

Spirit of the Flame - 70 days following the Olympic Torch



DAY 1

Today marks the start of the Olympic Torch arriving in the UK and starting its journey from Lands End, Cornwall, around the UK, visiting Dublin, Ireland, and finishing up at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games on 27 July.

It is symbolic that the torch has three sides. This represents the three times the Olympic Games has been in the UK. The torch will be sweeping the nation, reaching within 10 miles of 95% of the population. 8000 miles with 8000 runners, and lots of spectators along the way.

I can't help but wonder about the symbolism and how we could be doing something equally symbolic, but even more significant.

The torch has three sides; our God has three aspects, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The flame is permanently lit, as it travels across the British Isles. The Holy Spirit is represented by a flame.

What if every church, every home, every person, prayed for the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to sweep our nations? What if, for 70 days, we devoted ourselves to the search for the presence of God?

If the followers of Jesus met together and prayed for 10 days, after the ascension of Jesus, and then the power of God was manifest by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and 3000 were converted by the speech of one man, what could God do through us if we made ourselves available to His presence in our lives?

I invite you all to pray for the presence of God to be in your lives, and share this with your friends.

But be ready for the power of God to work in your life.

Are you ready?

Let's pray!



DAY 2

The Olympic torch moved through Devon today. I lived in Devon as a child. As a family we were the first to move into Broomhill House, a youth /conference centre bought by the South England Conference following a special offering at an SEC church session.

It was a wonderful place to be as a primary school aged child. Open spaces, trees to climb, wildlife to enjoy.

There were about a dozen American student missionaries that stayed at the Exeter church, and as there was one family with kids my age, we enjoyed even more their visit.

Many seemed to play the guitar, and one, Steve Dubose, wrote a song about Devon. The words were something like, "Devon, dresses in your spring fashion, you look so fresh and alive, released from winters cold hands."

The sense of new life in the fields of Devon in springtime for me is memorable. And it is this emerging new life that we can experience now, as we pray during the tour of the UK and Ireland of the Olympic Flame.

May the presence of God give you newness of life, now, and as God fulfils His promises in the future. Keep praying and seeking God with your whole heart (Jeremiah 29:13).



DAY 3

Controversy and debate today with the Olympic torches. Seems some runners are selling them on eBay, even before they have run with them. One is reported to have sold for £145k!

The debate seems to be over whether it is right that someone who is a runner, who has the chance to buy their torch for £215 should be allowed to sell the torch, with the potential of making money. The argument against this is based on the idea that running with the torch is their experience, their torch, so

they should not be able to share the experience.

During the 70 days for the tour of the Olympic torch round the UK and Ireland I am encouraging you to pray for the presence of God to fill your life. That experiencing the abiding communion with the Holy Spirit, your life will be transformed and you will have something to share with others, to share the good news that God loves the whole world and wants to be in relationship with everyone. (John 3:16-17).

Is it right that a torch runner should keep their torch? I look at it like this; the runner has had the experience, and now they can share that experience with someone else.

Is it right that a follower of Jesus Christ should keep the secret about Jesus? I look at it like this; the follower has the experience of the presence of God, and now they can share the experience of Jesus with everyone else.

Pray with me. Seek God with all your heart. Experience the presence of God. Share your experience.



DAY 4

The Olympic Torch continues its journey. 8000 miles with 8000 torch bearers. I am a watcher of sequences. I like this sequence. Linked to this is the 8.8 million kilometres Evelyn Johnson flew in her lifetime.

She died on 10 May aged 102. That is a milestone in itself, but she racked up 57,635.4 hours of flying (the record for a woman, second longest in history). She trained over 5000 pilots, and at 92 became the worlds oldest flight instructor.

At 101 she said, "I don't know if anybody loves it [flying] more than I do.... I've flown that long because God has been kind as to let me."

[[Quoted from Time Magazine May 28, 2012, page 11]]

An unknown lady to most of the world, but she prepared so many pilots, who flew so many planes, which carried so many passengers, which benefitted so many lives. An unknown lady to most of the world!

That sounds like you and me; an unknown person to most of the world. But what if we dared to make a difference? What if we sought the presence of God so much that we were moved to share Jesus with others; 8, 18, 88, over 8000?

I don't know who you are. Who will read this shared thought, but I want you to know that I prayed for you today.

Join with me in seeking the presence of God. Your future depends on it. Someone else's future may depend on it too.

When you get the chance to share your faith think on this, you have been given time in your life to seek God because God has been so kind as to let you.



DAY 5

Have you ever felt like your connection with God was slipping out of your grasp? Then try connecting with God another way.

Ben Fox hobbled and hopped along the main street in Royal Wootton Bassett today. Only having one leg, Ben had to use a crutch to support himself, while carrying the Olympic Torch. At times along the 300m stretch, he had to change hands to hold the torch as it was slipping from his grip. He paused, and even shook hands with some supporting onlookers.

To see the footage and report visit
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18160608>

During the 70 days of the Olympic Torch traveling across the UK and Ireland, I am inviting you to join me in seeking the presence of God, and in calling on God to send His power into our lives and our communities. The Olympic Torch may have a flame, but we have the metaphoric flame of God, the Holy Spirit.

I can't help but think of how Ben's experience is like my spiritual life. I try my best at holding God high, but sometimes it seems like it is slipping through my hands. That is when I find I have to try something new. Seek God in another way. Change things so I can keep my grip on God.

Sometimes I have to pause. Sometimes I have to benefit from the support of others. But at all times, my purpose is to continue my life journey with the presence of God. Never letting go.

If you feel like God is slipping from your grasp or reach, try something new. Find a new time. Try reading the Gospels again, maybe starting with the Gospel of Mark, it's the shortest! Find a new location. Get out in nature. Don't answer the phone while you are seeking God's presence. Tighten your grip on God.



DAY 6

Leaving Cheltenham today, the Olympic Torch arcs round to Worcester, before heading off to Cardiff tomorrow. But it's not just the large towns and cities the torch will visit. Along the 8000 miles of journey through the UK and Ireland, the torch will also meander through some quaint villages, communities smaller than some housing estates in some cities.

It is one small village I want to consider now. Kingston Bagpuize is an Oxfordshire village, insignificant to me (and the Olympic Torch as it will not visit here), laying about 10 miles south-west of Oxford. But tonight 500 of the villagers will fill a cinema in Leicester Square, London, to watch a film they made.

I understand that a local writer had the idea of the village making a film. So they did. They raised the £800k to make it, starred in it themselves, offered locations free of charge, and on one night the Women's Institute made 1000 fairy cakes to feed the production team and "stars".

"Tortoise in Love" is a love story, a slow love story, because nothing happens fast in this village.

I have no idea if I will ever see the film, or if the critics will encourage viewers to flock to see it. What I do know is this small "insignificant" group of villagers, took an idea, made it their own, made it happen, and have made their contribution to the British film industry.

How insignificant do you feel? During the 70 days the Olympic flame tours round the UK and Ireland, you are invited to seek the presence of God, and to share your experience with others. You may feel like one individual at Uni, or one small worshiping group, or even a member of a large church in an even larger, engulfing, community, but you have the chance to do as these villagers did.

It is in seeking God, remaining in a time and place with the presence of God, that we can make a wider impression. The villagers of Kingston Bagpuize could have given up. After all it took them 3 years to get this far. But they have persisted to the end. They ignored their insignificance.

It is time to ignore your insignificance, after all, you are significant to God. Seek God with patience and persistence. Band together with others to ignore your corporate insignificance. It is in doing this, in investing time, finances, and other resources, that we can achieve. Just like this film will leave memories with the viewers, our witness of God's love for mankind will leave an impression on our listeners.

You are significant in God's eyes.

Jeremiah 31:3

New Living Translation (NLT)

3 Long ago the Lord said to Israel:

“I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love.
With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself.
(www.biblegateway.com)



DAY 7

Our office has worship every morning. Not long. A song, devotional thought, and a prayer, including any prayer requests, especially from the Adventist Discovery Centre.

Today our talk was by the groundsman, Gary. In a room half full of theologically trained pastors, it might be presumptuous to expect one of these people to always do the preachy bit. I am glad it isn't the case. A bit like how glad I am when on a Sabbath morning, it is not always the highly trained who lead the Bible study discussion. Others have things to teach pastors too!

It might sound a bit cheesy but Gary's Bible text was about gardening. Well, about a person planting the smallest of seeds, and it growing into the largest of garden plants. ((Mark 8:30-32)).

Gary's train of thought went something like this:

We may not notice the small things, or even they may become an irritation, but if we care for the small things, they can grow into a big delight.

He told a story of an apprentice who once worked with him. The lad was the son of an Anglican vicar. His mother was very active in their church. But the young man felt under pressure to fulfill a role he did not feel happy with. Enter Gary. Gary shared his faith with the young man, in small pieces, continually. One day they were both laid off work. Some time later, Gary happened to bump into the young man, who told Gary that he was now going to church, he had a relationship with God, that Gary had helped him. Not by force feeding him, but by small bite-sized pieces of spiritual reflection.

I thank Gary for sharing his thoughts. It reminds me that I can't experience God all in one go. It's the little moments, continual moments, that progress our relationship with God.

It might seem inconvenient, or irritating, to interrupt our day with so many "God moments", but it is the culmination of tending the moments, that propagates our faith in God, and in the establishment of faith that we grow our relationship with Jesus.

The Olympic Torch has arrived in Wales today. Join with me in praying for those of faith in Wales, that as they seek the presence of God, that they will grow their own faith, and plant some seeds of faith in

other lives.

Happy Sabbath.

Jesus is your destination.



DAY 8

I am an owl, not a lark. I prefer late evenings rather than early mornings.

I read this evening that two ladies in South Wales got up at 4am to get a good vantage point to see the Olympic Torch pass by. Just as well I suppose, as the same BBC report said there were crowds out to watch the 6:30am start in Cardiff, and in Caerphilly there were 25k on the streets, and in Swansea there were 20k on the streets with 10k at the celebration event in Singleton Park.

I will probably end up going to see the Torch pass by, and maybe at more than one location, but I won't be getting up at 4am to see it!

I am an owl, not a lark. Though I will be getting up early tomorrow morning. My wife, Emma, has just left to congregate with over 4000 other cyclists to ride from Clapham Common to Brighton beach, through the night, raising money for the British Heart Foundation.

Emma is riding with her twin sister and her husband, and between them they are aiming to raise £1000. If you feel so moved you can donate at <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/EmmaStickland>

I am very proud of Emma for doing this. And despite her thinking otherwise, I am happy to be getting our kids up at 2am, bundling them in a car, and finding a place in the crowd for their arrival in Brighton.

I am an owl, not a lark. I also heard this evening of someone who gets up at 5am every day to do 30 mins of Bible study. Not the only person I am sure. But not the time of day that I like to get up.

I am an owl, not a lark. So here's the thought; two women get up at 4am in Wales to see the Olympic Torch, I get up at 2am to support my wife on a sponsored night bike ride, others get up at 5am to study their Bible. Actually the time of day doesn't matter, what matters is what you expect by doing something at that time of day.

I am an owl, not a lark. I am not going to prescribe to you a time of day better than any other for you to seek the presence of God, but I am going to suggest to you that when you do seek the presence of God, expect to find Him. It's the expectation, not the time of day, that makes the difference.

What are you expecting when you skip time with God, when you give only a few distracted minutes to God, when you neglect to linger in your reading of the Bible for the presence of God to help you work things out?

I am an owl, not a lark. Maybe it's time for me to turn off Facebook and expect something amazing in the presence of God!



DAY 9

I got the kids up early this morning, and drove part of the route my wife was cycling on the British Heart Foundation London to Brighton Night Bike Ride. From about 5am we rolled along in the car, mingling with, well at times maybe more like we were engulfed by, the cyclists. If you want to face something very irritating, try driving behind a couple of hundred cyclists at dawn, all with their red rear lights flashing!

Maybe you have seen them. Red flashing lights, LED ones, that are especially bright if you view them straight on. It's a bit like a freaky hallucination . It makes you quite giddy.

As a surprise we stopped along the route to encourage my wife. I admire everyone who did this course, as it was so hilly. There were plenty of weary faces at the finish line.

It was there that I noticed my wife's number, 0874. Looked more like the start of a help desk phone number. I imagined cyclists riding behind her contemplating ringing a help line to get support to "keep going, don't stop, you can do it."

This evening I was reading my family a Bible story about Manasseh, a bad king. His father had been a good king, but Manasseh reintroduced idol worship, and practised "sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD..." ((2 Chronicles 33:6 NIV)). He even sacrificed his own sons!

Then he found himself in trouble, exiled from his own land by an invading nation. He was put in shackles; imprisoned. Then he called to God for help.

This is the best bit of the story. God did not hold Manasseh's past against him. Instead, God gave the king another chance. Manasseh was reinstated as king of Israel, and proceeded to tear down the old pagan shrines and restored things as God had requested. Manasseh then lived a prosperous God-respecting reign.

2 Chronicles 33:12

New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

12 In his distress he sought the favour of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors.

Amazing that after all these anti-God things, it is recorded that God was Manasseh's God.

Manasseh was not in the habit of calling the God "08" helpline number; he did not pray to God. But when he realised God was waiting and available to him, when he called, God answered; "the LORD was moved" ((verse 13)).

I am so glad that there is nothing that I can do to stop God loving me, and that God wants to abide with us. ((The song, "Abide with me" was sung at the FA Cup Final in 1927 between Arsenal and Cardiff City, and the first and last verses are still sung at the cup final. There, my Olympic Torch in Wales reference for today, all be it loose!))

If it has not been your habit to seek the presence of God, nothing you have done will prevent God from loving you, and God is always ready to accept your seeking Him now and in the future. So why not ask God into your life right now. It's time you started enjoying the presence of God.

-Pr Nathan Stickland

Jesus is your destination.



DAY 10

I had a chance to see some of a TV programme today, Undercover Boss Australia. The premise of the programme is to make a documentary about a boss visiting some of his stores while under disguise. It seems a little far fetched sometimes, but it does seem to work. They do this by saying they are making a programme about people making a career change, or some such scenario.

In this episode the CEO of a supermarket chain visited a number of his shops, helping out in a number of departments. He seemed pretty witless at times. Not a practical sort at all.

In one store he helped out in the store's bakery. He started early, I think it was about 4am. It wasn't long before the bakery manager who he was working under said they were so far behind time (as much as an hour and a half!) that he asked the "boss" to leave as they would be able to work faster without him. It was done politely, but clearly the manager was concerned that the job just wasn't getting done.

The boss was a bit startled. The bakery manager featured in the employees gathering, the part at the end of the show when the boss reveals himself to a large number of the employees. He came off well though, getting a pay rise and a car! But the boss was clearly surprised that he had been fired, sacked, rejected. The boss had been dismissed by one of his managers.

Jesus told a story about landowner who let out his farm ((Matthew 21:33-46)). Retold in the style of Undercover Boss Australia, it goes like this:

There was a supermarket boss who built a new store and franchised it out. When it was time to collect his dividend from his investment, he sent three accountants to get his money. The store manager and his team beat one, killed another, and threw tinned tomatoes at the third. The boss sent more accountants, and again they came to the same end. So the boss sent his son, thinking the tenant manager will respect the son, but the manager chased the son out of the store and killed him too.

The question for discussion is this, when the company has its annual meeting with the shareholders, what should they do about the tenant manager and his team?

In Jesus' parable, the reply given by the religious leaders was to get rid of the tenants and replace them. To which Jesus turned the tables on the religious leaders, suggesting they were like the tenants/bad store manager. Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, a reference to a stone that a builder rejected that has become the most important stone of the building.

The bakery manager rejected the boss. He did not know it was the boss, but that doesn't matter in this case. The job needed to get done.

In the parable the tenants/store manager, rejected the envoys.

In our lives, as we busy ourselves with life, is it possible we might end up rejecting God? Sending God packing? Firing God from His job?

