

IN HIS OFFICE

A PRAYER VENTURE

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SETTING THE SCENE

Leave the door
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Leave the Door !

"Leave the door. I don't want anyone to think I'm not available. Come again soon. Come anytime."
Leave the door ! There was never a queue outside though. It always seemed I was the only one. Yet the whole world came to this door. It was never closed. Not to anyone. Not at any time !

I lingered a moment, reluctant to loose the door handle. Even my briefest visits made me want to stay. It had not always been so. At first I struggled to make the time. Even now there are days when pressures of work and leisure keep me away. Once here, however, it is hard to leave.

His "Come again soon" is an invitation to go straight back in...into the office ...
God's office !

But before I tell you about the place let me explain how I discovered the office...

Discovery

I needed a change. I felt no eagerness for the usual practices of prayer, yet my desire for God was stronger than ever. It was no use pretending. I had to admit that prayer had gone stale for me. The words no longer excited my spirit. The exercise no longer reached to touch the being deep inside me.

Well meaning friends talked of spiritual 'burn out', but that was too glib - I was not burned out. Aspects of my faith may have been reduced to greying embers but there was still fire in those embers. Again and again through the years I had known the powerful hand of God on my life. On many occasions I had been so sure of his presence with me in my work for him. Nothing could extinguish the fire.

What I needed was a fresh breeze and new fuel. I needed the breath of God's Spirit and, maybe a change of direction in my work for him. However, it was not in my power to supply either of these. They were gifts for God alone to provide. I had no doubt that he could and would give them - he had promised - but I had to be ready. I knew I had to get closer to the place where the wind of God's Spirit blows. I had to rake my faith-embers close to the fire of God's love.

From childhood I had been taught how much a Christian should value prayer and worship. Spiritual growth and maturity depend on personal and shared prayer disciplines. Over the years I had derived immense pleasure from reading many books about prayer and praying. I had slotted a quiet place for God into many days and shared in countless times of corporate prayer. Though steeped in middle-of-the-road non-conformist patterns of worship, I had often been challenged by the enthusiasm of charismatic prayer groups, and brought close to God in a wide variety of beautiful liturgies.

My problem was not with forms or styles of prayer and worship. It was with me. I had changed. Once my growing eagerness for God had been satisfied in the well used ways of devotion. Now they had become, for me, too well used. I was restless for something more - more of Jesus.

I now believe this personal revelation was part of my increasing awareness of the ever-widening gulf between Christ and our contemporary society and changing culture. I had found increasing difficulty in sharing him with other people. My greatest desire was to know Jesus and to share with others my conviction that he, as Saviour and friend, is relevant to every person in every society in every generation.

But how bridge that gulf ? How convey to other people the excitement and relevance of my faith in Jesus ?

Even among some Christian people I was aware of there being a diffidence in speaking his name. It seemed preferable to speak in the more abstract term 'God', and when even that is difficult to use phrases like 'him up there' rather than risk being thought 'religious'. Perhaps the embarrassment is related to their desire to relegate Jesus to being just a historical figure, or a good man with impossible ideals which have to be watered down for his followers today.

My frustration was fuelled by sadness. I felt they were missing so much. It was like having a wonder-cure that no-one would take. For me God had become so real through Jesus. A living and personal relationship with Christ had made me sure that he is God. God ! My friend ! He is God the saviour who loves every creature ! He is holy, yet forgiving, caring, sacrificing himself to offer peace and reconciliation to those who fail to live up to his holiness. Especially for them. Knowing Jesus taught me that the truth about everything in my life and my world has to begin with Him - because he is God - he is Truth !. He is the holy judge whose word condemns my unholy - un-godlike living. I know him as the life-giver; his Spirit is the life of God in me and my world, transforming human life and giving it the sure spiritual dimension he calls eternal life". In Jesus, his teaching, his life, his being I see, I feel, I know there is hope for a whole new society, a redeemed cosmos ! How can I tell them ? I simply want them to have the opportunity to share this incredible, wonderful good news.

But where did all this leave my understanding of prayer ? The fact was that the closer I came to Jesus the less happy I became with the forms of prayer I knew. It was not enough to recite words which kept him "over there" in the hope that every now and again they would lead me to one of those high moments when he who was 'over there' came 'here'.

It is a long time now since I replaced the 'gentle Jesus' of my childhood with the muscular carpenter's son of Nazareth, and effeminate school teacher with the strong son of God. That too changed my relationship with him which was expressed in my praying. Ever since I have found it difficult to share in that worship which confuses manly devotion and courageous allegiance with sentimental love songs.

