



MY PREVIOUS LIFE

There is really very little resemblance between my present life and the life I thought I would be living now. I began my adult life as a student at St Thomas' Hospital, London, studying surgery and anaesthetics, and went on to become an operating department practitioner. I assumed I would continue to pursue a career in medicine, but God had other plans. The world I occupied then is completely different to the one I occupy now, but nevertheless I learned some valuable lessons – not least the ability to react quickly in situations. When a patient goes into cardiac arrest you have to react immediately. When someone points a gun at you, intending to pull the trigger, you must also react immediately. If you have to think about dodging a bullet, it has already hit you. On the streets of Baghdad, my medical training has probably been more use to me than my theological training at Cambridge.

It was while working and training at St Thomas' that God called me and set me on the path that eventually led me to Iraq. One night I was on call to deal with any cardiac emergencies as part of the hospital's Crash Team and stepped outside for a while to get some fresh air and to pray in the hospital

grounds. I looked across the river Thames towards Big Ben on the opposite bank. I was thrilled to be at St Thomas' and I remember thanking the Almighty that I had successfully completed my training. I was fortunate to be doing the very thing I had always wanted to do in the very hospital where I had always wanted to work. I asked God what should be the next step in my life. Like a thunderbolt the answer came to me, but it wasn't the one I was expecting. I felt very strongly that He wanted me to offer myself for service in the Church of England.

Remarkably, as a child of ten I had said that I wanted to be an anaesthetist and a priest. But that was then and this was now. I no longer wanted to be a priest; I was enjoying my work at St Thomas' too much to give it up. Yet I knew, without a doubt, that God had spoken to me. For a few hours I struggled with His words, but eventually gave in and decided that obeying His will would be best. As I did, I was immediately aware of the presence and glory of God in a way I had never known before. As I returned to the operating theatre in the early hours of the morning, the Lord was there. When my shift ended and I went home, God was there also. He was at St Mark's Kennington where I went to church, in the Christian Union at work and at my home group. I felt so acutely aware of God's presence all the time, in fact, that I must have appeared rather strange to my friends. A few of them told me as much!

One friend who accepted me as I was, however, and never ceased to encourage me was Malcolm Matthew. We spent a lot of time together. Malcolm looked out for me, on one occasion coming to the hospital and forcing me to go home with him,

knowing I had worked for forty-five hours straight without a break! Each Sunday he and I would take patients to the hospital chapel and afterwards we would go on to Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park where I would take my turn to preach. It was a fertile training ground for later in life when I would frequently be called upon to speak in public.

More than twenty years later Malcolm is a consultant anaesthetist at King's College Hospital in London. He is still a member of the Territorial Army, as he was back then, and has often been in Iraq at the same time as me. Malcolm and his wife, Alison, are godparents to our eldest son, Josiah, and he remains one of my closest and longest-standing friends in life. Added to this, Alison and my wife, Caroline, are the closest of friends. Our friendship has been a double blessing: I have a friend who understands what it means to live out one's faith under fire – and we each have a wife who knows what it means to have a husband with such a calling.

Fulfilled ambition

Whilst continuing to work at St Thomas', I commenced a long, slow journey towards ordination. Eventually I attended a selection conference to see if I was the right type of person to be trained for ordination, and I was selected and offered a place at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, to study theology.

I began to prepare studiously for this next step. I remember trying to learn Greek while still working at the hospital! In the end I decided to take a few months' break before moving to Cambridge, intending to spend some time praying in a monastery, but first I wanted to visit the Kingdom Faith Bible

week to hear Colin Urquhart speak. Colin, himself a former Anglican priest, had made a significant impact on the life of St Mark's Kennington. I volunteered to serve in the clinic on site where several thousand people would be camping. I had a wonderful week there and our team saw a number of miracles take place in the clinic. It was an inspiring experience and I looked forward to what God might do next.

But for all my excitement about moving into training for ordination, I had one regret, perhaps better described as an unfulfilled ambition. I had not managed to achieve the one thing I had always wanted to do at St Thomas' – to eventually run the Crash Team. I had been called to assist them on many occasions, and had even volunteered for unpaid duties to gain more experience, but it was my ambition one day to head up the team. God, in His graciousness, decided to lend me a hand.

This was in the days before mobile phones. I remember calling home to speak to my mother, as I usually did, and she sounded frantic. She told me she had been desperately trying to get in contact with me for two days. When I asked why, she told me that St Thomas' Hospital had been trying to call me and urgently wanted me to contact them. When I called the hospital I discovered, to my astonishment, that they were having some serious problems in the cardiac emergency unit and had been forced to suspend most of the Crash Team. They asked if I would be willing to come back and run the team until they were able to resolve the problem. I didn't need to think about it – I said yes immediately. I was being given the chance to fulfil my ambition! I returned to St Thomas' for several months and experienced the most wonderful days of

my entire medical career.