It's time to get to know the Boss, and I don't mean Bruce Springsteen! It's time to be in regular contact with the Boss, God, to seek His presence, so when He does turn up, we will recognise Him, and He will recognise us.



DAY 11

Watching the torch relay is rather addictive. Amazing to see so many people lining the streets, trying to get their photo taken as the torch bearer comes past. Cheers, flags, kids running and riding bikes keeping up with the entourage. ((view live at www.bbc.co.uk/torchrelay))

The Olympic flame has arrived in Chester. Back in England, but tomorrow weaving its way along the border of Wales and England. Interestingly, the Chester football club stadium straddles the border, with the pitch in Wales, and the offices and main gate in England.

Another detail about Chester is that it was built by the Romans in the AD 70s. In about AD 32 Jesus foretold the fall of Jerusalem. About 40 years later the Romans destroyed Jerusalem (AD 70). The Romans tore down Jerusalem and built Chester at about the same time in history.

The Olympic torch came into Chester today with cheers and crowds lining the streets; Jesus entered Jerusalem with cheers and crowds lining the streets (Matthew 21:1-10). The funny thing is, both then and now, the Roman soldiers mingled with the crowds. This time actors have lined the street in Chester in commemoration.

After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, He lamented over the city. The citizens had constantly turned against God. For centuries God had longed for the people of Jerusalem to return to Him. Now, with the Son of God in their presence, they wanted only to kill him (see yesterday's reflections for a similar story).

Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem within one generation (Matthew 23:36). Not one stone would be left on another (Matthew 24:2). Josephus, a Jewish historian alive at that time, wrote, "it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it [Jerusalem] had ever been inhabited."*

As the Olympic torch entered the city of Chester today, I couldn't help but think of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed within one generation. It came true. When Jesus left the earth another prophecy was made, this time by some angels. Acts 1:11 "Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Paul wrote to the people in Thessaloniki about dead believers being raised to life when Jesus returns: *(1 Thessalonians 4:16-18) "16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds*

*to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.
18 Therefore encourage one another with these words."*

Jesus came, and we have a promise He will come again. As you seek the presence of God in your life now, I encourage you to look forward to the fulfillment of this promise, that by your faithfulness to God, you will be caught up with other believers, and live a life, a new and eternal life, in the presence of God, even face to face. I encourage you with these words!



DAY 12

I went out for a walk this evening with my brothers. We try to meet up and go out, about once a month. We are in contact in between, but it's a time for just us guys. This time we did not go to the golf driving range, or 10 pin bowling, but we made use of the lovely evening. Anyway, you get more time for conversation when you are walking. Taking turns to swing at a golf ball or bowl a ball is an interruption for conversation.

It has reminded me of a time when Jesus' disciples were following him along the road. They were discussing who was going to be the most important in the "new kingdom". When they got to their destination they were caught out when Jesus asked them what they were arguing about as they walked along the road (Mark 9:33-37).

They were embarrassed, and they kept quiet. But Jesus, knowing what had been the point of discussion, used a child for an illustration. Matthew records the incident as a reference to being humble: to be the greatest you need to be humble. Mark and Luke record the occasion as one of acceptance and servanthood. That if you want to be the greatest, you must welcome the children, the "less important people", and serve others rather than expect to be served upon. Do these things, and you will be great in the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is a place of dwelling for the presence of God. If we are all seeking the presence of God in our lives, then one key is to be humble, and seek to serve others, even those we consider less significant.

It's time to seek the presence of God, it's time to humble ourselves and serve others.



DAY 13

I spent a number of hours in the hospital today. Unplanned. I'm OK. I needed to take a family member to A&E. While waiting on doctors and assessments, I was asked to sit in the corridor. While I was reading and thinking through the things I needed to get done, I also watched people, like me, poised for improvement of health of a patient.

One such man sat a few seats away from me. I guess in his late sixties. He rose to his feet when a medical staff member, seemingly someone he knew, came round the corner. Something was said, briefly, then a man in his forties came round the same corner. Approaching the elder man, the younger man uttered, "He just passed away." They embraced, shed a tear, then walked out towards the exit. I guessed they were uncle and nephew.

Death is eventual. And permanent. At least the life we know now. But Jesus offers an eternal life. A life as He intended before the infection of selfishness, sin.

Mary lamented over the lack of Jesus presence before Lazarus' death. She said if Jesus had been there, her brother would not have died. She even acknowledged a "resurrection at the last day." ((John 11:24))

v.25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe?" ((NIV))

We have an eternal future, even if we die, if we believe. If we seek and abide in the presence of Jesus we have a long future ahead of us.

Do you believe this?



DAY 14

Have you ever lost something of value? Have you ever lost your phone? I have a cousin who lost, well dropped, her phone down the toilet this week! Amazingly it is still working!!!

I got a call from my Mum this afternoon. She was calling on her mobile. Then, instead of my Mum, a bloke's voice spoke to me. It turns out that this man, Chris, had found her phone in the road, and

managed to call the last number dialled. He lives a few doors up from my Mum and said he would drop it in.

Things lost of value, when found, bring great happiness. It reminds me of three stories about lost things, recorded in Luke chapter 15. A sheep, a coin, and a son.

In each story there is great rejoicing about that which was lost having been found. The last story is a bit different to the rest. This lost son, who left home with all the money he could get out of his dad, realised his mistake, his "lostness".

The son had blown everything. Wasted it all. Now he was feeding pigs. Then Luke 15:17 says, "when he came to his senses...". The son realised that though he had left his father, he was still better off returning home. And when he went home, his father was so glad he threw a party.

I am always glad when I have found what I had lost. Maybe sometimes it's my phone. Maybe sometimes it's my keys! (Sounds like the makings of a song!). Maybe sometimes I've lost the presence of God in my life.

If you feel like you are in a pigsty, it's time to come to your senses, and come back into the presence of God. I believe He is waiting to throw a party.



DAY 15

I have enjoyed a day at a camp for primary school kids run by my church in Northern England (NEC Adventurer Camporee). Walesby Forest is a massive camp site, with lots of other groups camping there this weekend. But there in the corner of the site, was a large marquee with all the clubs tenting around it.

The speaker used the theme for the weekend, "Joseph's Journey". You get something of the idea of his life journey if you watch "Joseph and his Technicolour Dream Coat".

From at least the age of seventeen Joseph wound his brothers up. Reporting bad news about them to their father, and having dreams that suggested his elder brothers would bow down to him. They despised him so much that they sold him into slavery and led their dad to believe he was killed by wild animals.

Joseph became prime minister of Egypt (large story jump there, sorry), and due to a famine ended up saving his family, only after they unknowingly bowed down to him!

Four hundred and thirty years later, the Hebrew people, Joseph's family descendants, left Egypt to return to Canaan. A land promised by God.

From that exit from Egypt, God showed these people how much He wanted to be part of their lives. God wanted to dwell among them, to have a representation of His presence with them.

Just like the marquee on the camp site today, with lots of tents camped around it, the Hebrew migrants, Israelites, were to camp around a large "tent", inside which was the presence of God.

These pictorial lessons have changed over time. When Jesus came to earth, he "made his dwelling among us." (John 1:14). In John, the Greek word "dwelling" is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew text of Exodus for "tabernacle" (meeting tent) [Exodus 40:34].

Through time God has wanted to be with us. He visited Adam and Eve in the garden, He requested a place in the Hebrew camp site during the journey to the new land, and through Jesus, God made His presence available on earth. Now through the presence of God (the Holy Spirit) He wants to be part of our lives.

Adam and Eve messed up that relationship, the Hebrew nation rejected God, Jesus' followers left Him when the going got tough. What will you do with the presence of God? Where can God "tabernacle" with you?



DAY 16

Another day enjoyed at another camp, this time at the Southern England camp for primary aged kids (SEC Adventurer Camporee). It seemed strange to me on Friday evening not to be at this camp. I have run this camp for eight years, and now I was at home, with one of my daughters camping in a field. Something just seemed odd.

Their camp theme is "You are Royal too". Linking the Jubilee weekend with the story of Esther, and the concept that everyone has the chance of being a child of God, therefore royalty; God is called the King of kings.

I was interested to notice, while driving down the M4 towards Bristol, that the motorway signs have been changed. The town of Wootton Bassett has had its name changed to Royal Wootton Bassett, in recognition of the town's respect for the servicemen and women killed in action while serving abroad. The towns people line the street as the hearse brings the body from the RAF base to the chapel of rest. Now the motorway signs proclaim the promotion of the town to "ROYAL" Wootton Bassett. The town has become royal too.

These two things today remind me of verses in 1 Peter. Chapter 1:13 says, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed." This preparation is about spending time with God throughout your day, sharing yourself with God, tabernacling (meeting up) with God regularly.

This is because "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (2:9 NIV).

The kids are learning that they are royal too. The people of Wootton Bassett have a renamed town, it is royal too. Peter calls those who follow Jesus a royal priesthood. That means if you are a follower of Jesus you are royal too.

As you seek the presence of God, know that you are sons and daughters of God, you are royalty too.



DAY 17

Jubilee celebrations continue over this weekend, with a big concert at Buckingham Palace today. Meanwhile, as the Olympic Torch weaves through Derry / Londonderry, republican protesters force a detour.

At the end of the concert, with the Queen on the stage, poised to light the last of the 4000+ commemorative beacons, Prince Charles gives some cordial words about his "mummy". As part of his speech the prince spoke of the Queen's work in the Commonwealth, saying she brought unity within diversity. With the protests in Derry we realise that complete unity even within the "United" Kingdom has not been irrevocably achieved.

I am mindful of the words of Paul to the believers in Ephesus about unity. He encourages them to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

There are currently 54 sovereign states in the Commonwealth. It is beyond a stretch of the imagination to say that they are all at peace. Wars and internal conflict afflict every country. But all are united by one Queen.

It seems there are 196 countries in the world. I would say that even believers in Jesus Christ don't always find unity and peace with each other. But we are all united by one King, God.

If you are frustrated or discouraged in your search for peace between Christian believers, consider this, is it more important that you find peace or you offer peace?

As you seek to foster unity and peace, remember what Paul said a few verses earlier in Ephesians. "In him [Jesus] and through faith in him [Jesus] we may approach God with freedom and confidence (3:12) for this reason I kneel before the Father (v14) I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." (v16-17a).

As you seek the presence of God, approach God knowing that you can, stay long enough in His presence, kneel if you have to, and claim the power of God in your life to keep you faithful until His return.



DAY 18

Oh the frustration of not having 3G coverage everywhere! I wanted to watch the Olympic torch today more than any day so far, as going from Derry to Newry, it passed through Enniskillen, Portadown, Gilford and Banbridge, where our son was born, daughter was born, we lived, and I pastored. So much of the time the livestream went blank. So frustrating. But I got to see some things. Nice to know the flame went past at least one Seventh-day Adventist Church. As we consider the presence of the Olympic torch covering the UK and into Ireland, let us continue to think of the presence of God moving across our nations.

Also today was the service commemorating the 60th Jubilee of the reign of Elizabeth II in St Paul's Cathedral. Watching the sermon that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, presented, I felt some agreement and it brought some thoughts to my mind.

Dr Williams spoke of dedication. That alone made me think of Roy Castle singing DEDICATION on "Record Breakers" (it's worth a listen to the words on Youtube). Anyway, Williams went on to say, "To declare a lifelong dedication is to take a huge risk, to embark on a costly venture. But it is also to respond to the promise of a vision that brings joy."

Williams and others today talked of the Queen's dedication to her role and responsibilities as monarch. The common agreement seemed to be that Elizabeth II has contributed tirelessly in her efforts over 60 years. A worthy epitaph let alone to be able to say this publicly in her hearing.

So what of our lives? If we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, or if we are interested enough to want to investigate knowing about God, how much dedication is needed? Is it a matter of working out how little we can get away with, or should we be so dedicated that clock watching is irrelevant?

I think that if we are to experience the presence of God in our lives, we need to dedicate our lives in a way that our interaction with God saturates every aspect of our lives. It is not a matter of how much time do I have to give to God, but how can I fit God into all my waking hours.

It is nice that the Queen has dedicated her life to her role, especially as she did not get a choice about the succession. You get a choice about God. If you want the presence of God in your life you get to choose. Are you ready for the dedication? It's a "huge risk...a costly venture" but it "brings joy"!



DAY 19

The Olympic torch moved from one country to another today, between The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

A friend of mine faces being sent from one country to another.

Joseph was sold by his brothers to travellers and taken to another country. The brothers then made out he was dead. Joseph established Egypt as a nation of provisions. His brothers came to him asking for food, without knowing he was their brother. He revealed himself. They lived happily ever after.

Before the reveal Joseph dismissed the Egyptian courtiers. "Leave my presence," he said. Then Joseph made himself known to his brothers. (Genesis 45:1). His brothers were "terrified at his presence." They realised the authority Joseph had over them.

As we seek to be in God's presence, what do we need to dismiss from around us in order for God to reveal Himself to us? What alien distractions can we do without? If we want to move from an earthly kingdom to a heavenly kingdom, shouldn't we make a point of shutting all other things out, and having some "me-and-God" time?



DAY 20

It's funny how we can get misled by our own perceptions about ourselves.

The Olympic Torch took the ferry from Northern Ireland to Scotland today. According to the legend, there is another route, a "path", from Northern Ireland to Scotland. Giant's Causeway, on the Antrim coast, is a volcanic phenomena, where basalt lava cooled into columns, mainly hexagonal in shape. This volcanic activity can be traced underwater to the Scottish Isle of Staffa. Thereby creating a link, a path, a causeway, between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The legend that accompanies the World Heritage Site has variations, but is basically about an Irish warrior, Finn McCool, who sought to fight his Scottish counterpart, Benandonner. In realising Benandonner was bigger than he, Finn and his wife made out that Finn was only the baby child of "Finn", who was not home from the field yet. Fearing this was such a big "baby" and therefore the father must be huge, Benandonner left and returned to Scotland, ripping up the causeway as he went to prevent Finn from following. Benandonner thought he was not big enough to fight the perceived Finn.

King Asa of Israel was a little like that too. He was told by a prophet that, "The Lord is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you." ((2 Chronicles 15:2)).

Asa brought some stability and peace to the country, and people from surrounding countries moved there because they could see that "the Lord God was with him." Asa assembled his people in Jerusalem, and "they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and soul." v.12. "They sought God eagerly, and he was found by them." v.15.

But something happened to Asa's perception about himself. He started to rely on his abilities and skills in governance. To prevent Judah from attacking Israel from the north, Asa gave the silver and gold from the temple and the treasury to the king of Aram, who then battled against Israel. This took the heat off Asa.

What Asa did showed he had relied on himself and another king, rather than relying on God. When he relied on God in the past, he had won battles, even when he was outnumbered. The next message from God given to Asa was that because his perception was that he had no need of God, from now on he would be constantly at war.

Unfortunately, even when Asa got a foot disease late in life, he only sought help from doctors, and still did not seek God for help.

We can look at situations and think we can not deal with them. So we run away and rip up the path behind us. We can look at situations and think we can deal with them, and leave God out of our equation.

Our own perceptions can mislead us. While Asa sought God wholeheartedly, things went well. It was when Asa thought he could now do it himself, that the problems never got resolved.

It's a shame I find myself behaving like Benandonner and Asa at times. That's when I need a reminder to seek the presence of God because I need Him. I sometimes manage that myself, but sometimes I need others to remind me.



DAY 21

Today has been Global Ocean Day. On their website, www.worldoceanday.org, they say, "This year, we encourage you to reach out to young people in your community and help inspire them for the 2012 theme Youth: the Next Wave for Change."

My reflections today are on reaching out and waves. After one of the times Jesus fed a large crowd, he sent his disciples off in a boat while he dismissed the crowd. That alone seems strange, but then He went up in the mountainside to pray. ((Matthew 14:22-34)).