Of course I would not wish to demean that gentle human love by which so many saints have come close to God, but I do not often find that helpful. My "love" for Jesus has to be overawed by divine glory which compels me to follow him by in gracious, strong manhood.

In my new thinking Jesus had to be at the centre of everything and my prayer had to reflect that conviction. It was a new discovery, yet not new. I recalled my first published article. It was entitled, "The Centrality of Christ". Its theme was that however far we travelled in life and experience we must begin with Jesus and always come full circle to return to him. How little I understood what I had written ! It was a prophetic word. Now I had done just that - come full circle - to know with Paul and millions of God's saints that all that matters in the end, is to know Christ.

So, where did I go from here ? How could I pray in such a way as to stand with my face to the renewing wind of God's Spirit ? I had to find a way of prayer in which I could personally get a new image of Jesus. I needed a pattern of prayer by which I would get to know him better. I wanted to talk to Jesus in today's language, just as the men, women and children of Galilee had related to him during his physical life. I knew that God was offering me in Jesus, an awesome encounter with him and with myself which is at the same time a most incredible friendship - friendship with the Creator and Saviour of the cosmos. I had to get to that ember-fanning encounter - and it had to be contemporary.

The answer was - his office.

We had often talked of God this way. "The Boss", we would say with a smile and an upward nod of the head. The idea appealed to me. With my East London background I had often been faintly amused and challenged by the translation of the psalmist's words as "O Lord our gov'ner".

For one who had always been taught to use my imagination when praying, it was easy to think of Jesus as the "boss", or the manager, or better still as the "company director". There and then I decided to make some of my prayer times a visit to his office to talk with him person to person person to God !

I was sure I had found what I was looking for - a new expression of my relationship with Jesus. The "boss" seemed to fit my present need. I was familiar with the concept of Jesus as "Lord", meaning God, who has sovereignty over the whole universe, our world, our lives. If he is the one who orders my life, then it is right for me to think of him as the managing director of my life and my work, of all I am and all I do. What sort of 'M. D.' would he be ?

Exploring this new relationship I brought my previous knowledge of Jesus to the picture. This manager would not be one who interfered in my affairs. He would observe. He would know all about me. He would be personally concerned for my well-being and that of my whole family together with all my circles of friends, just as he rejoices and suffers with every living creature across the world and wherever his Kingdom Company reaches through the cosmos and all its possible dimensions.

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He would be my managing director but also my friend. Far beyond me in his superior knowledge and experience, he was in a position to see the Kingdom Company as a whole and be in a position to correct the limited view I had from my desk. On the other hand I soon learned that he would never be breathing down my neck, making me nervous of every word and action, even though he was always there for me. He was always available to offer his counsel, guidance and encouragement whenever I needed it.

Possibly there will be those who will see this method of prayer as demeaning, or even blasphemous. In response I can only say that it helps me to draw closer to God. I have been given an opportunity to explore him; his nature and purpose for my own life and for the life of his world. And, of course it is only one aspect of my devotional life. As for so many other followers of our Lord that life includes the grandeur and the simplicity, the glory and the humility of worship in so many different forms of words, music and silence. My "boss's office" is after all a much grander place than the stable where God made his first human contact with us, and my purpose in creating "the office" is to increase that contact. It is aimed towards making Jesus more real for myself and for any others who share my thoughts and my longing for God.

In the following pages I have written down some of my experiences in 'his office'. I have recorded them first for my own future reference and encouragement, but I offer them to others for whom prayer and the approach to God through Jesus has become a stale routine, with the hope that they too may be renewed in his faith and love. To do so is not without cost. These encounters are personal and the record of them is like a diary in which my life with success and weakness is laid bare. However, if through my weakness, others learn more of the strength and the glory of Christ and through him see God more clearly, so be it.

But before relating those experiences, let me take you into his office.....

His Office

I have always been more aware of atmosphere than of furniture. I may not remember the pattern on the wall-paper, but I do retain a vivid sense-picture of the person I met in the room.

The office has an immediate feel of welcome. As I said, the door is never shut. It has only now occurred to me that I never had to plead with a receptionist to get admittance. Nor did I ever find a "busy- don't disturb" notice pinned to the door.

Walking into his office is like coming home. It is pleasant and relaxing, although there are times when like a remorseful spouse first pushing a present through the part open door, I have entered warily. Only to find that any discomfort has been entirely of my own making.