I ran the Crash Team right up until the day before I was due to begin my studies at Cambridge. The next day my life changed radically. I went from the hospital corridors, where my day was spent literally running from one crisis to the next, to the corridors of learning where I was engaged in studying and more studying! At first I felt very much out of my depth. Previously I had known what I was doing and I was good at my job. Now I suddenly felt very unskilled. Worse than that, before I had enjoyed a constant awareness of God's presence. Now I felt as though I had stepped into a spiritual desert. From this point on God seemed strangely remote – not only to me but to many of my fellow students. This is not an uncommon experience. My friend and fellow Canon, J John, told me that for him seminary was more like a cemetery! For many, theological training involved periods of real doubt. I thank God that, despite my difficulties, doubt was never something I experienced then (or at any time, for that matter).

An unexpected turn

Despite my training at Cambridge being mentally and spiritually taxing, I was still enjoying my time there. It challenged me to think deeply about many issues I had previously dismissed as irrelevant and it ultimately taught me that when God seems distant, He is actually very near. But in my second year a new challenge presented itself. I became very unwell, noticing that my coordination was bad, and I frequently felt dreadful. My energy levels were constantly low and I developed serious neurological symptoms. I was eventually admitted to

Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, but after a short time there and several examinations the doctors told me there was nothing wrong with me. I'm not sure how they reached this conclusion, as I left the hospital barely able to walk! But I was taken back to Ridley Hall and cared for in the Principal's lodge. After several days I was taken home to my parents' house where I was confined to bed until the next term began three months later.

I returned to Cambridge to recommence my studies, but still felt ill and worked from my bed much of the time. In order to attend lectures I had to be wheeled around in a wheelchair. But I was determined to keep studying, despite these difficulties. I continued to be observed by my doctors and was eventually diagnosed with myalgic encephalitis (ME), also known as "chronic fatigue syndrome".

In all I spent four years at Cambridge, with part of it spent in Jerusalem studying Judaism. Apart from one period of twelve months when I was too ill to do anything, I would return to St Thomas' during my vacations and work there. I was paid locum rates for this work, which meant I earned as much in one year as I would have done if I'd been working there full time. I often thought I must be the best-paid student in the country!

It was during my time at Cambridge that the foundations for my later work in the Middle East were laid. Judaism became my main area of interest. I studied under Professor Nicholas de Lange. He was not only a Hebraic scholar but also a Reform (modern) Rabbi. To this day I consider him to be the most significant and influential lecturer I had at Cambridge. I also began visiting the Orthodox Synagogue in Cambridge

where I learned a great deal – not least the Orthodox Jewish ways of worship, interwoven with centuries-old prayers. At no time did I feel that my own faith was challenged in any way; in fact it just grew stronger.

My journey into reconciliation

Then an event occurred that would be pivotal in shaping the rest of my life. The university's Christian Union (CICCU) was holding its major triennial mission and it decided to invite Jews for Jesus, a major evangelical organization that targeted Jews, to take part. The university's Jewish students were in uproar – so much so that one Jewish newspaper in London ran the headline, "Holy War in Cambridge". Since I was the only Christian anyone knew who went to both the Synagogue and the Jewish Society as well as the Christian Union, I was asked to mediate. I didn't realize it at the time, but God was positioning me for a particular service to Him and this was the beginning of a lifelong ministry of reconciliation. I spent many hours discussing the issues with both CICCU and the Jewish Society. It helped me understand that, above all else, people in conflict need to learn to listen to each other. In the end there was no compromise offered from either side and the event still went ahead, but subsequently I and some other students formed a society called Cambridge University Jews and Christians (CUJAC) in an effort to encourage peace and mutual understanding. I was appointed as its first President and within a short while the society became a major force for reconciliation between Jews and Christians.

I was amazed at how God took this small step of faith

and expanded it into something much larger. As CUJAC's first President, I found myself playing an increasing role in reconciliation in the UK and beyond. Three people were significant in my life at this time and instrumental during these early stages. Paul Mendel, who at the time was Deputy Director of the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), was a great advisor and became a good friend. With his assistance CUJAC was soon a branch of CCJ. Then there was Sir Sigmund Sternberg, who was a member of the CCJ committee, but also the Chair of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). The third person was Dr Elizabeth Maxwell, a great scholar of Jewish-Christian relations and the wife of Robert Maxwell, the infamous owner of the Mirror Group newspapers. Throughout the rest of my student days in Cambridge these people remained very important to me.

