

World of Madagoo

Hi, I'm Malcolm. I was born in the north of England, so I'm a true Geordie! I lived some of my childhood in a picturesque village there, the youngest of three children. I grew up as a catholic, and was very interested in "things churchy" but had no idea who God was, what Jesus did for me, or why the Holy Spirit was sent. These were not part of my education.

Eventually, I moved to London where I joined a technical university, and after some problems with accommodation during my summer work-placement, I had to bed-down on the floor of a friend-of-a-friend. This guy turned out to be a Christian, and would regularly read his bible aloud to me and obviously at me! Well, I was a good Catholic boy, I had my own religion thanks very much! I didn't need some zealot trying to convert me! But, after a couple of knock-backs, I had to say yes to his invite to come to church; I figured I'd be out on my ear if I didn't say yes.

That first night at the Baptist church was quite eerie for me; I'd never been to a Baptist church before! The guy on the door embodied everything I expected a Mormon to be (even though I had never met one at that point) and he somehow represented something that was squeaky clean and somehow not to be fully trusted (How wrong I was!!)

I was fazed somewhat by the lack of font at the door entering the sanctuary – what kind of God-forsaken place was this! And then – the heathens didn't even genuflect before the altar before entering the pew! [The fact that there wasn't an altar didn't dawn on me until half way through the service!] This was indeed a den of ill repute I was sure of it. But the cherry on the cake presented itself when this guy in suit and tie stood up on a platform. I assumed that he was about to announce that someone had left their car lights on in the car park...but no. This was the Vicar!! I mean, the audacity of it! Shamelessly foregoing the dog-collar and garb! This just wasn't fair. One needed some clues!

Having overcome the shock that this guy was the vicar, I settled down to score his sermon points out of 10. I still remember it to the day! He was preaching on the Temple of God. His first point was eloquently made, showing quite emphatically that the temple building itself was absolutely central to the worship of the Jews. He did point out that the temple building was merely a shadow, a schematic plan to represent heaven (but not to be taken too literally!) He moved onto his second point with ease, having scored a healthy 8/10 for the first. His second point was that the people of God were in the New Testament the temple – it was the people that were central to God not the building – and this was evident in the understanding and teachings of Jesus and his followers. So far, so good – a definite 8/10 perhaps a 9/10 if I was feeling generous. I would decide later.

Then came his third point. Something I wasn't expecting. The Holy Spirit was to indwell individuals – and THEY were to become temples of the living God. I was reeling from this – where did this new teaching come from. I'd never heard the like. It wasn't actually a voice from heaven – but was as real as if it had been – which said to me, "Malcolm, I want you to be my Temple."

Now as a scientist, I was in a real dilemma. I couldn't reason this away. I wasn't and am not schizophrenic. It wasn't the old lady behind me having fun at my expense. And I didn't imagine it! Its hardly the kind of thing that one does! But as a scientist, as was stumped as to how I could explain this rationally to another soul. God wasn't playing fair!

But, with this phrase, came a realisation that I needed to respond. And a sudden understanding that at that point in time I wasn't a temple – but that somehow God was going to transform me into just that. A living temple. All I had to do was accept the gift. And God would do the rest! Look – no hands!

And so that night, during a time of greeting each other during the service, I got up, and followed after the vicar. I called out to him, "Excuse me Father." To which he replied, "It's a vicious rumour! I'm not your father at all!" Don's humour was always at once something that made you smile and put you at ease! And so we sat at the front of the church while I explained my scoring system (he was gratified to learn he was doing so well!) and the voice, and that I knew I needed to respond but

didn't know how! So, he told me a little about Jesus – which Lee my friend had already filled me in on. And explained that this voice was simply God calling me to accept a free gift. All I had to do was accept it.

But he asked if I would do him a favour, and cheer the crowd now sitting watching us both intently. He asked if I would basically tell them what I told him. And so, he led me to a lectern and mic, and amidst much trembling (yes even rambunctious Geordies get nervous!) I began telling them what had happened. I still remember looking at my friend's face – mouth agape – as I told of my change of heart from a hard-nosed ne'er do well, to – well – I didn't know – but I was putting myself into God's hands.

And so the Road to Damascus was revisited! This was my own journey though. Yes, I could travel with people. And surely someone could travel a journey for me. But no one could travel this journey instead of me. This was something I had to do. It was almost a year later that my Baptism came around. The week before, we had a visiting preacher and his wife, and there were here to minister to the Youth group and its leaders (of which by then I was one!) Behind me a female friend argued the finer points of why shy needed to go forward for prayer but need her friend to come with her. But her friend wasn't having any of it! She'd once fallen foul of some prayer warriors who surrounded her when a call for prayer "all heads bowed" was made just as she was stretching her arm up to adjust her bra! Never again she said! And so, I selflessly turned around, put out my hand, and went forward with her again. We were ushered into an upper lounge as a group after the service, and it was explained that we would be individually called to the upper room for prayer. I suddenly realised that God had once again been a sly old dog! I too needed to be there – but I had been manoeuvred there surreptitiously!

And so my turn to go to the upper room came. I sat on the chair, and before the guy could ask me anything – I burst into tears. I was facing my Baptism, and didn't think God would accept me as a gay. The couple just hugged me. No condemnation. They simply told me God was leading me. I just needed to follow. And being gay was way down on his list of priorities for me. I was told that God would change me from the inside out. There was nothing I could do. I just had to be patient.