Often I sense a perfume in the room. I could never describe it. I imagine it to be a therapeutic pot-pourri of all the most beautiful flowers and fruits in the world. It puts me at ease and counterbalances the sense of awe I always feel when on entering the room my eyes are drawn to the "boss" wherever he may be. The mateyness which some well-meaning people taught me I should feel for Jesus has long gone. The more I discover of his human friendship the more I know that he is God. True friendship - especially with God - is such a beautiful experience. It is too big to be demeaned. It is too precious to be spoiled by familiarity. This man - God in Christ - created the whole cosmos. His unleashed energies are beyond the control of people and yet he covers the odour of our detritus with the fragrance of a million, million multi-coloured blossoms.

I said that I always look at him before I see the room, but there are occasions when he is not there to greet me. While I wait, however, there is always the sense of his presence - like the lingering perfume. Let me quickly dispel any idea I may have given of him sitting behind a director-size desk waiting impatiently for me to sit down in front of him and state my case. It is never like that. In fact mostly I have to look for him. Sometimes he is at the desk; sometimes at the window looking out on his world; sometimes he is just standing, deep in thought, or kneeling on the floor.. and gestures me to simply stand or kneel with him in silence. One time I burst into the office, eager to talk with him, but was lost for words as he turned from the window. He had been crying. But more of that later.. and of the time when I found him with a duster in his hand !

The office itself is a large room, but not uncomfortably so. High ceilings create spaciousness - almost timelessness. There is nothing elaborate or fussy. The furniture is all of oak as is the wood-tiled floor. I imagine it to be the wood they once worked with in Galilee. There is a simplicity here which makes me feel at the heart of all the vast complicatedness of the universe. There is a peace amidst activity like being in the eye of a storm. The office is full of light. Much of it comes from the windows, but there is also a hidden source of illumination, as though the room itself is light.

The windows on two sides, at right angles to themselves, are his favourite place. We often stand before them, talking and thinking. The smaller window is cross-shaped. It looks out on a lake surrounded by pasture-land. In the distance beyond green hills loom rugged, barren mountains, snow-capped and often running with streams. Once he traced for me the flow of a tiny stream just below the snow-line. It tumbled into crevices, and poured down the hillsides until its excitement abated in the marshes and it flowed almost imperceptibly into the lake. We watched in silence. I did not need to hear words. He was showing me how my life flowed into his. This window was to become a sort of 'Bible-window' for me where we stood to see events and stories from his life and the lives of God's people.

The other window is fascinating. It gives me a sense of being at the heart of everything. It is like a visual control panel for the world. The view from this window constantly changes. It has an in-built magnification. At one moment it is like a map of the world, but then zooms in to a particular country, city, town, and even a home.

Through its glass we have looked together at cities and villages, wealth and poverty, joy and sadness, war and peace. We have laughed at its loveable oddities; we have rejoiced at the power of love and the strength of human character; we have shared anger at the greed of selfish exploitation and corruption; we have wept together for the painful suffering of those who hurt, and even more for those who had no healing for their hurt. It has been a window of memories too, where together we looked at pertinent meetings and moments in my own life. Memories can be therapeutic in being both happy and humbling.

I often wondered that with all this to concern him he had time to share it with me; in fact even wanted to share it with me.. and with all the many millions of other people whose lives are enriched and enabled by his presence and power.

So his office has become my meeting place with the director of the cosmos and the saviour of all people. It has become for me my burning bush in the desert. It is the place where I want to take off my shoes and say "this is holy ground". A visit to the office can be like entering into the heart of God's Temple where the heavenly company lift my thoughts in his praise. This room can be my Gethsemane, where I learn to share my director's faithful, sacrificial obedience and his dreadful sorrow for the whole world of people, including those who hesitate at or walk straight past his open office door. Many times when he says "Leave the door!" I see myself opening it wide to share his prayer that others will venture in.

In my everyday work I often imagine the perfume of his office about me, reminding me of his presence. After all, he is God who is at the same time there and here. I hope that others may share the fragrance and, asking where I have been, or whom I have been with, will want to find their way to the office and meet the Lord - our managing director.

In the following chapters (*to be found in the BLOG – In His Office*) I would like to share some of my visits to his office, hoping that in reading them someone else may catch the fragrance and be encouraged to push that open door and meet the "boss".