It was not long before Sir Sigmund got me involved with the work of ICCJ. Headquartered in Germany, this was the body that brought together all the national branches of CCJ from around the world, and it wielded considerable influence. Every year ICCJ held a major international conference hosted by a different nation and this was always preceded by a conference for its Young Leadership Section (YLS), geared towards those under thirty-five years of age. I remember receiving a desperate phone call only a matter of weeks before this conference, asking me if I would help to organize it – even though I had never been to one before! I agreed and ended up organizing almost everything. There were representatives from more than twenty countries. Near to the end of the conference there was the usual annual general meeting which elected the board of the YLS. I decided to put myself forward

as a candidate and, to my surprise, I was not just elected to the board but invited to be its President. It was a position that afforded me a lot of influence and proved to be significant during the early years of my ordained life, since I didn't hold the post just for one year (like most of my predecessors) but was re-elected each year for five years.

“Take risks, not care”

When I first went to Israel in 1988 my expenses were paid by two further people who became friends: the late Duke of Devonshire, who was the patron of CUJAC, and the Jewish philanthropist Sidney Corob CBE. Both were deeply involved in Jewish-Christian relations and both became very important to me. Between them they not only paid for all my studies in Jerusalem (at the Hebrew University and then at an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish seminary) but all my subsequent visits to Israel as well. I found it strange that a young seminarian like me should become so familiar with the great and the good.

It was an invitation from Sidney Corob to a function at one of his bases in Mayfair that led to my first meeting with the man who would become my mentor in life: Lord Donald Coggan, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the ICCJ. I had heard him lecture many times, but had never met him personally. We immediately became friends. At the time I had no idea just how significant he would become to me. As we left the meeting that day, I walked down the road a little way with him before saying goodbye. As we parted he hugged me warmly (as was his custom) and said the words that would become my motto in life: “Take risks, not

care.” That phrase embedded itself in my spirit and I have sought to follow his advice ever since.

Because of my ill health, my time at Cambridge was extended by one year so that I could complete my studies. Increasingly I spent my time studying in Israel, paid for by my friends. My time in Jerusalem added to the foundations already laid for what was to come. I learned a great deal about Judaism and indeed the Hebrew language, and also realized I needed to learn about Eastern Christianity and Islam – a journey that continues to this day. One day, my Ultra-Orthodox rabbi told me I needed to go and meet a certain lady. It surprised me that such a conservative rabbi should tell me to go and meet with a woman – that was unusual in itself – but even more surprising was the fact that she was a Christian who led a worship centre based in her home in East Jerusalem. I attended one of her services and it was unlike anything I’d experienced before. I could only describe her as being very large and very Pentecostal! Her name was Ruth Helfin and I have often since referred to her as the most frightening woman I’ve ever met.

Ruth preached powerfully and loudly, and sang a lot. I was slightly puzzled as to why the rabbi thought I should meet her, but God used her to speak into my life. At the end of the service Ruth singled me out and began prophesying over me. She said that my calling was to work for peace in the Middle East. At the time I presumed that this meant a life spent in Israel. In the years that followed, when I was working there, I often recalled her words and knew that they had been fulfilled. Now that I am based in Iraq much of the time, I think about her words even more. I only met Ruth three times in total, but

each time God used her to impact my life powerfully.

When I returned to England it was time to look for a parish in which to serve my curacy. My health continued to be problematic and although I was able to function – just – I experienced many ups and downs. The Bishop of Southwark, Ronald Bowlby, and his suffragan in Kingston, Peter Selby, were both very supportive. Bishop Peter very much wanted me to go to St Mark’s Battersea Rise. Though they raised serious questions about my health during my interview there, I was eventually offered the job. I left Cambridge in June 1990, returned to Jerusalem for a couple of months, and was ordained at the end of September that year in Southwark Cathedral. I greatly enjoyed my three-year curacy and learned much from the vicar, Paul Perkin, about how to run a church in a professional manner and get things done. Friday was my day off, in theory, but I frequently returned to St Thomas’ on a voluntary basis to work as an assistant in Anaesthetics. I didn’t imagine there were many curates doing anaesthetics on the side! I have never been one for taking much time off.

In addition to my various duties as a curate I continued to fulfil many diverse duties in the ICCJ. As well as making trips to the ICCJ’s headquarters in Heppenheim, Germany, to spend time with Lord Coggan, I also visited CCJ bases in a number of other countries and was even granted regular audiences with Pope John Paul II as the Vatican was preparing to recognize the State of Israel in 1993. I admired the Pope and he became a genuine friend. Looking back on my curacy, I am acutely aware of the graciousness of my vicar, Paul Perkin. Few vicars would have allowed their curates to do the things I did!