Evening time, or sunset, in that part of the world is about 6:15pm (between 4:30-7:45pm). At that time Jesus was on the mountainside, praying. He could see in the evening light the boat the disciples were in. On a clear evening He could have seen right across the lake, it is only 13km wide at its widest point, and 21 km long.

That evening Jesus might not have been able to see across the lake. There was a storm tossing the boat on the waves. They were a long way from shore, and it was evening time, starting to get dark.

Jesus knew these men, some fishermen, were in a storm, but He left them. For Jesus, prayer was more important. It wasn't until between 3-6am, the fourth watch, that Jesus went out onto the water and walked out towards the bobbing boat. Imagine being in a storm on a lake, with a number of experienced sailors, you have been battling the waves for about ten hours, and you notice someone walking towards you on the water, like they are out for a country walk. No wonder some thought they were seeing a ghost!

Peter, always ready to launch himself into a situation, asks this "presence", "If you are Jesus call me onto the water." Jesus obliges. So, bold as brass, Peter jumps out of the boat, and walks on the water towards Jesus. OK, this is the weird bit. Walking on water. First Jesus, then Peter. If Jesus made physics, if He made the elements, why can't He control them too?

Having battled in the boat for hours on end, Peter, now walking on the water, suddenly remembers the raging sea. Waves lifting him up and down, but he was still conquering surface tension. Peter then realised this is not normal. Peter panicked. He should not be able to do this. He starts sinking, and again

calls out to Jesus. First Peter asks for an invitation to come, now he asks to be saved.

Jesus reaches out and catches Peter. They get in the boat, and the wind stops.

Why didn't Jesus stop the wind when He was up on the mountainside? It would have made for an easier life for the disciples. Instead Jesus waited for the desire to come close to Him, and the realisation that Jesus is needed for salvation.

I'm thinking about my own struggles, my own storms. Jesus doesn't stop them happening. But He may calm the storm after I remember to come to him and seek His saving grace. I hope this reaches you with inspiration.

When Jesus calms your storm, what is more important, the calm, or Jesus?



DAY 22

The Olympic Torch went from Glasgow to Inverness today. Along the way it went through Fort William, the nearest main town to Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Scotland and the UK.

I remember being the driver for a group who set out to do the three peaks challenge: the three highest peaks in Scotland, England, and Wales in 24 hours. They set off for Ben Nevis in the afternoon, with a view to be down by nightfall (sunset was late when they went). I was to be the driver between the three peaks so they could rest (sleep) between the ascents.

The idea was to do Ben Nevis (Scotland) by nightfall, drive to Skafell Pike (England) by sunrise, and get Snowdon (Wales) done at lunch time the following day.

As a treat I was to have some hot soup and rolls ready for their return off Ben Nevis. So after my own stroll in the local woods, and an attempt at my amateur photography, I was back in time to get things boiling.

I mixed the water and the cream of sweetcorn together. Beat the eggs, and added to the warming broth. I could see the stream of head torches snaking down the mountainside like an army of fluorescent ants. I thought I should be ready a little earlier than the expected time of arrival, just in case! But that time target came and went. So did the target time. The latest deadline time came and went too. I was calculating that this three peaks attempt was not going to be successful, even with clear roads ahead. I kept heating up the pot, and with the evening getting cooler by the hour, my desire to have yet another

cup of soup increased.

With no mobile phone coverage, it was a waiting game. I listened to the last night of the proms on the radio. Some walkers came over and thanked me for the musical welcome back to the car park with the sound of "Land of hope and glory" ringing out in the chilly pitch dark air.

I don't remember if I was asleep when they returned, but the soup was gone in a quicker time than it took to reboil.

I did not know when the walkers would return, but I got ready anyway. It was not a surprise when they returned, I just didn't know quite when it would be.

In the first few verses of 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul uses the analogy of Jesus' second coming not being a surprise to those who believe in God. The time may be uncertain, but believers will not be caught unaware. Paul says, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." When a thief comes you don't know he is coming. Those who seek the presence of God, who look forward to the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to return will not be shocked at His arrival. Only unbelievers will.

So as you live your life, and seek the presence of God, be ready, be prepared. We don't know when Jesus will come, but we know He will. He said He would. So enjoy the wait. Seek God's presence now. Drink soup!

((The first mountain took longer than they thought, but they went on to do the second. By the time they got back from that one, time and energy had gone. Snowdon, and the three peaks challenge will be there for another day. I am very proud of their stoic achievement though.))



DAY 23

As the Olympic Torch heads to northerly islands off Scotland, I want to consider some things in a westerly and then a further northerly direction.

As we consider 70 days of praying for and experiencing the presence of God in our lives, the Catholic Church is holding the 50th International Eucharist Congress in the Republic of Ireland. Today, with 20,000 attendees, they held an open air service, with 80,000 expected next Sunday. The congress has as its theme "Communion with Christ and with One Another".

The congregation was not limit to Catholics. The Church of Ireland Archbishop Dr Michael Jackson

participated. This interaction between Christian denominations is cordially welcomed by some, but to others it is seen as a prophetic fulfilment of a false Church drawing people away from true Christianity.

I can't help but wonder at how many jokes have been made about the Archbishop's name! But it was this that reminded me of a story I read in "The Unquenchable Worshipper" by Matt Redman. It's a book I would include in my "If-I-only-had-one-bookshelf-to fill-what-would-I-put-on-it" list.

Matt Redman, a Christian songwriter and recording artist, travelled to Norway for an appointment. He accompanied the speaker, but as the speaker had a fear about flying, they went on a ferry. Matt loathed the long journey, and when they arrived and did the sound check he was not in a good mood. Even during the set of songs he did, he felt restless and not in a worshipful mood. Then he found himself interrupting the sequence of songs to sing a Michael Jackson song, "You are not alone."

Unhappy about the whole experience, he sat through the rest of the programme. At the end, people came to speak to him, and he was aware of one lady loitering. When everyone else had gone, she came forward. She expressed to Matt how her life was a mess and she wanted out. She came to the meeting saying to God that if you are here, express yourself to me. Then she referenced his Michael Jackson rendition. She considered it was a message from God to reassure her, she was not alone, God was there with her.

God speaks through men to crowds. And God speaks to individuals in a crowd. I am grateful that when I seek communion with Christ, I can go directly to God and not through a priest, and that when I ask God if He is near, He will answer me.

Psalm 138:3 (New International Version)

"When I called, you answered me;
you made me bold and stouthearted."



DAY 24

As the Olympic Torch continues its tour around Scotland, I reflect on a TV programme I saw the other day. "Ade In Britain" is a show where Ade Edmonson, of "The Young Ones" fame, is touring Britain looking for ancient or traditional food.

In this show he was near the English/Scottish border. He met some people who carry on a tradition in Berwick-Upon-Tweed of patrolling the border to ensure the Scots had not crossed over. It was all done in historic fashion, though it hardly seems neighbourly, but I guess there was a reason to do it centuries

ago.

I was sorting out some stuff this evening. Well, boxes of stuff to be honest. I came across a magazine, that I can't for the life of me remember why I kept. But in it is an article by a solicitor outlining the law and neighbourly disputes.

The article considers many problems neighbours quarrel over. At the end of the article the writer says, "I have always regarded having bad neighbours as hell on earth - a way of acquiring points to be cashed in when the next world is reached!"

One day an expert in religious legalism asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. I guess he was looking for "acquiring points to be cashed in when the next world is reached!" Jesus retorted asking what the religious legal requirements were. He replied that it is to love God with all your might and love your neighbour as yourself. To be sure the expert was meeting his target he asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?"

Jesus told the story we call the "The Good Samaritan." A man gets jumped by a gang, and left for dead. Two fellow countrymen came past, at separate times, both men of authority. But neither stopped to help. It was a traveller from another country who did stop, cleaned the victim up, and booked him into a hotel, at the traveller's expense.

If we are to experience the presence of God, now and in the next world, it seems we can learn something through treating others with compassion, consideration, and care. So who is my neighbour? It may be someone from another country, from over the border, or just over the fence.

Eternal life can start now, though it is not done on a point system. Experiencing and portraying the presence of God starts now too.



DAY 25

I was my son's age when the story of baby Azaria and the dingo hit the headlines. An Adventist family was camping in the Australian outback. The mother went back into the tent to check on their baby daughter. But Azaria was gone. The claim was that a dingo, a wild dog, took Azaria.

The mother, Lindy, was tried and sent to prison for life, for the murder of her daughter, and Michael, the father, an Adventist Pastor, was given a suspended sentence, being found guilty of being an accessory after the fact.

The media and the nation were captivated by the story, which also attracted global interest. Of course, having a church connection, Adventist at that, all kinds of false stories and suspicions were rumoured.

Then, due to new evidence, Lindy was released, and then pardoned. It has taken 32 years of courtroom drama to get to the stage this week (12 June) of having yet another coroner's report, the fourth, give the latest verdict that a dingo caused the death of baby Azaria.

Such was the interest in this story that Hollywood made a film about the story, called "A Cry in the Dark", starring Meryl Streep.

Protesting their innocence for all these years, now Lindy and Michael, and their children, can find relief in knowing that they have not only had their convictions overturned, but they are exonerated from the suspicion of murder. I presume that despite a large compensation pay out, and a major movie made of their lives, they would rather have their daughter alive.

The Chamberlains are not guilty. But they had to fight, and wait for 32 years, to reach this point in clearing their names and concluding the cause of Azaria's death.

We, on the other hand, are guilty.

Guilty of turning away from God, and showing selfishness towards our neighbours, and sometimes even our families and friends. This is called sin. Sin became part of life on earth when Eve and Adam ignored God's instruction, and only thought of themselves. Turning away from God leads to self destruction.

But because God is a God of relationships, of presence, He looks at us with grace, as though we are not guilty.

Isaiah 1:18 (NIV)

"Come now, let us reason together,"
says the Lord.

"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool."

God says, come to me, we can enjoy each other's presence. I will forget about what has separated us. There is no consequence to you.

It's time to come and reason with God. To experience His presence. Come. Now.



DAY 26

If you asked me to recount the storyline of "Chariots of Fire" you would get little information. What I do remember is that it was about men of faith and principle.

Given that the Olympic Torch took a route along a beach in Scotland today, re-enacting a scene from the film, and given comments have been made on the BBC website accompanied with pictures, seemingly showing some pride in the connection with the 2012 Torch, the beach, and the 1924 Paris Olympics, I thought I would refresh my memory of the story.

A true story, and indeed one of two men of faith. Harold Abrahams, a Jew, experiences anti-Semitic despise at Cambridge University, but went on to get a place in the British Olympic Team. He lost the 200m race but won at 100m. He defied those with prejudice, and won gold. Noteworthy is that Abrahams converted from Judaism to Catholicism a decade after his win. Being persecuted as a Jew gave him determination to win gold. If he had converted earlier in his life, would he have had the same determination?

Eric Liddell was a devout Christian. Born in China to Scottish Missionaries, he is challenged by his sister over his devotion to God having missed a prayer meeting while out running. This faith challenge stayed with Liddell when he travelled to Paris as part of the British Olympic Team only to find his race was on a Sunday. Being a Sunday keeper, he chose to forfeit his chance to run, instead taking a preaching appointment at a Church of Scotland congregation in Paris.

Lord Andrew Lindsay, having already won silver in the 400m hurdles, offers Liddell his place in the 400m race. Despite being a 100m runner, Liddell wins gold in the 400m race.

Along the way Liddell gathers global interest as his religious beliefs took precedence over his national athletics. He then returned to China as a missionary.

The film is due for re-release on 13 July in 100 cinemas nationally. It comes out on Blu-Ray and DVD too on 16 July, and is on stage in London from 23 June.

But so what? What made this film the 11th best British-made film? Was it the cast, or the set? Was it that two men stood for principle? I would like to think that these men's trust in God had something to do with the film's success.

As we consider ways of encountering the presence of God during the 70 days of the Olympic Torch relay, let us consider the Scripture passage allegedly used by Liddell in his sermon that Sunday:

Isaiah 40 (NIV)

30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

31 but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

It's time to seek God. It's time to renew your strength. It's time to run after God. It's time to put your hope in God and seek His presence.



DAY 27

As the Olympic Torch drops south from Scotland to England, our nations remember the 30th anniversary of the end of the Falklands War.

I remember seeing coverage of the conflict on television. Early attempts at text graphics flashed up on screen when something significant happened. It confirms in my mind that most conflicts in the world boil down to land ownership. That's our island. We want that territory, and we want you people out. The insanity and bigotry of jealousy, selfishness, and greed.

The capital of the Falkland Islands is Stanley. Like the global tradition of twinning towns to foster international appreciation, Stanley is twinned with Whitby. Incidentally, my secretary told me today of the twin towns of "Dull" and "Boring". ((<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-tayside-central-18336146>))

Whitby will be visited by the Olympic Torch within a few days. This ancient town has much history, the good and the gory. In the 7th century AD, the Synod of Whitby met. From my understanding, this was about two opposing methods of calculating Easter.

The Ionan practice was based on the Jewish method of calculating the Passover (lunar), and seemingly celebrated on whatever day the resurrection fell on; much like people remember their birthday always on a given date.

The Roman practice used a different method of calculation (solar), and is coincidentally often the first Sunday after Passover starts. That is my simplified version of the calculation! It's like saying I will remember my birthday on the first Tuesday in February when the sun rises after 7am!

((See this link for maybe the best and concise explanation <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2011/04/when-are-easter-passove/>))

At the Synod of Whitby, it was concluded that the Roman calculation would be thereafter adopted. One of the arguments for this was that as the Roman church believed in apostolic succession since the apostle Peter, then if the Roman church says Easter will always be on a Sunday, this is authoritative. Forgive me if I am wrong, but I see parallels of the Roman church changing other dates, to Sunday too!

This discovery has made me ponder. Not just on the relevance of God's instruction to remember the seventh day, or even which day we might remember Jesus' resurrection, but the significance of asserting changes to any event of or instruction from God.

I guess the more important lesson is not so much about tradition and changes, though they are marks of a true believer (Revelation 14:12), but of habits. What good is it if I turn away from wrong tradition, and practise correct Biblical instruction, but I have not made a habit of seeking the presence of God? I could be right in theory, but not right in the presence of God.

The 14th of June is the anniversary of the end of the 1982 Falkland Island conflict. Easter is the anniversary of the end of the cosmic spiritual war. Today is a daily anniversary for each of us in our continued quest to seek the presence of God.



DAY 28

We are thinking about being in the presence of God, especially with the Olympic Torch relay covering the UK and Ireland. It's a good illustration of God being near us all.

I got sent a link today to a newspaper article, that reports on the video antics of a student in the USA, and his team, who record public pranks, and post them on Youtube.

This prank was to walk up beside other students on campus and try to hold their hand. For a mixture of responses have a look at the article and the video. It has reportedly got 1.5 million viewings in 3 days!

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2159355/Why-wont-hold-hand-Hilarious-video-student-pranking-random-strangers-internet-sensation.html>

It made me laugh, and made me think about the Beatles song, "I want to hold your hand." The song is about a man who is expressing his interest in holding someone's hand. It's an expression of love. Of

availability. Of interest.

One line says,
"And when I touch you I feel happy, inside
It's such a feeling
That my love
I can't hide
I can't hide
I can't hide."

I believe God wants to be with us. God wants to hold our hand. God has a feeling of love, He can't hide, He can't hide, He can't hide.

Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV)
The Lord your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing."

Imagine God taking such delight in you, that He sings you a love song. He loves you yeah, yeah, yeah. He wants to hold your hand. He wants to sing to you. He wants to be in your presence.

Why not take time to get close to God today? To metaphorically hold His hand.



DAY 29

Tomorrow (Sunday) the Olympic Torch will leave Durham and weave its way to Middlesbrough.

Oh, the clarion sound of Roger Whittaker singing "I'm gonna leave old Durham town" comes racing through my head.