But first, let me tell you a little more about him and what he has come to mean to me

The Director

It is impossible not to look at the 'Director' when I first enter his office - his eyes are unavoidable - but I would disappoint anyone who asked me to draw a picture of him. I cannot tell you the shape of his nose or the colour of his eyes, the length of his hair or even if he has a beard. I see him in that wonderful way we remember people from whom we have been parted for a while. There is no photograph to hand, but it doesn't matter. We have an emotional, character image of them. We see them, as it were, with our hearts. That is how I see the 'director' and therefore that is how I must describe him.

Now on further reflection there is one particular impression I have of his features. His eyes. Again it is not the colour of them I remember, but the truth and knowingness which glows through them. To look into his eyes is to be sure that he knows everything about me - everything about everyone. Those eyes draw you with love; sometimes with compassion; sometimes with that holy fire which makes you want to condemn yourself and plead for mercy; sometimes with an agony of deep concern which makes you feel like rushing from the room, frantic to help him love his world to himself. Yet I can understand what Teresa of Avila meant when she said that if she tried to describe the Lord's eyes as she experienced them in her visions, she lost the image completely. What mattered for her was the sense of him looking at her and the consolation and strength she derived from simply being with him.

How fortunate that God chose to reveal himself in his humanity before the advent of the camera and among a people whose culture rejected the depiction of people's images. I dread to think how many more divisions there may have been in Christendom if we had different Jesus portraits to argue about. Seeing him with the heart and mind enables us to see God who knows us rather than Jesus as other people have seen him. If it is true that we all see other people differently then we all have our own picture of Jesus.

Some years ago I met a man who was a late-comer to personal faith in God. He asked some very basic questions about things we long-time believers took for granted. Paul asked me, "What picture do you hold in your mind when you talk to God?" My answer was that I often thought of Jesus as I imagined him. Paul was an artist. He thought in pictures. He thrilled to the idea of being able to encounter God in a person to person experience with Jesus. As we talked we both realised our picture of Jesus had to be a personal one, but this same person had a different face for each of us. As we grew to understand more of Jesus through our deepening knowledge of the Gospel stories and through relating his teaching to our life, we would each continue to touch up our picture and maybe even re-draw it, - as I have done several times.

My picture of Jesus as I meet him in the office is still changing, as my prayer reflections will reveal, but there are aspects of him which remain constant. For instance, his greatest appeal to me is his open simplicity. He is always at my level yet never patronising. He is truly aristocratic in that he is naturally above me, yet makes me feel not equal but important. After all he had the right to be the "boss", yet chose to work his way up from the shop floor, both as a carpenter and as the world's saviour! On my visits to the office I see him simply dressed yet not austere. I would describe his manner as gently stern. He is able to condemn, forgive, reprove, instruct and love all at the same time!

I have come to know the 'director' as the most gracious person. He is courteous, kind and generous. He is nothing like the 'gentle Jesus' picture of childhood books in which he has a halo brim to his hat and holds a woolly lamb. He is a strong person in every way. He is courageous, fearless and determined for truth and justice. The 'director' is a big man, gently great.

I think I can hear him laughing at the picture of himself with a halo and a lamb. He has such a good sense of humour. Never hurtful though. He is teaching me to laugh at myself. He laughs with true happiness; enjoys the oddities of life; and shares the gleeful outbursts of little children.

I am attracted more and more by his goodness. He is God. He is holy. At first that was difficult. Still there are times when it is not easy to be with him. The contrast between us is unimaginable. Happily I now know that he asks of me not present perfection, but the earnest desire for it - a simple longing to be like him.

Another facet of my personal Jesus portrait is my understanding of him as a father, mother and elder sibling figure all in one. That picture inspires my confidence. It is helping me relax in the simple knowledge that he is God and is in control of everything. The resting, of course, is not always easy, but that reminds me of one more thing about the 'director' - the exhaustless patience with which he keeps saying, "trust me".

No, I cannot give a clear portrait of him, but I know him when I see him and if further explanation is required I can only reiterate the invitation of his first Galilee friends - "Come and see for yourself." The office door is always open.

A Mobile Office

You may be asking where to find this 'office'. It is anywhere and everywhere ! I shall be grateful always to the friend who decided I needed a hobby, and taught me the rudiments of oil-painting. He showed me many things. He believed there is an artist latent within each of us, even if a not very good artist. He introduced me to the world of colour I had previously taken for granted. He taught me to see things which other people missed. "Close one eye," he would say, 'You see the world more clearly with one eye.' I soon discovered many details I had missed in everyday scenes, activities and encounters.