It was near the end of my first year at St Mark's, while I was preaching at the Sunday evening service, that I spotted someone from the pulpit I had not seen before. She was young and beautiful and I confess that in the midst of my sermon I thought, "I like what I see!" After the service I went and talked to her. She told me she had just moved to St Mark's from a church in the City of London. At the time I was busy organizing a mission at the church with J. John, so I asked her if she would like to help. I didn't really know anything about her, but this would give me an excuse to meet with her again! I was delighted when she agreed. I soon discovered that her name was Caroline and that she was a lawyer in the City. In a matter of days we fell in love with each other and began a relationship.

The next step

Just six weeks later I took Caroline to Cambridge and we went punting on the Cam. Somewhere between Clare College and Kings I asked her to marry me. I had decided several years before that if I ever proposed to anyone, it would be at that very spot. Being a lawyer, Caroline's immediate response was, "Maybe"! But a few moments later she said, "Yes", and from the end of the punt I threw her the ring I'd had made for her. Later we travelled down to Hampshire to visit her family so I could ask her father's permission for us to get married. He agreed, though he commented that it was happening much sooner than he'd expected. Ten months later we were married by Lord Coggan in a remote little church near the farm where Caroline grew up. We spent part of our honeymoon in the

Golan Heights and part of it in Jerusalem where I arranged a party so that Caroline could meet all my friends. We had no idea what our life together would be like. Already involved intimately in inter-religious affairs, I had every intention of maintaining this "interest", but assumed my life would primarily be spent as a cleric back in England.

Marriage has a way of exposing a person's true nature and I soon learned that I was quite a strange, even difficult, person. I well remember one day getting annoyed and telling Caroline that she was cutting the carrots wrong. I told her that in our house we always cut them lengthways! Fortunately, the woman I married is a wonderful person and utterly patient. Instead of becoming irritated by my idiosyncrasies, she was always understanding and willing to teach me how to improve my odd ways! Many years later she continues to do so.

Towards the end of my curacy, in 1993, my archdeacon, David Gerrard, suggested I should put myself forward for a position at a nearby church in Clapham: the Church of the Ascension, Balham Hill. The congregation there was seriously dwindling and the idea was to do a church plant or "graft" with people coming from St Mark's Battersea and Holy Trinity Brompton to inject fresh life and energy. One other person being considered for the role was the curate of John Sentamu, the current Archbishop of York, who at the time was a vicar in nearby Tulse Hill. I was offered the job and soon Caroline and I were moving a mile up the road to the biggest vicarage I had ever seen.

The new church was a real challenge. We were introducing a group of around fifty young professional people into a small congregation consisting mainly of elderly, working-class

and black people. But at the same time it was a wonderful experience and I loved the people there. It provided me with another opportunity to hone my skills as a reconciler. Our worship was very broad: we always started Sunday morning with a traditional Anglican Eucharist, while in the evening the service was informal and very much in the Charismatic tradition. Despite the very different focus of each service, we enjoyed great unity. The church grew and I became involved in every aspect of community life, from community centres to local schools to local politics, often finding myself being a member of or chairing committees.

I continued to be very involved with Jewish–Christian relations and travelled internationally to engage with various religious leaders on behalf of the ICCJ, increasingly working closely with the Vatican. I met regularly with Pope John Paul II and managed to take Caroline to meet him on one occasion. In August 1996 our first child, Josiah, was born. I was delighted that he was delivered at St Thomas’ Hospital where I had trained and worked. Josiah was baptized in early December by Lord Coggan in a truly wonderful, memorable service.

During this time my involvement with the local council increased. Council-related meetings would often be held in our vicarage and eventually I was asked if I would stand for Wandsworth Council. I discussed the matter at length with our church leaders. The great majority, though not all, were in favour of me standing. In fact, most people locally seemed to approve of the idea of their vicar standing for elected office. Polling day arrived and I did a little canvassing in the evening before going to the town hall to wait for the results.

To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t that bothered whether I won or not – but my pile of votes got bigger and bigger and when the final results were announced, I had won my council seat with a very large majority.

The ward included my parish and two others. I had to make it clear to everyone that in these other parishes I was only concerned with council and not church work. I was given specific responsibility for social services and quickly discovered that much of politics has to do with making compromises. There were many times when I disagreed with decisions that were being made. On one occasion I felt so passionately about an issue I was voting against that I told my colleagues I would be forced to resign from my role of leading social services. On that occasion the decision was reversed and I remained.

There are big differences between local and central government, but many principles can be transferred from one to the other. Little did I know how useful this experience would prove to be in the future. Not least, I learned a great deal about how to maintain your faith in the face of opposition and how to be led by the Holy Spirit through the metaphorical fire. God was preparing me for the next phase of my life.