In the song, the verses list a number of reasons why the singer will leave Durham town. His Daddy walked out the door, going to war, presumably not coming back. As a boy he'd watched the ships leaving on the river Tyne. Mama passed away, "Goodbye, son" was all she'd say. Now there is no reason for staying. So it's time to leave.

We might have all kinds of reasons for leaving. We leave to come back; we leave our digs to go to study, we leave home to go to work, we leave church only to come back.

We leave to get away; we leave a job, we leave a relationship, we leave town.

Our reasons for leaving are many.

But this is not a song that God will sing to us. He is not leaving, for any reason. In fact He is physically coming back.

But here and now we can experience His presence. God said to Joshua when Joshua took over leadership of maybe 1.5 million traveling Hebrews, "No one will be able to defeat you all your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forget you." (Joshua 1:5 NCV)

Jesus, talking to His disciples before He left earth, told them how they should share their faith, and said, "... I will be with you always, even until the end of this age." (Matthew 28:20b)

We might have reasons for leaving, even leaving God, but He will never leave us. He said so. He promised!

Since God is with us, why not share some time with Him now. You and God. Alone. And again later. And again soon after that. All day. Continually. He's not leaving you. He hasn't forgotten you. You just have to stop and say hello.



DAY 30

It's been Father's Day in Ireland and the UK. A day to remember your Dad, hopefully with positive memories.

My eight year old daughter informed me today that I don't have to get a card for today, because my Dad is dead. I understand her child's perspective. She also said she doesn't just have to remember me today, as she loves me every day of the year! I love these simple perspectives.

A child's comments give us insight into our relationship with God, our heavenly Father.

Yesterday, I pondered on leaving, and how the presence of God never leaves us. That can be confusing, as Jesus (incarnate God) left us, but we still have the presence of God with us (Holy Spirit). I realise the

confusion this can bring to think of Jesus saying I will never leave you, I will be with you to the end of the age, and then ascending to Heaven. It needs to be understood as physical and spiritual. These are linked but separate.

My Dad died a few years ago. I don't have to buy him a card any more. Actually, it's sad that I don't get to buy him a card any more. But, because of what I believe, I know I will see him again when God returns and resurrects the dead who had put their faith in Him. But I still get to remember my Dad, and remember my love for him daily, not just on Father's Day.

We don't get to buy God a Father's Day card. He is not here with us, yet. Jesus left the earth, but promised to return. But I can remember God's love for me and my love for Him, every day, not just at Christmas or Easter!

And more than that, because God is not dead, and because He is God, He remains with us in Spiritual presence. Jesus said so.

John 14: 16-17 (NIV)

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Jesus went on in John 17:20-21 to say,

" ...I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [the disciples] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...."

Jesus left, but the Holy Spirit remains.

Our experience is not limited to one day, or to a day of reunion in the future, we get to seek and find God now, and now, and all the "nows" we can fit in our day.

Jeremiah 29:13 (NIV)

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Happy Heavenly Fathers Day!



DAY 31

With Croatia being beaten by Spain 1-0 in the Euro 2012 cup, the plethora of plays on the name of the goalscorer was lead by Gary Lineker.

Jesús Navas scored the goal for Spain, and after the final whistle, Lineker, a TV commentator, said something like, "So there you have it, Jesus is the saviour." It didn't take long to have others posting "Jesus saves!"

It reminds me of the banner at a football match years ago. In the prolific goalscoring days of Kevin Keagan, a banner (well, bed sheet) was stretched out in the crowd, "Jesus saves, but Keagan scores on the rebound." (Google it and you will find all kinds of variations).

"Jesus saves" is poetic, even if it sounds like an 1800's hymn. 'Keagan scores' sounds victorious!

And that is the way I would like to think of Jesus, victorious.

Psalm 60:12

With God we shall gain the victory,
and he will trample down our enemies.

As we seek the presence of God, while the presence of the Olympic Torch flits round Ireland and the UK, let's consider this aspect of being victorious. We gain the victory WITH God. In His presence. You have to be on His team!

To score on the rebound we have to be in the box. To be victorious with God we have to be in His presence.

Salvation comes from Jesus. Victory comes from God. Scoring comes from being in the right place. It's time to be with God.



DAY 32

The Olympic Torch reached the City of York today. A city steeped in history, being the city of the House of York, which fought against the House of Lancaster around the 1400's. The House of York was the dominant force, but were overthrown by Henry VII of the House of Tudor, supported by the Lancastrians.

The War of the Roses, between the Houses of York and Lancaster, took place mainly in open fields, with

England's castles playing little role in royal allegiance in this era. One of the older castles, Windsor Castle, was built by William the Conqueror soon after 1066. It was added to over the centuries, and was favoured and developed by Henry VII in the early 1500's.

So my link with the Olympic Torch today is through Henry VII. The torch is in York tonight. Henry defeated the House of York. Henry vastly developed Windsor Castle. I have been inside Windsor Castle and drove past it today!

A tentative set of links, but an association anyway. And hereby lies my ponderings for today.

I got invited to a gathering of friends at Windsor Castle once. Basically, some friends of mine have a friend who used to live and work in Windsor. She hosted the party. I got to enter some of the staff living quarters, and I wasn't a tourist!

While the social gathering played out its time, I remember gazing out of a window. We were in an old tower, round as I remember, and while the view was interesting, the thickness of the walls are what I remember. They must have been about six feet, 1.8m, thick. You almost have to step out of the room, into the alcove, before you reach the window.

These walls were very thick. A defence. A fortress. A mighty fortress!

These walls have always reminded me of the Martin Luther song, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Luther wrote this hymn between 1527-1529. What a coincidence, Henry building the walls in parts of Windsor Castle, walls I have marvelled at, at about the same time Luther wrote this hymn.

The words are a paraphrase of Psalm 46. In this Psalm there are loud, raging words like "roar, foam, quake, uproar, desolation, wars, breaks, shatters". There are words of peace too. Indeed, these words are the pearls of the Psalm.

10 He says, 'Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.'

11 The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

As we seek the presence of God, remember "a mighty fortress is our God", and amidst the fury of life, we have an invitation from God to "Be still, and know that I am God". Be still in God's presence.



DAY 33

Summer solstice today. Longest day of the year and all that. Not always on the 21st, occasionally, like today, on the 20th. It is the day with the longest sunlight.

In Joshua 10 there is recorded a strange phenomenon; the day the sun stood still.

12 On the day the Lord gave the Israelites victory over the Amorites, Joshua prayed to the Lord in front of all the people of Israel. He said, "Let the sun stand still over Gibeon, and the moon over the valley of Aijalon."

13 So the sun stood still and the moon stayed in place until the nation of Israel had defeated its enemies.

God often used natural forces to achieve an outcome. In the previous verse it describes how the Amorites were chased by the Israelites, and a hail storm inflicted large casualties on them. "The hail killed more of the enemy than the Israelites killed with the sword." God parted the sea as an escape route for the Israelites running from the Egyptians. As the sea refilled the pathway, the water drowned all the pursuers.

So in the verses above, God made the sun stand still.

I heard a story today of a mother who made her two year old son sit still, all day, every day. She is an addict. A Community Chaplain knocked on her door. After the pleasantries, the chaplain offered to pray with the mother. She disclosed her despair. She had been to her doctor. He had recognised a problem. The social services got involved. Now she waved the letter telling her they were coming to take her son away. All the boy knew how to do was sit in the corner, silently. She had not been a good mother. But in seeking help for her condition, the mother was facing separation from her son.

The community chaplain prayed specifically for the decision to be revoked; rehabilitation to be offered to the mother, and the son to remain with his mother.

The following Sabbath morning, midway through the morning church service, the mother tore into the room waving a letter. She declared she wanted to be baptised! For her God had become real in her life. The social services had fulfilled the prayer request. She was offered rehab and could retain her son.

I wonder what God wants to do in our lives if we only stood still, sought His presence, and asked?



DAY 34

The Olympic Torch was back in Scotland today. I thought it had left the other day, but it was back, ending up by lake Windermere.

Today I read about the new library in Birmingham. Opening next year, it is costing about £189 million. Libraries are the kind of place you go back to. Not least to return items. And libraries have expanded beyond books, to have films, music, newspapers and magazines, and internet access.

This new library in the city centre of Birmingham is going beyond that too, "providing a dynamic mix of events, activities and performance together with outstanding resources, exhibitions and access to expert help for learning, information and culture." (www.libraryofbirmingham.com)

An aside, my youngest daughter was so keen to finish reading her library book this evening, that when my wife checked up on her after bed time, my daughter had fallen asleep on her back, with the book still open, over her face! She must have been holding the book up, and gradually fallen asleep.

The Olympic Torch went back to Scotland. People go back to libraries. And people keep going back to God. What is the difference?

The torch is a one off. Libraries are places people visit, return items, borrow more etc. And in Birmingham one day people will be able to get more than a usual library service. This makes me wonder if we treat God any differently to libraries.

Do I pop back to God for the usual exchange, but miss out on a more involved experience?

Seeking the presence of God is more than an exchange of information, or presenting a list of "have you got this, and this, and this?". God wants us to remain and receive. If you have been missing out on something with your time with God, try resting. To rest means to stop. Be still. Remain. Abide.

Matthew 11: 28-30 (NLT)

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."

Why not try this with God now. Stop. Come to God. Rest, and be rested. Listen. Let God teach you. Receive a "dynamic mix" with "expert help".



DAY 35

The end of the 35th day, halfway through the Olympic Torch Relay, the day's tour has had a sweet theme. From Kendal (mint cake) to Blackpool (rock). I have been journaling during the 70 day journey, concentrating on how we can focus on experiencing the presence of God.

I hadn't realised the torch was nipping back into Scotland after it left a few days ago. I hadn't realised I would be in Windsor Castle today, having journalled about it within the last few days. And I hadn't realised how the last 35 days would affect me. An outcome of sharing my ponderings about seeking the presence of God has been that all day, every day, I have been sensitive to things around me that bring my attention to the presence of God.

My ponderings today are reflections of my visit to St George's Chapel, Windsor. I have been attending some meetings this week about Adventist Community Services, at Newbold College, and we took a break to attend Evensong at St George's Chapel, only it was not Evensong this evening, but Evening Prayer.

I was slightly disappointed that I would not hear choristers enchanting us with their synchronised voices, but never-the-less to sit in the Quire and see the magnificence of this Chapel was mesmerising.

I had been given a laminated order of service. The 25 minute service was occupied with responsive reading, both from the reusable printout and a prayer book. We heard two recitals from other passages of scripture, but our main "prayer" was Psalm 118, and, as promptly as the exercise finished, the canonical procession left.

There is too much else I have been disturbed by to ponder on now, but this experience both stagnated and agitated my desire to encounter God in this historically rich place of worship.

The clergymen came in. We stood in silence. We bantered the scriptural passages and written prayers. The sequence seemed more procedural than personal. They left. So did we.

Matthew 23: 27-28 (NIV)

'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.'

I don't mean to pass judgement on the clergy there today. I post this scripture to think of me, not them. I was repulsed at the thought, the realisation, that we can so easily go through the process, read a text,

say a prayer, go to church, stand and sit at the right times, all this looking good, but it is void of the personal longing and experience of an encounter with God.

This troubles me because it is so easy. A simple charade. We can fool others. We might even fool ourselves. But we leave God longing for the intimate us.



DAY 36

Twice today I have heard reference to the same story. Once in a sermon I heard, and once in conversation this evening.

The story is when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" ((Mark 8:27-29))

The response the disciples gave was, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

Then Jesus asked them, "But who do you say I am?" Peter, always quick to jump in, answered, "You are the Messiah, Christ, the Anointed One."

On driving home this evening I was pondering on this. Why did some say Jesus was John, Elijah, or another prophet, and a disciple say Jesus is the Messiah?

In Matthew's gospel account it is recorded that Jesus says Peter knew the answer not because someone told him, but because God the Father revealed it to him.

I want to suggest something here; Peter knew who Jesus is because he spent time with Jesus; Peter lived with Jesus daily. The others didn't know who Jesus is because they weren't with Jesus very much, or maybe not at all.

As we consider ways of being in the presence of God, I think this story holds one of the keys. We won't get who Jesus is unless we live with Jesus. God isn't someone we visit, but someone who accompanies us.

Who do you say Jesus is? Not sure? Pray, speak to God, and ask Him to accompany you this coming week, and the week after. Always. And renew that invitation daily. And daily ask yourself, "Today, who do I say Jesus is?"



DAY 37

I pulled away from the hard shoulder on the motorway today, having just changed my wheel. The buzz of adrenaline eased from my veins, and my legs felt a little weak.

Making my way to Newbold College from Watford for another day of Community Service training, I was mentally bemoaning the state of the rainy weather, while running through the morning devotional I was to present to my fellow cohorts.

As I turned off the M25 on the slip road to the M4 the view from my windscreen moved to the right as the rear of my car swung round to my left. I tried steering into the skid but only managed to reduce the severity of the spin.

My front nearside wheel hit the chamfered curb, followed by my rear nearside wheel. This wheel hit side on, breaking the seal of the tyre and deflating it. The pirouette continued leaving me facing the right way down the road, but straddling the curb. Not wanting to have another car copy my routine, I pulled away, joined the M4 and found a safe, well safer, place to stop and inspect.

Fortunately, there were no barriers or signs at the point where I did my twirl. Just muddy puddles. I had come away with two dirty wheels, one deflated tyre, and a squirt of adrenaline to see me through the day!

I have continually thanked God today for my "safe" journey. Things could have been so much worse.

I wonder why it takes an experience like this to make me so appreciative of God's continual presence, care, and provision in my life? Why aren't I always full of thanks and praise, all day long, for the simple, the mundane, the usual things that happen in my life?

This week, without being too obsessive, I am going to thank God for all the "usual" things that happen. Not that I haven't been appreciative in the past. It's more for my own good. I don't want to leave my thanks to God just for the "unusual" occurrences. I invite you to join me.



DAY 38

"Are you a thermometer or a thermostat?"

The Olympic Torch arrived in Sheffield today. A city known for its industrial past, Sheffield steel is considered among the finest steel in the world. Steel production is still a major industry in Sheffield, and in one factory they are able to pour the largest ingot in Europe at 570 tonnes!

To make steel, you have to first make pig iron, which is basically steel with too much carbon. Further refinement takes place to make steel. To make pig iron, iron ore is heated at a very high temperature (1,375 °C / 2,507 °F).

This is not as hot as ancient foundry workers managed. "The Haya people of East Africa invented a type of high-heat blast furnace which allowed them to forge carbon steel at 1,802 °C (3,276 °F) nearly 2,000 years ago." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steel>)

Clearly monitoring and regulating temperature is very important in the production of pig iron and steel. A thermometer tells you the temperature, a thermostat adjusts the temperature up or down.

So which are you? A thermometer or a thermostat?

Do you measure your relationship with God as to how "hot" you are? The thing is, a thermometer just reads the temperature. There is no adjustment. Just a reading. Fact. Acceptance.

A thermostat takes the reading and adjusts the heat to maintain it at the desired temperature. It is reactive and proactive. It adjusts. It optimises. In a foundry it changes matter from a solid to a liquid.

So which are you? A thermometer or a thermostat?

It is good to regularly measure the temperature of your relationship with God (thermometer), but even more important is to regulate (thermostat) your relationship with God in order to keep you at boiling point, thereby refining your relationship.

Does your relationship with God need some thermostatic adjustment? Is it time to turn up the heat? Spend some time in the presence of God to regulate your relationship with Him.

Ezekiel 24:11 (NIV)

*Then set the empty pot on the coals
till it becomes hot and its copper glows,*

*so that its impurities may be melted
and its deposit burned away.*



DAY 39

When I nipped home for lunch, I saw a programme on TV, and they were talking about a missing piglet!

The discussion was based on the idea that the piglet had been taken, or had run away. Then one presenter suggested that the piglet was just lost. It had wandered away unintentionally and had become lost. It didn't know its way home.

This reminds me of the stories in Luke 15 of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In all stories the shepherd, the woman, and the father were looking for what was lost. In the lost son story, the son realised his error in leaving his father, and returned home to a welcome reception.

