence, God also did what only he can do and caused this young man to grow in spiritual, prophetic and leadership intelligence which made him the perfect choice to carry the responsibility that he had surrendered to God's will all those years before. You see, there is more than one way to be clever, in fact, just one way is never enough.
WHY JESUS WALKED ON THE WATER

First of all, you need to know that the fish that Peter caught for a living in the Sea of Galilee are Tilapia. Except on those occasions when he caught nothing at all, but that is another story altogether. We were listening, well, eavesdropping really, on a tour guide who was explaining the stories of Peter to a group of Russians who were visiting the ruins of Capernaum. The guide was finding the language difficult and in the end, not being able to find or explain the Russian word for Tilapia, he decided instead to say the fish were - piranhas. They knew that word. Well, of course, thinking about it, this makes perfect sense. With piranhas in the Sea of Galilee Jesus would obviously walk on the water, rather than swim or splash his way across. Similarly, this explains the fear that Peter experienced when he stepped out of the boat and walked a short distance on the water before falling under the waves and straight into the realm of the piranhas. Who would not cry out, "Lord, save me?" Finally, we now know why the other disciples were so reluctant to get out of the boat. We smiled and we hope that you will as well. However, we did not put our feet in the water. Just in case.
WHY WE UNFURLED THE WHITE FLAG

They called us illegal. They called us illegitimate. Men who occupied pulpits on Sunday, called us 'Mongrel Ministries' on Monday because of our way of collecting some of the misfits in churches to see if Jesus could make disciples of them. It was all true, and the preachers were right.

One nationally known pastor telephoned and asked to visit me the next morning. This made me think that having offended the church leaders in my city, the whole nation was now in uproar.

That night I unfurled the white flag. I practised explaining my reasons for calling it a day, and started looking for jobs in the newspaper.

Philip Vogel, who is now 81, came early. He looked around, heard the story, met the misfits for mission, and then gave me his considered opinion: that God was present.
That being so, Philip was staying and stay he did, and for years.

All thought of surrender other than to God, instantly evaporated and we burned our bridges behind us together with the white flag.

Ignominious beginnings indeed for a movement of the grace of God that has stood the test of time. Yet how near we came to quitting on that day twenty five years ago. It felt just like the old Western films when John Wayne and the US Cavalry ride to the rescue at the last minute.

In fact just the one man sent by God and God riding with him was more than enough.
WINSTON CHURCHILL’S BLACK DOG

Winston Churchill called it his black dog. It was his way of handling the ever-present gloomy feelings that followed at his heel for a lifetime, yet millions would never have guessed this from his words.

The dog that has kept me company for a lifetime is nearly as black as his, and although optimism may not be exactly me by nature, or you either, nevertheless we can still choose to be optimistic. We tell no lies. We don't fool ourselves and it is not hypocrisy.

With God's help and with good people listening to us and keeping us balanced we can keep a grip on our mind, control our tongue and make positive decisions. When we deliberately speak words that are hope-full and not hope-less it is only reasonable to expect the best outcome.

Now, I have just told that miserable dog of mine to go away. Why don't you do the same?
WOMEN, WHO NEEDS THEM?

My first pastor would often say that he had nothing against women in roles of leadership. He was just pro-men.

In my organisation most of the 'men' that I looked out for, advertised for, prayed for and hoped would come in fact turned out to be women.

They came ready-made with God's gifts, skills and with extraordinary abilities to care, to suffer and to go that second or third mile with difficult men like me. So, will I celebrate International Women's Day once a year? No, I will not.

What I will do is celebrate my wife, my daughter and my lady colleagues around the world every day of the year.

Who needs them?

I do and many more like them.
YES, IT'S APPLAUSE AND IT'S FOR YOU

I am a volunteer, everyone in DCI around the world is a volunteer. We pay no salaries, no expenses, pay for no buildings, cars or pensions.

It's been like this for 30 years now. I can tell you for sure that we could never have achieved even a tiny fraction of what has been done for the lost, the last and the least of the world without our incredible, amazing men and women volunteers of all ages, colours and backgrounds.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have gone the second, third and fourth miles for Jesus and for us with no reward other than God's smile and our hugely insufficient thank-you's.

Today, for volunteers everywhere it's applause, shouts, whistles, chocolates, high fives and hugs all round.
YOU. THE GREATEST STORY NEVER TOLD

We grew up on stories, how many of you would not go to sleep without a story being read to us. Now our children do the same to us. Libraries are favourite places, and Amazon sells Kindles by the million so we can take all our stories with us. The holy grail of the advertising industry is to compress a fairy story into thirty unforgettable seconds on TV that sends us running to the shops. Jesus is never without a story, in fact, he uses everything from a lady sweeping the house to collapsing buildings to get people like me and you to stop, listen and learn.

Now seriously, there is no story like yours and no-one knows it better than you do. Nobody can tell the tale with more feeling than you can. Facebook, Blogger and You Tube are two clicks away with an audience that can't wait for something new.

But hey - don't wait for an invitation to tell your story, begin with me because when it comes to a story, I am all ears. Write me soon please.
YOUR MOVE I THINK

In my childhood home, the subject was never mentioned and names were not so much as breathed. Not once.

Where did my mother come from?

Who was she?

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

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

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

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

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

Don't you think that sometimes God is waiting for us to make the next move before it becomes his turn to show us what he can do.
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The final edition of the book with 365 Minutes, one for each day of the year, will be published later in 2015.

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