They were reassuring and kind words at the time. And most unexpected. I had already figured out that the party line was not favourable for gays to say the least. So, I kept my secret quiet. But felt immense relief that I had "confessed my sin" and so my Baptism was a red-letter day for me with God. These Baptists have it all worked out – a small pool under the platform in the church which was filled with nice warm water! So as I went down under the water I remember opening my eyes (which I had never been able to do and have never been able to do since!). I simply remember seeing a swathe of golden light. I was engulfed by a feeling of love. I was under no illusion here. God loved me as I was. And I felt somehow that there was a pride in this child coming from God. I was doing the right thing!

It would be nice to tell you that the rest of the story after this was as rosy. Alas it isn't. I was still struggling with being gay; how could I be a gay AND be a Christian – the two just don't fit. So I thought then! And, I was sure that God was going to get me for lusting after that guy on the bus! But worse was to come. I was mugged late at night resulting in my face being slashed with a craft knife leaving two scars. The aftermath of this event was immense. As was the shock when it set in! But what happened after that was quite amazing. I had up to my conversion been a tough rugby player (yes – gays DO play tough rugby – and not all so called straight guys are as tough – or as straight – as they would have you believe!) I had also been up to that point quite a violent person – quite able to defend myself and look after myself in a fight. But during this scuffle, I repeatedly responded to the tug of the Holy Spirit to "step back". I kept feeling that inside – "step back" and I would do just that every time I felt the Spirit speak. Eventually the villains walked off into the night.

After the shock had subsided, I was left wondering, no demanding an explanation from God. "Why wouldn't you let me defend myself," I asked. And the answer came in the shape of three dreams which were not so much re-enactments of the scene as alternative scenarios. In two I fought back – in one I was killed; in the other my attacker was killed leaving me devastated. In the third dream an old man was attacked by the pair and died of horrific wounds. Somehow, I was God's man on the spot. God knew I would obey in the moment. I was the best agent for the job.

I left this incident feeling somehow that God hadn't finished with the whole "let's teach Malcolm some lessons from this" routine. But I couldn't for the life of me predict what it might be. But it was to be some years before I would discover this!

During the intervening time, I continued to struggle with my sexuality and spirituality, and realised that I needed to go on a spiritual journey. Somehow I needed to find a place where people accepted me in the same way as I saw Jesus accepting the sinners of his time. Where they were. How there were. As they were. Period. And so I moved churches at the same time as I moved house. To Staines! But this church was only a stepping stone as my career moved me to Epsom, as the journey from Staines was too long.

But despite the journey, I joined Pioneer, a network of free/house churches, and became a member of the main church of this group. I got involved with that, teaching counter-cult evangelism on their youth ministry training programme. I also continued preaching – something that I had done since being at the Baptist church. But all was not well – I had a growing angst. Why wasn't God making me straight. I had prayed, cried, begged, visited every gay ministry you can think of. But still no change. All the while I continued commuting from Staines to Epsom until I eventually found some accommodation near to work.

But I was still at Staines, but attending Pioneer, when then life changing event came. I was visiting my parents in the North for my birthday and as I was stepping down off the train at Newcastle train station I realised that my right ankle was very swollen. Which puzzled me somewhat as it wasn't at all sore. I put my foot up when I got to my parents and all seemed to return to normal. But this was to be the first sign – but I didn't know it. After returning to my home in London and to work, I felt ill over the following weekend. So much so that I had to call in sick on the Monday with flu. But while showering I discovered my right testicle had gone hard – and this later proved to be testicular cancer.

No one can prepare you for that diagnosis. The moment when you are told that you have cancer. The week between the diagnosis and operation to remove the cancer was without the doubt both the worst and best week of my life. *Worst* in that everything that I held precious was smashed, brought to the ground. Demolished. *Best* in that everything that I held precious was smashed, brought to the ground. Demolished. It sounds terrible (and it was!) except I rediscovered my bed-rock again – Jesus. Now everything made sense. I really understood some key Bible passages. That one where Paul says he considered all he had to be “rubbish” [he swears in the Greek calling it “crap” just something stronger!] – except for knowing Jesus in his suffering – that is – knowing that this was the price of freedom. This was the price He had paid for my freedom. I was free, I was loved, I was gay, I was Christian, and God was going to see me through this trial just as I had been guided through the mugging. God was there. Jehovah- Shammah!

During that week I had been part of a team helping with some Revival meetings at Marsham street which Pioneer had been sponsoring. John Noble, a lovely man of God, prayed for me “Thus far and no further.” It shocked me to the core as I had that very day been reading about Job being sifted by Satan, and God saying something similar about his testing. I dwelled on those words, and the rest of the Job story that week leading up to my surgery. One of the most liberating points of realisation I had then was that I trusted God. I didn't need God to heal me – of cancer – or of being gay. I could say with Job, about my cancer and my being gay, that this God was a God I could trust, and as Job put it, “Yet though he slay me, still I will trust in Him.”

And so the surgery and aftermath has come and gone. There are many more things I could say about what God did during my 10 years clear of cancer. All without chemotherapy or radiotherapy. But the most important thing was to say that when I moved back up to London – to join my new partner and start my new job, I also moved into a local congregation that belonged to the Pioneer network. But, I joined via a meeting with the elders and leaders in which I was up front and out about my sexuality. The friendships I made from that are still ongoing. But they weren't in a place to help me more than be kindly disposed to me. And so, I recollected a place a gay friend had told me about, this strange crew that were meeting in a United Reform church in Camden.

So, in July 2005 – the week after MCCNL had joined the gay-pride march with a float – blessing the crowd as they went by – I came home. I remember sitting in the chair (hoping it would take my weight!) and being greeted by several people. They might as well have been family, they were so friendly. But I guess the song was right, “We are family; I've got all my sisters an' me!” I think the Road to Damascus is going to be fun here on in!

Besos y abrazos,

Malcolm