For our morning worship today, my kids and I read a nature devotional book. The illustration was about salmon who swim from the place they were born, cruise the ocean seas, and then find their way back to the very stream they were born, to continue the reproduction cycle.

An experiment was quoted where they removed the smelling part of some of the salmon on one stream. Some of the sample salmon were not operated on. The "normal" salmon were released with the "modified" fish.

The normal salmon found their way to the exact stream they were born, while only about half of the modified salmon managed to get back "home".

Scientists say it is this smelling part of the fish, the olfactory, that guides them back home. The particles in the water make up a smell that they recognise, and they are able to trace this right back home.

Piglets may wonder off, and so might sheep, and there is a search for all (or most?) things we lose. But like the lost son, and the salmon, we can come to our senses, to "smell the coffee" as the saying goes, to wake up to our distance from God. And when we venture to return home, I believe we will get a celebratory welcome.

If you feel it is time to "swim home", finish reading this, click the link below, read the stories, and talk to God (say a prayer), something like:

Dear God

I have found myself wandering away from you. I know you will be happy to have me back. I just find it hard to be sure of that. But here I am. I am ready for you to show you love me. I am ready to return to a relationship with you. Thank you for your forgiveness. Thank you for your promises. Thank you for your returning presence in my life.

Amen



DAY 40

Two conversations. Unrelated. Linked.

I spoke on the phone today with someone who told me she is moving. Home. Country. She had just sold her car. Everything is going. She is giving up everything and going to study youth ministry in another country. She feels God is leading her this way.

I spoke to someone in a car park today. He has a part time job. Having had to share his wife's car for some time, he now has a car of his own. His boss sold him the car. Not for market value, but for less than the trade-in value. His boss, not a Christian, told him, "God gave you this car."

Both people, not only believe in God, but rely on Him. I get the impression that both rely on the presence of God in a way that if God says, "Give", she gives, and if God says, "Receive", he accepts.

Matthew 10:5-8

The Message (MSG)

Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge:

"Don't begin by travelling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighbourhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously."

I don't use this quote to persuade "her" to stay. I just like the last line. I wonder what have I given to God today. Only then might I be ready to receive. God gives generously. We get the chance to do so too.



DAY 41

RSVP

Répondez s'il vous plaît, a French phrase inviting a response. Sometimes we are asked to give our response, but sometime we give it anyway. Either way, our response can encourage, offend, persuade, and dissuade someone in their actions. Our influence on someone should not be disregarded.

I read today to two boys, each working as an altar boy, in different towns, but similar era. One boy accidentally dropped a goblet and spilt consecrated wine all over the floor. The priest struck the boy, shouting at him that he should not come back. The boy obliged.

The second boy accidentally did the same thing. A different church, a different priest. This time the priest winked, and whispered, "You are going to be a priest someday."

The first boy, Marshall Tito (Josip Broz), became the authoritarian dictator of the former Yugoslavia. The second boy, Fulton J. Sheen, became a TV priest in the USA. The assertion in the article I read is that it was the alter boy experiences that determined the polar opposite lives these boys developed.

I am not sure about the details or the implication of the article, but I repeat the story because I am pondering about the affect we have on others.

Proverbs 22:6 (NIV)

Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

OR

Proverbs 22:6 (MSG)

Point your kids in the right direction—
when they're old they won't be lost.

Two comments. Two priests. Two boys. Two different careers.

After Peter denied Jesus, three times, Jesus effectively winked at Peter and said, "You are going to be priest, a faith leader, someday."

I like it that Jesus did not tell Peter to clear off. It gives me hope. When I find myself stepping back from the presence of God, He doesn't keep his distance, but offers words of support.

God wants to direct us, without pushing us away. And we get that instruction when we are in the presence of God. And after all His expressions of love to us, He asks us to RSVP.



DAY 42

After a very long, traffic congested, painfully slow journey from Watford to Glasgow today, I am glad to be settled and reflect on my day.

During my journey I was reminded of one time I did this trip on the train. The second of two times on the train, the first going up the east coast, this time the trains took me up the west coast.

On my return leg I was gazing out of the window admiring the rolling hills somewhere between Glasgow and Carlisle. I noticed the distant snow tipped mountains, the babbling stream running alongside the rail lines, and the farmed animals, both sheep and cows. Then I noticed a man standing at the back of a 4x4 type vehicle.

As we clattered closer I surprised myself with the thought that it looked like he had no clothes on! Passing by about 30m from where he was parked, I can confirm that indeed he had nothing on but a pair of trainers, and stood facing the passing train. Don't let your mind think about that too much. I looked around the carriage, but no one else seemed to have seen the spectacle.

Today, on the radio the DJ gave reference to the Mayor of Louth, who had dressed up as a local food product for when the Olympic Torch passed through her town a few days ago. Her Lincolnshire Sausage outfit caused consternation with the town folk, as some thought the padded foam garb resembled a body part more than a sausage!

While both stories are linked to nudity, or a perception of naked awareness, I hope you will "bare" with me. (I only realised the pun as I typed it).

God created Adam and Eve, and they were naked. It was only their actions that broadened their perceptions, and they realised they were naked. Nothing wrong with that. It is how God made them. What happened was, the way they saw things changed. Selfishness. Personal gain. A disdain for the other person. Shame of doing wrong. Blame of someone else. All led to a cover up. Literally. It is sin, turning away from God, that produces perversion.

God made us to be in His presence. As there is no perversion in the presence of God, we are stuck. How do we shed our perversion, our sinfulness, mask over our wrongs? Trying to do it ourselves is another

mistake. We don't. We can't. God does. He has!

Isaiah 61:10 (NIV)

*I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

Until Jesus returns and makes all things new, we will always have a sliding scale of what is modest, and what is not. It is because others struggle that we should be careful not to provide distractions for them.

My pondering is not about how we see each other, or ourselves. It is about how God sees us. He offers to see us the way He made us. He sees us as covered up, not exposed. Therefore we don't need to hide from God. He forgives. He covers. He wants to dress us up like a spouse, because He adores us, and wants to be with us. Stop hiding. God sees you as a beautiful spouse.



DAY 43

I have had a great day at Glasgow Church doing Master Guide training with nine Master Guide hopefuls. I am so encouraged by the young age of the group, from four churches. Well done Scotland!

This afternoon's session was Christian Storytelling and Communication Skills. My irreducible minimum in communication skills is, "communication is done on the terms of the receiver".

The stereotype scenario is she says she told him last week, he says no she didn't because he didn't hear her. They are both right. She did say, but he didn't hear. Communication is done on the terms of the receiver.

God is not a distant God. Not in presence. When I speak to God, He hears me. He hears me because He wants to be intimately involved in my life. If I would let Him.

Psalms 18:6 (NIV)

In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.

If communication is a two way thing, and if God is listening to us, are we listening to Him?

Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

God made us to be in relationship with Him. So why wouldn't He stand at a metaphoric door and call for our attention?

The danger is we ignore God, or even do our own thing, with faith as a disguise. Or even create faith the way we want it to be.

2 Timothy 4:3 (NIV)

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

If communication is done on the terms of the receiver, and if we want to hear the voice of God (this is an inclusive phrase for an audible sound, a strong feeling, advice from those we trust etc), shouldn't we turn off all the distractions, and prepare ourselves to receive God's transmission?



DAY 44

I found it hard to keep my eyes on the road this evening, as I noticed the pitch silhouette of the Trossachs Mountains overlaying the blushing post-sunset sky. The sheer splendour of the mountains beckoned me into their presence, even at late dusk from tens of miles away. Thank you God, that through the turmoil of the flood You made such beauty.

Psalms 104:19 (NIV)

*He made the moon to mark the seasons,
and the sun knows when to go down.*

The view from your window may not be as majestic as this. I only wish I had a daily view like this! More often my window view is comparatively more bland. But God is equally there in that perspective.

So my pondering today is why does it take the magnificent to draw my attention to God, when He is around me in the minutia as well?

Psalm 104: 33-34(NIV)

I will sing to the Lord all my life;

I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

May my meditation be pleasing to him,

as I rejoice in the Lord.



Day 45

While Spain suffers with 25% unemployment, they have been celebrating their win last night of the Euro Football Cup. And it hasn't taken people long to come up with the jokes, like "Italy went to Poland 4-NOTHING". A joke about losing to Spain 4:0.

I read an article today about the fines UEFA have issued during the tournament: one for Croatia of \$100k for the fans chanting racist comments at Italy's Mario Balotelli, and another of \$125k against Danish striker Nicklas Bendtner for showing his underwear after scoring a goal - underwear clearly advertising a betting company.

<http://keepingscore.blogs.time.com/2012/06/25/10-things-weve-learned-about-soccer-from-euro-2012/?iid=sp-x-mostpop1#10-things-we-learn-from-euro-2012-some-things-are-worse-than-racism>

The article quoted above questions the disparity of the fines issued. The author questions why guerilla marketing should attract a higher fine than racism.

Whatever the reason and validity of the disparity, we live in a world of sliding scales of consequence. In UK law, if you assault someone you might get a warning or a short prison sentence. If you murder someone, your sentence will amount to years in prison. We seem to work with the idea that some wrong things are more wrong than others, therefore worthy of differing penalties. But assault and murder are wrong.

In the Bible there are various guidelines for better living, and some instructions from God. While these too seem to work with a sliding scale of consequence, the fact is everything is equally wrong. It is equally wrong to misuse the name of God as it is to murder. It is equally wrong to commit adultery as it is to forget the Sabbath.

In football it is equally wrong to be racist as it is to advertise unauthorised products.

The common thread is there seems to be a fluctuation of consequence according to how "wrong" we

rate things.

Every wrong is equally wrong, but all wrongs do not attract the same forfeit.

So what does this have to do with our relationship with God, and being in God's presence?

Romans 3:23 (KJV)

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Sin is doing wrong in the eyes of God. So this verse points out that we are in trouble!

In fact it gets worse. In the Greek writing of this verse, "for all have sinned" is in the past tense, and "come short of the glory of God" is in the present continuous tense. This means, we did wrong in the past, and we continue to do wrong today. Day after day!

When we do wrong according to God, the consequence is equal. We lose the presence of God. It's not like ice-hockey where we do wrong so we get sent to the "sin bin" for 5 minutes, then we can rejoin the game again. They don't have to apologise before they rejoin!

But here's the thing, God loves us so much that He forgives us and offers us the chance to be in His presence again. We just need to admit our mistakes and accept God's gracious forgiveness. There is no timed exclusion. His forgiveness and resumed communion with us is immediate.

John 3:16-18 (MSG)

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him."

I thank God that while wrong is wrong, and there are consequences, because of His love and forgiveness, I get to say sorry and am accepted back immediately into His presence. For now He is unseen, when Jesus returns I will see Him in full view.



Day 46

I did a devotional reading with the kids this morning. Pesky nuisance. The topic of the story not the kids! The reading was about "The Pesky Mosquito".

With a list of various facts and research, the satirical conclusion was "the best way to avoid mosquitoes is to be a not-too-clean, light-skinned male who wears light-coloured clothing and doesn't have to breathe!"

Apparently mosquitoes like the smell of soap, tend to go for dark skin, females, dark clothing, and the carbon dioxide in our breath attracts them.

All I know is while some people are less affected, mosquitoes are an indiscriminate pesky nuisance to everyone. With over 3500 different varieties of mosquito, I am indiscriminate in not liking all of them!

One thing about them that I learnt today is the high pitched whine they make is at a frequency five notes above high C.

So two things are constant; most species of mosquitoes suck our blood, and they all sing the same tune!

And so too with God. Not that He is pesky! Not that He wants our blood or sings a whiny song. But God is constant. Predictable. Never changing.

Hebrews 6: 17-19 (NLT)

God also bound himself with an oath, so that those who received the promise could be perfectly sure that he would never change his mind. So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.

Hebrews 13:8 (NLT)

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

I am glad I can have "great confidence" in what God has promised to me. That He is always the same.



Day 47

The Olympic Torch arrived in Norwich today. The birthplace of my parents. And I still have family that live in and near this city. And I have family who live in other countries, other continents.

I single out one uncle, as today a momentous announcement was made within his scientific field of work. My uncle, Dr David Stickland, works at one of the particle research centres in Cern, Switzerland. I am very proud of my uncle in the work he is involved with. He is working on one of the four experiments seeking to find the Higgs boson particle.

Nicknamed "the God particle", the Higgs boson particle is a theoretical particle which could help prove theories about particles, matter, and mass. I might not have got this exactly right but this is how I roughly understand it. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/eureka-cern-announces-discovery-of-higgs-boson-god-particle-7907677.html>). The announcement has not proved its existence, but "experiments see strong indications for the presence of a new particle", and "the experiments found hints of the new particle". (<http://public.web.cern.ch/public/>)

I am sure that when the particle has been found for sure, it will spark all kinds of theories and further experiments on the origin of the universe. An interesting time in earth's scientific history.

These particles used in the experiments are very small. But they matter so much that after nearly 50 years research and £2.6billion, research will still continue to search and find them. Small things matter. (No pun intended, if you got the inference).

Small things matter to God. I believe in intelligent design. Why could particles not be made with their own field of force? God uses small things to help us learn.

Proverbs 6:6

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!

Here we can learn from this small insect how to prepare ourselves.

Mark 4:31

It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.

Luke 13:19

It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.'

Luke 17:6

He replied, 'If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it will obey you.

Here Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, and faith. The kingdom of God is small but becomes large,

and is the measure of faith we need in order for God to work in our lives.

I am happy that scientific theories challenge the way I think and believe. I am happy that Jesus challenges me to consider small things. I am happy that being in the presence of God gives me a perspective of the minute, miniature, massive, and mega.



DAY 48

Today the Olympic Torch ended up in Ipswich. A town linked to the sea by the Orwell estuary. Built on the site of a large Roman villa, Ipswich became a settlement in the Anglo-Saxon times (7th-8th centuries).

From reading around, it seems Ipswich has a strong sporting heritage. I remember Ipswich Town doing rather well in football at the end of the 70's and early 80's. And I seem to remember going to see a speedway race, one of the teams being the Ipswich Witches.

I was reminded of this just a few days ago while driving through the Midlands. The local BBC radio was commentating on the wet conditions of the speedway track, being used by local speedway team rivals Birmingham and Wolverhampton. After an early race one of the bikes had suffered problems probably because of the wet sand kicked up by one of the other bikes, effectively caking bike and rider with the slurry.

As all the other three riders crossed the line in a close heat, the fourth rider was a long way back, aiming for the finish but moving slowly. By the description he must have looked like a slow moving sand castle!

Barely moving, the rider rocked the bike forward, finally ... crawling ... over ... the ... finish ... line. He made it. Not first place, but he made it.

And so too with our spiritual life. In our faith journey as we determine to the finish, we could encounter things that retard us, and slow us down. That is when our frequency of seeking God's presence really makes a difference. If we ignore God in the good times, how will we know the way into His presence in the bad times? And even seeking the presence of God does not preclude us from getting splattered with wet sand. It is through the bad times that we secure our relationship with God. This is when dependence is confirmed.

David wrote about this in the popular Psalm 23:4

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy

rod and thy staff they comfort me. (KJV)

God does not promise an easy life. We will still face dark valleys. What makes the difference is if we either ask God to accompany us on the journey, or blame Him for the darkness. I believe seeking the presence of God in the good times prepares us for the assurance that He is with us through the bad times. Even when we can't see or sense Him.

So when difficulties arise, press on. As Paul puts it (Philippians 3:14)

"I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus."

So when life seems like it's treated you like that speedway rider, you feel like you are metaphorically in dark valleys, covered in wet sand or other, press on to the end. God is with you, in the dark valleys and the wet sandy races.



DAY 49

Today has been International Kissing Day. 6 July. But of course a kiss is not just for one day. This day celebrates the kiss. An expression. A communication. An intimate act.

