

A talk by Rev'd Stella Halmshaw at St Paul's Church September 2023

Your new vicar, my daughter Caroline, has asked me to share with you something of my journey to faith. I thought I would begin in 1980 when we were having breakfast in the kitchen, and my announcement that I was going to church, caused Caroline to burst into tears! The reason for those tears was that she and her brother and sister had all been brought up outside the church and were brought up to think the church was anti-life, oppressive and judgemental. Hence Caroline's tears. She told me later that she had been afraid life would no longer be fun. I have to be honest, I didn't either! I think the first honest prayer I said to Jesus was "*Lord, I will follow you, but I think you're a killjoy.*"

So, why *did* I become a Christian? When I look back on my life until that day in 1980, what had led me to that place? The short answer is, that I lived through many of the trends of the twentieth century, and found they led nowhere, only to emptiness. I'm going to pick out two main ones: the Sexual Revolution (which began in the 1960s) and Turning to the East and Individualism.

I loved the 1960s. Malcolm and I went to see the musical *Hair* twice! "*It's the dawning of the age of Aquarius, when peace shall rule the planets and love shall rule the stars.*" I loved Carnaby Street, the Beatles, new fashions, encounter groups, freedom! In a "Know Yourself" group I drew a picture of everything I found oppressive: a line of washing, a pointing, judgemental picture and of course, a church. After all, the age of Pisces was over, the repressive rule of Christ. Some of it was good, the marches for peace, Joan Baez singing with such compassion for the suffering people of the earth. The passion for social justice. But if anything goes, then why not have fun? Sex was seen, as it is now, as a leisure activity, no commitment needed, or horrors, no procreation. So, free love was in and a year in a commune followed. We could grow vegetables, make love with whoever, but the failures in relationships, in love and harmony were glaring. Someone there remarked "*How did the monasteries manage it?*" I did not know, as I know now, that we were all part of the rebellion against God. In the end that path ended in disillusion and sadness. Malcom and I survived with help, but a baby conceived in that time did not. It took years of healing prayers to come to terms and receive forgiveness for that abortion.

Then, I did what so many did and are still doing. I turned to the East. I sought inner peace. T.M. then Buddhist meditation mindfulness. There were moments of peace and unity, with all things flowing through me. But I ended up in a very dark place indeed, an impersonal void where I needed the help of other human beings. It ended where I gazed at a tree using mindfulness and a thought came "*So what? What if I achieve this inner bliss, who will it help?*" I saw so clearly that the choices I had made had hurt my family and I knew I had to reach out to others; not in self-fulfilment, but with self-denial. Now who had said that?

It was then, after I was shown the joy of going out of myself into the world and towards others, that a leaflet came through the door. A Third World Action Group. I loved it! If I had known then that it was Christ calling to me, I would never have gone. But it was through that group and the love and openness shown to me that I at last decided to explore the rejected and despised Christian faith with the Priest who led it. I did not tell my family. I had told him I had no faith in God, nothing. After the third or so session, he gave me a directive. *"I want you to go home and read the Gospel of Mark."* I have no adequate words to describe that encounter with Jesus Christ.

Funnily enough, something came to me out of nowhere. *"That one face, far from vanish rather grows ... becomes my universe that feels and knows."* Whose face I had wondered? It was Him! I sensed I had hit rock bottom reality. I fell in love with Him but what would that mean? I had no idea. In the end, I knew I would have to re-enter the church I had despised. Hence Caroline's tears that morning.

I will end with another scene, a few weeks later. I am sitting in the church full of doubts wondering whether I could ever commit myself to this. The Priest lifts up the chalice. *"This is my blood of the new Covenant shed for you."* An enormous love seems to reach me, and I knew Jesus was offering me Communion, with Himself and everyone else. I knew that my "yes" to this and His church, was to get up out of my seat and take the bread and wine from his hands.

So began my journey with Him, very shaky and full of doubts. But He had opened to me His heart of love and called me to His feast where none are left behind, into the life of His all-encompassing love. Years later Caroline and I sat in the community of Taizé. I read there my favourite quote from its founder Brother Roger. *"The daily aspiration of my brothers and myself is for every person to discover Christ. Not Christ taken in isolation but the Christ of communion, present in fullness in that mystery of Communion with His Body the Church. How our weary stricken world needs this hope, this joy."*

Who would have thought that Caroline and I would be standing here with you all this morning? Some stories are stranger than fiction!