I was thinking of this as I was driving along, making my way back from a Friday evening appointment. Pondering about my ponderings, I pondered on "the kiss". This made me want to be home sooner!

I changed the CD in the player, and after a few songs, still thinking about the meaning of a kiss, the next track rifted through my speakers. I recognised the bassy chant of the instruments, and spun the volume dial up. Right up. A drying road after a day of torrential rain, street lights illuminating pads of orange on the motorway, outnumbered by trucks limited to 56mph, and no one to tell me to turn the music down because the kids are trying to sleep in the back. No, I was alone, keeping beat with my thumbs on the steering wheel, and singing like I wanted to lose my voice.

The album: "Kiss the River" by Paul Oakley. (<http://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/kiss-the-river/id410029540>).

I was listening to the song that gave its name to the album. The first lines of the song are:

I still remember, falling to the floor and
Now I, often wonder how I ever dared to let you come
Even closer, closer than the air around me

Underneath my skin.

The reference to "kissing the river" comes later in the song. Throughout the song there is a sense of being absorbed, surrounded, consumed, by the presence of God. Just like a kiss can lose you in the intimacy of the moment, this song basks in the pleasure of intimacy with God.

While kissing is to be celebrated, and enjoyed responsibly, the intimacy of the presence of God is to be celebrated too. Maybe it's time for you to "kiss the river"!



DAY 50

As I was driving home last night I passed a sign pointing to a village called "Great Ness"! What a fantastic name. Imagine being asked where you live, and you reply, "I live in Great Ness."

Living in greatness may be a place, financial comfort, a bestowed title, or an attitude of mind. But is living in greatness, or Great Ness, the best place to be?

My kids were watching a Focus on the Family video, Adventures in Odessey, in which one of the characters lives in a house called "Whit's End"! A funny place I have seen is a pub called "The Nobody Inn".

Places are important to us. Where we live. Where we used to live. Where we were born. Where we had a special time with God. Where we met a loved one. Where we got married. Where we go to be alone with God. Where someone is buried. Where we work!

I picked my mother-in-law, Cecilia, up from Belfast International Airport and started the hour and a half journey to Enniskillen where my wife, Emma, and I lived. Early in the journey, Cecilia mentioned about Emma coming home some time. I picked her up on the comment. Coming home? Where is home? It was a long journey ahead and the debate kept me awake.

For Cecilia, home was where her parents lived, that is, where she grew up. Also home is where she lives now.

My grapple was that for me I have lived in many properties in my childhood. Which one was my home? My parents had moved four or five times since I lived with them. Their house was not my home. I was a "blow-in" from England living in Northern Ireland. Was England my home, or Northern Ireland?

I concluded that my home was the place I live in with my wife, and children.

We finished the conversation with varying applications of where HOME is for us.

John 7:53 - 8:2 (NLT)

Then the meeting broke up, and everybody went home.

Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them.

In this story Jesus did not go "home". Where was home to Him?

Luke 9:58 (NIV)

Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

In this response Jesus suggests He has no home, or fixed abode.

The Mount of Olives was a favourite place Jesus went to. Seemingly it was not a problem that He had no permanent home. When others returned to their homes, Jesus went to the hillside, maybe the Garden of Gethsemane.

Before Jesus ascended into the clouds He made this promise to His followers,

John 14: 1-4 (NLT)

"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. And you know the way to where I am going."

This may need some more explaining, but the point I am making and pondering over is this, does it matter what name we give our home, favourite place, our house? Or does it matter more who is there with us? Our family. Our friends. Our God?



DAY 51

Hundreds, maybe thousands, watched at Wimbledon today to see if Andy Murray could win the men's final. And I went to Saint Albans to see the Olympic Torch Relay today.

Crowds covered the hill, shouting, waving things in the air, hoping the new would depose the old. There was great expectation. It seemed that sometimes he had performed miracles to get to where he was. The sense of triumph excited everyone. Could this be the time a national would reign victorious?

The crowds slowly filled the streets when people heard about the route through the city. It was like a carnival. A good atmosphere. Jostling to find the best place to see the procession. Everyone wanted to see the "chosen one". The one who brought light in a time of national struggle.

The entourage preceded the main party. People were peering and jostling to get a look. Some had waited a long time in their claimed roadside places to see this. Others joined later at the back of the throng, hustling their children forward to get a better view. Maybe this would inspire the youngsters to greater aspirations.

And then the cavalcade moved past. Slowly. Surrounded by those protecting the "chosen one".

As the crowd dispersed after they had seen what they came to see, memories and anticipation filled the sentences of the viewers. Little did they know they would be disappointed later!

Luke 19:45-46 (MSG)

Going into the Temple he [Jesus] began to throw out everyone who had set up shop, selling everything and anything. He said, "It's written in Scripture,

*My house is a house of prayer;
You have turned it into a religious bazaar."*

Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem, with crowds of supporting onlookers, amidst the high expectations is recorded in Matthew 17, Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 12. My experiences today remind me of the accounts of Jesus entering Jerusalem.

The description above could well have been what happened today: seeing the Olympic Torch, and later seeing Federer beating Murray. But the narrative is my description of Jesus' celebrated entry into Jerusalem in light of my day.

I'm glad I went with my family to see the Olympic Torch Relay. It's a one off. I'll not likely get the chance again. But it won't change my life.

I'm even more glad that I go with my family into the presence of God, via reading the Bible, devotional readings, focussing on faith in our conversations, and joint prayer. It's something I do regularly. It has changed my life.

When we participate in events and later say, "I was there", it's a proud claim. A point of reference. Do we equally claim to others, "I was there, today. There in the presence of God"?



DAY 52

Just after midday today the Olympic Torch spent time at the Stoke Mandeville Stadium, near the Stoke Mandeville Hospital, the claimed birthplace of the Paralympic Games.

A German born Jewish doctor, Professor Sir Ludwig Guttmann, fled the Nazi regime in 1939, and ended up working in a British Hospital. By 1943 he was asked to head up a new spinal injury hospital. Under his leadership, the Stoke Mandeville Hospital provided care for injured servicemen. Until his work, most patients with spinal injuries died within a year "having been given no hope of returning to their previous life."

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14896776>

Part of Guttmann's treatment was the morale boosting challenge of sport. Using wheelchair polo, wheelchair basketball, and archery, he encouraged a "can-do" spirit within people.

The first Stoke Mandeville Games took place in 1948, coinciding with the London Olympic Games that year. The first games were just 16 people, and archery was the first discipline. I reckon getting tickets for the archery at the Paralympics this year would have strong historic significance. ((Just checked and it seems these have all gone!)).

A team from the Netherlands joined the games at Stoke Mandeville four years later, and by 1960 in Rome the Parallel Olympics, later to be known as the Paralympics, became an Olympic event.

One man, with healing in his heart, made such a difference to so many people, directly and indirectly.

A paralysed man was once brought to Jesus. (Matthew 9, Mark 2, Luke 5). The disabled man had great friends. The house where Jesus was visiting was packed full, and the friends could not get the disabled man near Jesus. So they went up on the roof, broke a hole through the roof, and lowered the paralysed man down in front of Jesus. These are the kind of friends to have!

Jesus told the man his sins were forgiven. The religious leaders were outraged, because only God can forgive sins. They did not accept Jesus was God in human form. If I was the man, I would have been confused. I think I would have been hoping for physical healing not spiritual healing. Jesus asked which is easier to give, forgiveness for sins or physical healing.

But then Jesus did both. He looked at the man, and with the opportunity to teach different people different lessons, Jesus told the man to get up, pick up his bed, and walk. And the man did. He walked home.

People with spinal injuries were not expected to live long after their injury even back just 60 years ago. But what made a difference was hope in something better. Hope in a healing man.

The paralysed man received spiritual and physical healing. He had hope in a healing Man.

What do we need most? Physical healing, or spiritual healing? Whatever your answer, I figure that we need to do two things. Come into the presence of Jesus. Don't let the roof stop you from going into the presence of God! And have hope in the healing Jesus. Proximity, and hope. It's time to top-up on both.



DAY 53

Today the Olympic Torch finished up in a rainy Madejski Stadium, home of Reading Football Club. Oh, how I would love to have been there. My family have various connections with this town in Royal Berkshire.

It's the royal county name that gives the football team the nickname "The Royals". Unfortunately, I can't boast any royal relations that I know of, not even by nickname. Our association to Reading comes by birth. I was born not far from Reading, and my wife was born in Reading.

We do have a tenuous link to the Madejski Stadium though. My wife's uncle is good friends with John Madejski, and I have a photo of a table list from the mentioned uncle's 70th birthday party, where my name appears next to John Madejski's! I thought it would be a bit inappropriate to ask him for an autograph, or tell him my Dad used to buy the Thames Valley Trader, which grew into the Auto Trader brand, a car sales magazine, that made John his millions. So I settled for taking his photograph instead!

John Madejski bought Reading Football Club, and has been the chairman until the end of May this year, when he sold a major share in the club.

So there is my set of links. I only have royal claim by the fact I was born in Royal Berkshire, and my wife's uncle is friends of the previous owner of a football club called "The Royals".

But actually there is a link, a strong link, to me being a royal. And you are a royal too!

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

This text is used in the context of contrast, with those who reject Jesus.

You are special to God, and if you declare God's praises, you are considered part of God's royal family. And a priest enjoys the presence of God.

You are royalty. And you don't need to be born in a given place or have the title by heredity. You just have to know Jesus by spending time with Him, and accept that God loves you, and respond by living "Christ approved lives" (1 Peter 2:5 The Message).



DAY 54

The Olympic Torch toured from Reading to Salisbury today. Nearing Stonehenge, but not going there today. It will go there tomorrow. Possibly the oldest object the torch went near today was Salisbury cathedral.

In the cathedral is a clock dating back to 1386. It is the oldest surviving mechanical clock in Britain, and the oldest working clock in the world. It has no face. In those days clocks only rang out the time. Nowadays, it is accurate to within 2 seconds every 12 hours. That is amazing.

There is one thing that really bugs me, and that is poor timekeeping. So I was really mad tonight when I arrived late for a meeting. Timekeeping, and timing is important.

I read with my kids this week about a kind of fish that has to get the timing right according to the moon and tides. Within a certain three day window, the females follow the tide and wash themselves up on the shore, they lay their eggs just under the sand, and catch the next wave back into the sea. The male fish fertilise the eggs, and the tide action buries the eggs deeper into the sand.

Without the perfect timing, the eggs will get lost, the females will get stranded, the males will not get to fertilise the eggs, and the waves will wash away the eggs, or bury them too deep.

Timing is important in nature, man can make clocks to keep very precise time, and timing matters to God.

Reportedly the wisest man who ever lived said in Ecclesiastes 3 (NLT):

For everything there is a season,

*a time for every activity under heaven.
A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.
A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.
A time to search and a time to quit searching.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear and a time to mend.
A time to be quiet and a time to speak.
A time to love and a time to hate.
A time for war and a time for peace.*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbjSWDwJILs>

Earlier today I shared this from my DVLA facebook subscription. It is a promo about not using the phone to text while driving. Basically, concentrate on your driving when you are driving, and your texting when you are not doing anything else.

This makes me ponder about timing. In nature, timing is important. In life timing is important. When driving, timing is important. (It's then not time to text!) With God timing is important. Mark 13:32-37

And what of our time with God? Do we watch like the fish for the right time and give that time to God? Are we as precise as an old clock ringing out "it's now my time to spend with God"?

Or do we allow distractions (texting) to interfere with our journey with God (driving). If you have not been experiencing the presence of God in your life recently, maybe you need to think about your timing.



DAY 55

I noticed a sign today announcing a road closure on a given date due to the Olympic Torch route. It is almost two weeks notice. A big yellow sign purposefully placed in a prominent public position. (A lot of P words in that sentence! Would have been funny if it was a petite purple sign.)

I remember seeing a sign last year welcoming visitors in Telford to the BUC Congress. It was the BUC

Youth Congress over Easter. What a thrill to think, "I'm a part of that!"

And driving into London a couple of years ago seeing a sign about major delays due to a march in central London. I realised that that was the parade I was on my way to join, the SEC Youth march against gun and knife crime. Wow. I was going to be a part of that.

Different road signs tell us different things. Round road signs instruct us. Triangular ones warn us. The one I saw today notified me.

Jesus told us about signs. That various things would happen before he returns. And Jesus asked us to get involved in instructing, warning, and notifying people of His return. (Matthew 24)

Signs are great if you take notice. If you don't, then you can get into trouble, maybe a fine, maybe a driving ban. Of course, it's even better when everyone takes notice of the signs.

I wonder what signs God has been showing me but I have been too busy looking in the wrong direction? Sometimes on familiar roads we get used to the surroundings and forget to notice the signs. How true this is of my faith experience. It's easy to go through the motions, travel the same route, process my time with God, act out attendance at church. But how much more benefit would I have if I read God's signs? God's communication to me.

It's not just a few roads that will be closed at the end of time, the whole world will be closed. Maybe I should read the signs more often, prepare myself for the disruption, and tell others to do the same. I should be preparing to be a part of that.



DAY 56

I've had a childish afternoon and evening.

I had my 8 year old daughter and two of her girlie cousins in the car as we went out to visit somewhere. On arrival they expended all their accumulated energy from having sat watching "Ice Age 4" earlier this afternoon. Vocal. Loud. Running. Speed. Jumping. Everywhere. Conversation. Intense.

Then back in the car, the only restraint was the seatbelts. There was the same veracity, only encapsulated in the confines of the car. If captured it would fuel a power station.

After dropping my wife off to go and do the much needed shopping, I took the girls to a local park. This

park claims to be a Sport Legacy Zone, the first in the UK. Combining play and social fitness, the park has lots of outdoor exercise equipment, and playful apparatus for little people and parents alike.

As their energy propelled them across the field, over, under, through, and round the obstacles, I found myself acting the part of their coach.

When they needed lifting, I was called. When they needed spinning, I was called. When the moving parts needed retrieving because their short legs and arms could not reach, I was called. And of course, I had to do the Dad/Uncle thing and have a go!

We laughed. We ran. We got a little dirty. And then we piled back into the car when the rain started.

I have had a childish afternoon and evening.

One day, these girls will grow up. That is, grow out of doing childish things. Their "maturity" will progress them on to other things, unless they let go occasionally, or if they have to do the mum or aunty thing.

Doing childish things can be fun from time to time. But for most of us, maturity reshapes us.

1 Corinthians 12 talks about the abilities God gives us to work together in encouraging each other, and in sharing our faith. Chapter 13, which is best read in conjunction with chapter 12, reads on about the best ability, or attitude we can have is to love each other. Other good actions are pointless without the attitude of love.

1 Corinthians 13:11 (NLT)

When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things.

The simile here is that babies mature, grow, develop. And Paul uses this analogy to show that one day, when Jesus returns, we will reach a maturity in faith. Until then, we are childlike in our spirituality.

The end of the chapter concludes: *"Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love."* (verse 13)

Today, I had a childish afternoon and evening. But I don't normally behave like that, I'm more mature as the decades roll by!

Today, this afternoon and evening, I have a childish faith and hope. These are maturing by constantly seeking the presence of God. And as for maturity of love for others, I think that is found through spending time with God too.

As you seek the presence of God, may your faith and hope mature, may your love for others multiply exponentially, but may you never forget how to occasionally run, jump, and laugh like a 6-8 year old!



DAY 57

Hill View.

Today the Olympic torch went from Bournemouth to Southampton, via the Isle of Wight. Yesterday I mentioned about kids aged 6-8 years old, and I must have been about that age when I lived in Bournemouth. It's where my youngest brother was born. It's where I saw the QE II sail past Hengistbury Head, near Bournemouth, as part of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, with the Queen on board apparently; though at half a mile out from shore I have to take their word for it! And it is where I went to Hill View Infants School.

At church this morning, I had the blessing of being able to participate in the service of communion. Usually, I am at churches or events where we don't do communion. That's not usually done when the Youth Director is there. So for the last eight or so years I have rarely led or participated in communion.

Now the violins have stopped, I will just say we sang a hymn during the communion service today that always reminds me of the Adventist Church in Londonderry.

I was told that it is the hill the other side of the river Foyle from the Adventist Church that gave inspiration to the words of the song "There is a green hill far away". Cecil Alexander was the wife of the Anglican Bishop of Derry, who saw a green hill, or mound, regularly on her way into the city to do her shopping. This mound reminded her of the hill where Jesus was crucified.

Derry has an old city wall. I believe it is one of the only ones you can still walk all the way around the top. And this too is referenced in the song, "without a city wall", meaning, from the old English, outside a city wall.

Therefore, Cecil would regularly see a hill that reminded her of God's love for mankind, in sending His Son to experience the spiritual death we all deserve due to our rejection of God. That is, the death of spiritual separation from God the Father. Cecil had a Hill View to remind her!

It is recorded, "About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')." (Matthew 27:46 NIV). This is a direct quote from Psalm 22.

In reading this Psalm I noticed that there is a reference in verse 26 to the poor eating and being

satisfied. This reminded me of the stories of when Jesus fed large crowds, on a hillside (Matthew 14 and 15). The sum of these stories is Jesus took a small amount of food, gave thanks for the blessing, and shared it with the people. Jesus performed a miracle of multiplication. Everyone ate and was satisfied. There was even food left over. The crowds and the disciples learnt a lesson on those days. They had a Hill View experience.

These same lakeside hills are where Jesus met with his disciples after his resurrection. And here on the hillside Jesus told them 1. in your going (as you go about your daily business) 2. make disciples (followers of Jesus) 3. baptising them and 4. continue teaching them all I have told you. (Matthew 28:19-20). This instruction was done with a backdrop of a Hill View. This was another Hill View experience for them.

Our Hill View may not be an infant school, a grassy urban mound, a song, or a Galilean location, but I think it is good to have a Hill View. A Hill View in terms of the presence of God, is a place we can associate with God's love and mission.

I thank God that things around me: my spiritual Hill Views, remind me of the love God has for us, and how He asks us to share that good news with others. What, and where, are your Hill Views?



DAY 58

Have you ever done something you haven't tried for years? I went roller-skating this evening. I was never too good, or confident, at roller-skating when I was a teenager. Ice-skating was the more regular mode of wrestling with gravity. And I wasn't much good at that either.

So this evening my family attended a birthday party at a roller-skating rink. My kids did well; I reminded some of my muscles they have to work for a living, and my wife weaved through the shuffling crowd with grace and style, reliving her teenage years.

My daughter got in the car to come home and announced how many times she managed to fall over. I had spotted others who toppled the balance between stability and velocity. I know from past experience that when you start to go, your fall ranges from an elegant drop to an Olympic gymnastic routine. Your world can turn upside-down.

We have a danger in our relationship with God of turning things upside-down too. That is, getting things wrong, mixed up, ending up on our back.

Isaiah 29: 13-16 (NIV) describes this as a warning.

The Lord says:

'These people come near to me with their mouth

*and honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me
is based on merely human rules they have been taught.
Therefore once more I will astound these people
with wonder upon wonder;
the wisdom of the wise will perish,
the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.'*
*Woe to those who go to great depths
to hide their plans from the Lord,
who do their work in darkness and think,
'Who sees us? Who will know?'*
*You turn things upside down,
as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!
Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it,
'You did not make me'?*
*Can the pot say to the potter,
'You know nothing'?*

God knows us as our maker. God loves us. God wants to develop a regular contact with us. God wants us to be in His presence. We can't hide anything from God. And worse still, we can say the right things in worship, but we don't really have our heart in it! But there's no fooling God.

But there is hope. Vs 22-24 read:

*Therefore this is what the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, says to the descendants of Jacob:
'No longer will Jacob be ashamed;
no longer will their faces grow pale.
When they see among them their children,
the work of my hands,
they will keep my name holy;
they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding;
those who complain will accept instruction.'*

If you find your life, your spiritual life, has been hollow, mixed up, in reverse, upside-down, why not try the formula above? Keep God's name holy, distinct, revered, special enough to tell others about. Acknowledge God in every aspect of your life. Involve God in your decisions, fears, and joys. Allow enough time in your day to stand in awe of God, to have some "you-and-God-time" together. Seek the presence of God without there being the pressure of rushing to another appointment.

Try turning your world upside-down.



DAY 59

Fabric conditioner! What kind do I buy? I stood in the aisle this evening doing my mental arithmetic working out which one was the best price. Which one was on promotion. The most litres I could get for the fewest pounds spent. What kind do I buy? The cheapest branded kind!

It's all about choice. Life is full of choices. The choice of fabric conditioner. The places we go. The people we call friends. The spouse we marry. The home we live in. The time we give God. All are choices.

James 4:4 (NIV)

"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

James puts all our choices down to one major choice; will we be friends with the world, or friends with God?

He later goes on to say how much God wants to be with us. James 4:8 (NIV) *"Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."*

The past 58 days I have been writing about being in the presence of God. As the Olympic Torch toured our countries, imagine the presence of God, the Holy Spirit, filling our nations with His presence! Today I ponder about the same thing. And how wonderful it is that James encourages us to come near to God. James asserts that if we do, God will come near to us.

And God gives us this option. Coming near to God, seeking His presence, is our choice. The most important choice we can make. A daily choice. What have you chosen to do with God today?

I read today in TIME Magazine (23 July 2012) a quote by US Governor of Maryland, Martin O'Malley, that "Progress is a choice." He was talking about the state's approach to the economic downturn, and raising income tax to preserve state services.

In light of the verses in James, O'Malley gives us insight in our spiritual lives. If we want progress with our relationship with God, we need to tax our time in order to preserve our relationship with God. To come near to God, to seek Him, with our whole heart (Jeremiah 29:13). And then we will find God. That's real progress. That's a progressive choice.



DAY 60

Today, the Olympic Torch ended its day in Hastings. Famous for the battle on 14 October 1066, it is imaginatively known as "the battle of Hastings".

On that day in history, the Normans, under Duke William II of Normandy, beat the English, lead by King Harold II. It is notable because it is the last time England was defeated on its own soil by an invading country. And consequently, as the Normans spoke French, within time French words started slipping into the English language.

Duke William II of Normandy was crowned King of England on Christmas Day 1066.

It would be a quick link for me to now talk about a spiritual battle that has been going on since mankind was put on this earth. So why not?

My life goes through times when it feels like things are going against me. That there is a battle going on. A Pastor is not exempt from temptations and afflictions! I am very much aware of the spiritual battle going on to pull me away from my time with and faith in God. And it is easy to feel defeated by other decisions that have to be made.

1 Samuel 17:47 (NIV)

"All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

David was a young man, short, but full of the boldness of his faith in God. In front of his brothers, the Israelite army, and King Saul, who stood head and shoulders above all the other Israelites (but that's another lesson!), David taunted the taunter, and he taunted the taunters battle strong warriors.

David's message was simple; it matters not what the threat is, the battle belongs to God. He will give me the victory.

What a wonderful outcome of putting your faith in God. God will give you victory in your battles. If that is the criterion, and the outcome, what have you done to maintain your faith in God today? How are your facing your battles? Have you spent time enough with God so you can face every battle with confidence?

David still had to face his giant, but God promised the victory. And I believe God offers the same victory to everyone today. The good thing is, you don't have to learn French to be on the winning side!



DAY 61

The Olympic Torch made its way into Kent today, finishing up in Dover. And I went to Kent today too. We had an outing to Diggerland with our extended family.

Amidst the busyness of work it was good to steal back some time with my family. While it was breezy, quite blowy actually, and cloud cover was 100%, the rain only came as a drizzle while we were indoors for lunch, and as a tropical storm as we were making sure the right children were in the right vehicles on departure. Praise God!

I am a miserable person to be with in a crowded leisure park, but today I was smiling like a groom. At the height of the busy time there was only 100 or so people there, and one of the park staff said within a week they will have 1000+ visitors, with queues of an hour for some of the rides/tasks. Not a place for me then!

But today, we waited for the three or four people in front of us to take their turn, and then we were on. A day when my 8 year old daughter hooked plastic ducks out of a pond with a mini-digger using a chain and ring on the end of the arm. My son drove a 7.5 tonne, £52k JCB digger (brand new registered this year!) around the muddy and undulating digger track. And I screamed like a primary school girl as I sat with my nieces and daughter in the bucket of a giant digger as it spun round at high speed, at incrementally higher levels during the ride.

One of the rides/tasks, was to use a mini-digger to pan for gold. Well actually, you use a rake-like bucket on the digger to sift through the wet gravel, looking for the metal bricks; four in all. You scoop them up, and then place them to the side. With controls in both hands, to operate up and down, forward and backwards, and roll the rake/bucket away and towards, it takes some getting used to if you haven't used this machinery before.

Patience and method help you find the bricks. Concentration helps you do the task.

This reminded me of the sequence of stories, illustrations, Jesus told recorded in Matthew 6 & 7; storing up treasure (6:19-24), not worrying about worldly possessions (6:25-34), and asking, seeking, and knocking (7:7-12). And I am reminded of the story, well sentence actually, of a merchant who sold everything to buy a field that he knew had treasure in it (Matthew 13:44).

To summarise and apply these verse to my experience today, Jesus said, concentrating on your motivation for material possessions is a distraction, but equally you don't need to worry about what you have, or don't have, if you are making the search for God's kingdom your first priority. That when you make it imperative to ask of God, seek for God, and knock on God's door (call around at God's house,

metaphorically speaking), you will be given what you are looking for because God welcomes you with an open door policy.

The imperative is that if a relationship with God is that valuable, we will give everything to maintain the ownership of that relationship, that nothing else will matter.

Digging for metal bricks in gravel is hardly a religious activity, but it can help emphasize the above mentioned invitation from Jesus. If we want the bricks, the valuable relationship with God, we have to spend time and concentration, and use our senses to gain what we value.

So next time you see a digger, ask yourself, "What am I digging for? Where is my treasure?"



DAY 62

Have you ever read a verse or more in the Bible and thought, "Wow! I never read that before", but on closer inspection you realise you must have, because you had already underlined it? Well I did that this morning!

I have been reading around John 5 for a while. There is so much in these verses, so much that relates to other things, and I have had days of distracted reading. My revelation was with verse thirty-nine.

John 5:39 (NLT)

"You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!"

Jesus was talking to the Jewish leaders after He had healed the man at Bethesda who had been an invalid for 38 years. The Jewish leaders were being meticulously pedantic over the application of an interpretation of working on the Sabbath. This man should not be carrying his mat on the Sabbath!

Jesus scolded them with a lesson on how we should read the Scriptures. Jesus said they read the Scriptures in order to gain eternal life. But in reading, they had totally missed the references to the coming Messiah, Jesus.

In fact it gets worse. Jesus said they read the Scriptures wrong because they didn't have a love for God in their hearts. That's brutal exposure!

So how do we read the Bible? Isn't it by reading that we gain eternal life?

In Acts the Bereans read the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). Paul and Silas went to Berea and were preaching about Jesus being the promised Messiah. The Bereans didn't take the preachers word as "gospel"! They

checked themselves, to see that everything was true. A worthwhile activity for us all. Never believe what a preacher says without checking for yourself.

So how do you read the Scriptures? If by reading the Bible we can gain eternal life, what need is there of Jesus, or our search for the presence of God?

Reading the Scriptures is pointless unless we have the love of God in our hearts. It is by grazing on the Scriptures with a desire for God that we gain benefit. Otherwise, we read and simply gain knowledge. Read the Bible because you are in love with God.



DAY 63

On the day a teenager tried to grab the Olympic Torch in Gravesend, Kent, the Olympic Torch/Flame ended the day with a dramatic arrival at the Tower of London. Carried by a Royal Marine abseiling from a helicopter, the Torch joined all the medals in the safety of the Towers vaults.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18930410>

At the end of our day, as a family we sat together to read the story of Gideon. A fearful farmer, who considered himself less important than everyone else in his family, not least as his was the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh.

It is a story worth reading, and to read it again even if you are familiar with the story. (Judges 6:11-8:35. I am referring mainly to 6:11-23).

I find it interesting as to what Gideon accepts and what he challenges. Gideon accepts the stranger without question. The stranger, the Angel of the Lord, tells Gideon he is a strong warrior and that God is helping him. Strange this "strong warrior" is fearfully preparing his grain in a pit, out of site from his enemies!

Gideon respectfully suggests, challenges, that God did amazing things in the past for Israel, but that was then. Now there is no sign of God. Gideon felt abandoned.

Then God commands Gideon to be strong, because God was going to give him the power to rescue Israel. This makes me wonder if we shouldn't be careful what we complain to God about. If I go to God with a problem, He might make me the agent of change! But if He does, He will give me the power to do the job.

Gideon needs a sign that this is really happening, and he wants to offer a sacrifice to God. So before he goes to prepare himself, Gideon asks God to wait until he brings God an offering. And God says, "OK, I'll

wait."

Then Gideon brought to God a valuable meal, a feast really. And when Gideon realised he had been in the presence of God, God had to calm him down as Gideon thought he was about to die. Gideon was exposed, but found safety in the presence of God.

The Olympic Torch is somewhat exposed to people breaking ranks and reaching for the Torch as it travels the streets, but for the "bubble" of Police security. Heightened security seems certain with a professionally trained soldier depositing the Flame into the vaults at the Tower of London. If the crown jewels are safe there, then probably everything else is safe there too.

God is like the Olympic Police safety bubble, and like the Tower of London. But just as God expected Gideon to get up and do something with His promise, God asks that of us too.

Things happen in our lives that might be likened to the threat of Midianite invasion, and plundering. We might hide in a pit, fearful of our life. We might even summon God to challenge Him as to why it seems such a long time ago that He "saved the day".

The threat of exposure is not the absence of protection and provision.

In my previous ponderings I have reflected on the protection God offers. I won't repeat myself now. In this story God's protection was only withdrawn when people "disobeyed the LORD." (Judges 6:1). Gideon was faithful to God, even under threat. And God rewarded Gideon's worship of the true God, even when Gideon kept asking for a sign so as to be sure this was God. Gideon then got up, rallied the troops, and told them of his experience, that God was about to let Israel win. And they did.

And when we experience this kind of salvation and protection from God, we get a chance to tell everyone about it.

Psalm 40 (NIV)

9 I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly;
I do not seal my lips, Lord,
as you know.

10 I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;
I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.
I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness
from the great assembly.

11 Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord;
may your love and faithfulness always protect me.

12 For troubles without number surround me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.

They are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails within me.
13 Be pleased to save me, Lord;
come quickly, Lord, to help me.

As you seek the protecting presence of God in your life, remember to share your experiences with others. What you tell them might be just what they need to hear.



DAY 64

This evening my 11 year old son talked me through the moves to complete the Rubik's cube. I have never done this before. And it took my well practised son to help me do this for the first time. Thank you, Luke.

I heard a great sermon today, by a sports degree student, based on the idea that Jesus is for life, not just for Christmas; Jesus is for Uni, not just for home. She used a number of sporting illustrations to good effect, and was honest in her testimony about her early days in this her first year at uni.

Intending to be bold in her witness, she confessed that Sabbaths became a lay-in day, and intentions remained intentions. Time and opportunity has changed that, and she is now more involved in witness on campus. (N - I hope this is a fair précis of your talk. Thank you and well done).

Two young people. Two lessons learnt today.

Paul wrote to a young missionary. He counselled not to be puzzled by confusing teachings, he used a sporting analogy, and encouraged Timothy not to allow his youthfulness to be a reason to give up.

1 Timothy 4 (The Message)6-10

You've been raised on the Message of the faith and have followed sound teaching. Now pass on this counsel to the followers of Jesus there, and you'll be a good servant of Jesus. Stay clear of silly stories that get dressed up as religion. Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever. You can count on this. Take it to heart. This is why we've thrown ourselves into this venture so totally. We're banking on the living God, Savior of all men and women, especially believers.

11-14

Get the word out. Teach all these things. And don't let anyone put you down because you're young. Teach believers with your life: by word, by demeanor, by love, by faith, by integrity. Stay at your post reading Scripture, giving counsel, teaching. And that special gift of ministry you were given when the

leaders of the church laid hands on you and prayed—keep that dusted off and in use.

Whether you are in secondary or tertiary education, over educated or uneducated, don't let your young age deter you from teaching someone something new. Be sure you don't get distracted in your faith. Exercise daily in God. Read the Scriptures. And keep doing something for God's sake.

Thank you young people for teaching me something recreational and spiritual today.



DAY 65

Yesterday I pondered about the lessons youth can teach us older ones. This time I ponder over a football game I was involved today. Under 35's v over 35's. Yes I was in the second group! With youthful athleticism on their side, us older ones still managed to beat them 3:2! But given the way I feel, I bet I know who is more likely to have been nursing aching muscles; the older ones!

The saving grace of the game was that we could swap players, a bit like ice hockey. Ten minutes on, and then it's time to hand over your bib to someone fresher than you. Change was a good thing.

This evening, when my kids got home from a party and time visiting friends, they saw the last part of Crocodile Dundee II. Mick Dundee, the hero, gradually "kidnaps" each of the seven men trying to hunt Mick down. Set in the outback of Australia, there are funny moments as each person gets taken from the group. Most were in amusing mischievous ways, which made my kids laugh.

At the end, Mick swaps clothes with the villain. They walk out in the open making it look like the villain had caught Mick. Wally, a terrible shot, shoots at "the villain". He goes to the ground. This flushes out the last villain, who shoots "Mick", who falls over the cliff. The heroine shoots the emerging villain, and then grieves over her lost loved one.

A friendly Aboriginal appears, and explains the swap, and says something like, "Just as well you are a bad shot, Wally." They had counted on Wally being a bad shot so Mick would not be seriously hurt, and present the intended illusion, flushing out and disposing of the two villains. While this is not the kind of TV our family promotes, the illustration is useful; the change (of clothes) was a good thing.

Romans 12:2 (NLT)

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

There are times when CHANGE IS A GOOD THING. Like changing tired players in football. Like changing

places/clothes to save your life. Like allowing God to change the way you think.

This is not a brainwashing, it is a choice, one that you can revoke at any time. It works with the idea that some things in this world are not good for us. Selfishness, greed, and a lack of loving concern for others breeds hatred, prejudice, and intolerance.

I like the way The Message translation puts this verse, "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you." (v.1-2).

Sometimes change is good. Especially when we have a God who is unchanging. Hebrews 13:8 (NLT)
"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

So if change is sometimes a good thing, and if God can help us change spiritually, what do you and I need to ask God to change in our lives?



DAY 66

Carbohydrate and "special blessings".

I am resisting the ponder about the Olympic Torch route and day 66, and end up with some linked thoughts about the famous US Route 66. But there it is, I've mentioned it anyway!

My ponderings today do have an Olympic link. My wife and son went into London today for a seminar day on adolescent diabetes. As mentioned before, my son is insulin dependant, and is my hero. The amount he has had to bare since diagnosis at 17 months is a lot. I am so proud of him.

Their trip exposed them to a flavour of the Olympics, with signs and banners everywhere. They came back with comments about what they saw. They also came back with an amazing book about carbohydrate counting.

The basic relevance of this in Luke's case is he has to have a measured amount of insulin according to his carbohydrate intake. This book has pages of pictures with different portions of foods, so you can look in the book, estimate your portion, and total the carbohydrate in your meal. It saves weighing out food when you are a guest at someone's house, or out for a meal! This book may not mean much to you, but to us it is like a scientists book of formulas, a cheat sheet for students.

Counting carbohydrate is important for Luke. It's a matter of healthy living, pretty much life or death. With this book, he can count his carbohydrate, and we can count our blessings.

And now for one of my irritations. I hope that was a smooth enough transition for you from the Olympic Torch route to the subject of blessings!

Maybe one day I will write about this some more, but for now I will give you the short version. I get so mad when people use the word, bless, or blessings, or they ask God in a prayer to bless this, that, and the other, or worse still, ask God to bestow a "special blessing" on something. What do they mean?

Do these people think about what they are saying? For me, it's like tossing "blessings" around. Like a modern artist flicking a paint laden brush towards an already splattered canvas. The blessing paintbrush adding another layer of paint blessing at the canvas of life. Both this kind of use of the word blessing, and that kind of modern art make little sense to me.

To temper my rant, let me just ask, what does it mean when we ask God to "bless" someone or something? Does God know what we are talking about? Do we know what we are talking about?

Like an insulin dependant diabetic needs to count their carbohydrate intake, we need to count the blessings we receive, and those we ask for, and name them one by one. Yes, that does sound like a song I used to sing as a child. But why is it that somewhere between childhood and adulthood we lose the detail of the blessing?

We have misled ourselves by sitting with a plate of food in front of us, and asking God to "bless" our food. This is not Biblical! Open your eyes. Sniff in the aroma. You have the blessing in front of you already!

Jesus did the Hebraic thing when He fed the large crowds. He took the food they had, gave thanks (properly translated in modern translations, and not in the old English translation), and performed a miracle of multiplication so everyone ate and was satisfied. Jesus gave thanks for the blessing.

My appeal to you is not to use the word "bless" or "blessing" without specific reference. If you want God to bless someone, explain how! I pray with my kids in the evening and ask for a blessing, but I name the blessing. I ask for the blessing of a restful night. In the morning I pray our family will have a blessing that day, of peace, of tolerance, of whatever I feel relevant for that day.

Counting is important. Not just diabetics counting carbohydrate, but us counting named blessings. Ask for blessings by name, and give thanks for blessings by name too.

Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God has done!

Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.
-<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/c/o/countyou.htm>



DAY 67

I took my kids to the park today. Lots of kids roaming around in the hot sunny weather. Some boys came along and sheltered in the shade of one of the play apparatus. One boy had been talking to my son as they played on a flying fox type piece of equipment.

The boys then sheltered again, and shared out some bags of crisps from a multi-pack bag. As they finished the bags, they tossed them away, as if they would vanish into thin air. I was irritated by their poor behaviour. I considered talking to them, and make them pick up their litter.

As I talked myself out of telling them off, suggesting in my mind that one of the boys had a wrestler of a Dad who might come and tell me off for telling his son off, my son walked over and proceeded to pick up the empty bags, now tumbling across the play area blown by the welcome breeze.

I noticed the boy who my son had been talking too took notice of this neighbourly act. But he said nothing. My son casually gathered the rubbish, and found a bin to put it in. No drama. Over in a matter of seconds. He needn't have done it, but I am proud he did. And for the sake of my wife reading this, yes, I did tell him!

As we were leaving the park my young daughter befriended a puppy. Jumping on the end of its lead, the puppy enjoyed my daughters attention. The owner admitted that even a little puppy needs a lot of care. I was grateful for that comment! And then as we left, my daughter said to the dog owner, "Thank you for letting me play with your dog."

I walked out of that park a very proud father. I commended my daughter for her comment. Then we jumped in the car and went to get something to eat.

1 John 2 (NLT)

15 Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. 16 For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. 17 And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.

My kids made me proud of them today. I am proud of them anyway, but I hope you know what I mean.

I was pleased they had behaved so well. In the Bible it talks about us being children of God. If God is our heavenly Father, is it possible for us to do things that please and disappoint our Father?

My kids behaviour today in the park made me wonder what I have done today that pleased God; that made Him proud of me, His son?



DAY 68

Just before 1pm today the BBC Torch Relay website posted that hundreds of red balloons had been let off, just before the torch team stopped for a lunch break.

Much as I have tried to find a picture of this, I have found nothing. Sorry. But it didn't stop me from looking, and started me singing a 1983 song by Nena called "99 Red Balloons". If you don't know it, don't look it up. It will plague you! You have been warned.

The original song was in German, and the lyrics slightly different to the English ones. In English the storyline is two kids buy some red balloons, inflate them, and let them go. They drift from West Germany to East Germany, and an East German radar technician spots something on the radar and activates a nuclear attack warning. Missiles are fired from Global East and returned by Global West. A world nuclear war defaces the surface of the earth. This is obviously before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Young ones, consult your history books.

At the end of the song, the singer says she is looking for something to prove what was there, and finds a single red balloon. Then she lets it go. One suggestion is this song represents the dreams the post WWII Germans had of peace without division. Each red balloon is a dream of something better.
(<http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=2511>)

I have heard some concerns recently about the perceived association between the Church and the Olympics. Without unwrapping that one too much, I want to say we should never compromise our faith, for anything. But we have an opportunity to do something for God's sake!

The "Jesus Followers" in the book of Acts didn't stay quiet during a Jewish festival. Paul didn't stay quiet when surrounded by statues of mythical gods. So we should not stay quiet when the world is visiting the Olympic Games. That's not compromise, that's opportunism!

The founder of the International Olympic Committee is Pierre de Coubertin. His perspective of the competitive aspect of the games was stated this way, "The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle, the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

"...de Coubertin's idea that winning was less important than striving is at odds with the ideals of the Greeks. The Apostle Paul, writing in the first century to Christians in the city of Corinth where the Isthmian Games were held, reflects this in his writings when he says, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize", (1 Corinthians 9:24)." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_de_Coubertin)

The struggle to make the best of oneself, to win, to dream of better, to have a red balloon, is not just a sporting slogan, or an aspiration inferred in a song.

Revelation 21 (NLT)

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.

And the sea was also gone. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

It's good to have dreams, aspirations, red balloons. It's good to do your best, in sport, in study, in work, for others. But the best dream, vision, I have heard is that one day, everything will be levelled, everything made new, everything will be like God intended for us to experience, with the absence of selfishness and personal gain. I can't wait. Come, Jesus, come. This is my red balloon.



DAY 69

God is with me where ever I go.

For the last 68 days I have been sharing my ponderings as the Olympic Torch has toured the UK and visited Ireland. The proximity of the torch to the majority of the population inspired me in its example of the close proximity of the presence of God in our lives.

I was unsure as to what to write about for DAY 69 as I know I would be out much of the day, and I did not anticipate sharing what I have been getting up to! As some seem to think that a Pastor is available 24/7 and therefore does not have time to have holidays, days/time off, family time, or time off in lieu, I was thinking of not mentioning that I took my son to Old Trafford, home of Manchester United football team, to see two Olympic football matches!

When the tickets were booked (thanks Grant) some time ago, we did not know which teams were to play on which days. To our joy, having booked the tickets, we discovered that Team GB was drawn to play Senegal on our ticket day!

I am only glad that 4.5 hours that have passed since the end of the game, and my drive home has given me time to conclude I will not comment on the game; not even the cautious approach of Team GB, the filthy fouling of Senegal, and the lack of consistency from the referee. Though I did enjoy the United Arab Emirates v Uruguay game!

While I have been pondering on the presence of God in my life, and wondering what to share with you about day 68, something caught my eye in the stadium. I saw it first on the big screen, then I spun round to see it for real.

In the Sir Alex Ferguson Stand (where no one stands any more, it's all seating only!) the chairs are coloured to spell Manchester United. This is unseen when people are sitting in the seats. A block in the middle seemed to be reserved, but was at times unoccupied. The surrounding seats were full. In amongst all the crowd was the unoccupied gap, which relieved the letters HE. HE was in the middle of the crowd. HE was in the stadium. HE was with us, even if others did not realise!

Jesus said something to his followers before HE left this earth with the promise to return, "Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 (NLT))

I am with you always! HE, Jesus, is with us always! HE, Jesus, wants to share HIS presence with us, even if we don't realise it!

I was moved by what I saw and what I realised God was telling me. In the massive crowd, with all the noise, so much to keep our attention, I believe God was telling me HE is with me. And I believe God wants you to know HE is with you too.

HE is with us, where ever we go! HE wants to be in our presence.



DAY 70!

The end has come!

Or is it the beginning?

ENDING

It is the end of the 70 days of the Olympic Torch Relay; weeks and weeks of the torch touring the nations of the United Kingdom, as well as visiting the Republic of Ireland. The torch, representing the spirit of the Olympics, covered 8000 miles, and visited a city, town, or village near you.

As this pondering devotional blog has been following the 70 days of the torch tour, the end has come for me to finish my last rambling thoughts.

The end has come for another week. Just a Sabbath day left. A time to put aside all that preoccupies my time and devote more attention to God, my family, and other people.

BEGINNING

But it is the beginning too. The beginning of the opening ceremony for the Olympic Games. We had two protesting kids this evening when we turned off the television and settled down for worship at sunset. For us in Watford, less than 20 miles from the Olympic Stadium, sunset was minutes before the much publicised opening ceremony.

Instead of focussing on the opening ceremony, we focused on the opening of Sabbath! For us it was a chance to teach our kids that nothing, not even a £27 million extravaganza watched by 1 billion people worldwide takes the place of our worship of God.

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/blog/2012/jul/27/4-billion-olympic-opening-ceremony>)

What my kids did see on TV this evening was the Red Arrows flying in perfect formation. With so many people watching worldwide, it is easy to see how global events can be seen in an instant around the world.

We have heard an unusual number of helicopters, including military choppers, flying over our area. There has been a lot of busy activity in the sky, which has caught the attention of my kids.

APOCALYPTIC ENDING AND BEGINNING

For evening worship I deliberately chose two stories; one of the three angels bringing their messages (like the Red Arrows), and another of the return of Jesus in the clouds (like the helicopters).

I asked my kids to look for lessons as they compared these stories with the Olympic Games opening ceremony. With some discussion, they got it. And gave it more interest than they had shown in pining to see the ceremony.

If the Bible is to be believed, we are told that God will give everyone the chance to turn back towards Him. This is the message of the three angels. Each message is about worship. True worship. Worship of God.

JESUS LEAVING (ENDING) AND RETURNING (BEGINNING)

The Bible also says that Jesus will return just as He left the earth (drifting up into the clouds Acts 1:11 (NLT) "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!").

And that when He returns, those who have returned to God will live eternally. 1 Thessalonians 5:10 (NLT)

Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever.

A MOST IMPORTANT ENDING AND BEGINNING

So the end has come for the Olympic Torch Relay, and with it the beginning of the Olympic Games.

The end has come for my 70 days of ponderings on the presence of God in our lives. As for a beginning, well maybe I begin to get my evenings back!

But how about the most important ending and beginning? Is the most important ending and beginning the end of life on earth as we know it, and the beginning of an eternal life? While this will be important, and I believe more than 1 billion people will see that, there is a more important ending and beginning.

The most important ending and beginning you can experience is the end of turning away from God, and the beginning of experiencing the daily presence of God in your life. It is not easy. There are always distractions. Leaving God out of your life seems so easy to do. It's so easy to say, "God can wait for later." But you never get round to making the date.

So what is it time you ended? And what do you need to begin?

If you are interested in learning about God's love for you, about ending your running away from God and beginning your faith journey, contact me, LIKE us on our Facebook group (BUC Youth Ministries), and keep in touch at our website (www.adventistyouth.org.uk). If you like I can put you in contact with someone local to you to help you in your faith journey.

And if you want the ending and beginning to start right now, join me in this prayer:

Our Father in Heaven, we sense you exist but we want to know you more.

Help us to intentionally set aside some time every day just for you. Even in our day, may we present our struggles and victories to you. Help us develop a habit of chatting with you.

May we put aside our life of self, and begin a life of eternal opportunities with you.

We ask these things because you love us and want us to join with you in your presence.

AMEN.

-Pr Nathan Stickland

PS Thank you for joining me in my ponderings about the presence of God. It has been a joy to share with you, and an amazing experience of focus for me.

Remember what God said to His people taken as slaves to a foreign land, "If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me." - Jeremiah 29:13. Enjoy seeking God wholeheartedly!