Since then I have met others who say, 'I've passed that place a thousand times, but never noticed....' It was like that for me with the Office. In the office and through its windows, guided by the 'director', I saw things in a new way. Much that I had assumed about faith and life, I realised I had not really accepted or worked out or fully appreciated. Like the fact that God is with us always. It was the last earthly promise of Jesus, and many times I had been grateful to know that God is with us. The truth of that came in fuller force that day I realised the director has a mobile office !

We were on the beach and having fulfilled my role of drying wet bodies and easing grains of sand from between sore toes, I was permitted half an hour solitary to walk along the sands. Clambering over rocks, I watched the waves for a while. Suddenly he was there - in my thoughts. I sat down on a large rock poised above a still pool of water, thinking of the deep ocean stillness where God's Spirit first brooded and breathed life. It was like opening the door to his office. The difference being that this time I had not had to go to it. The office had come to me. Here was the director, sharing my thoughts without intruding; interested in my leisure time as well as my work, wanting my companionship just as he desires the friendship of all his creation.

In the same way as the whole ocean was in the pool at my feet, so the director - Jesus, the fullness of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit - was with me - around me - in me ! It was all there in the waves and the wind, the air and the sunshine. I was enveloped in an incredible cocoon of eternal love.

I know now that this was the first of many such moments. Those future times became possible because of this one meeting. Many years later on another beach bordering a country torn apart by civil war, in my frustrated anger, and depression, I was to find the same director; the same office; and the same assurance - "I am with you - ALWAYS" !

On the beach he did not have to take me to the window of Bible scenes. I could see his beach. Distant snow caps, the water lapping on sand and rocks in the first light of day. We were in Galilee and he was saying 'I am with you always.' Mind pictures of his first followers came in fast succession. First of Peter, restless and sleepless, worn down by un-forgiven guilt made worse by love and hope and waiting. Then the other friends, excited yet anxious; sure, yet wondering; aggravated by Peter's broody, morose aloofness. They responded to his, "Let's do something. I'm going fishing !" The eagerness of the others to join him could well have been an expression of their concern for his safety, or simply of their own turmoil of mind and frustration. I closed my eyes and saw the lake shrouded in early morning mist as the hidden sun began to warm the day. I saw the weariness of despair on the faces of men who were already resigning themselves to another day of waiting.

Then Jesus came.

First, a stranger on the shore, directing and encouraging them in their work, then recognised, first by John. The pictures flashed fast now. Peter splashing through the shallows; the look between him and Jesus. No words yet, except his cautious, 'Master?' and the compassionate response, 'Peter.'

I watched them at breakfast and through the question-time. Then at last I heard his ultimate question. 'Simon, son of John, do you love me ?' with all its force of condemnation, forgiveness, peace, renewal, re-commissioning. But the best was still to come - at the end of the story. The promise to all his followers for all times - 'I am with you - always'.

So there on my beach among the rocks and pools, I talked with him. I knew the same surprised joy at the encounter; the overwhelming feeling of shame in his presence; the forgiveness; the peace; the challenge to follow. It was an experience which was to be repeated many times in quiet moments; in worship, in reading the scriptures; in breaking bread

On reflection, it had been like Jacob's Bethel experience - 'the Lord is in this place and I hadn't realised it !. For me it was the discovery that the Lord has a mobile office. I knew, but had never fully appreciated it. Where is the director's Office, then ? Just a thought away.

Reading the Minutes

It take a little while to adjust to being silent with him in his office. Silence is an art not practiced a great deal in a world of rapid movement and eager wordiness. Apart from special retreats our silences are all too short. On more than one occasion while centering my mind and trying to let the daily cacophony slip away - which harder to do the more you want it to happen - I thought of the visit as a business meeting and mused that we never read the minutes of the previous meeting. Perhaps that was because in my experience of business meetings the longest silences came at the beginning when we needed moments to read the previous minutes because nobody had had time to do it before they came.

I suppose the thought came from many years of dealing with minutes and more recently having to write them. In retirement and wanting to be involved in voluntary charitable work, I soon discovered how organisations welcome you with open arms. However, all those wonderful ideas of bringing years of experience to practical world-changing activities are dashed by the first two questions - *'Will you come on the Committee?'* followed by *'Can you take the minutes for us?'*

When I thought about it, the minutes in the Managing Director's office were assumed. He would jog my memory about the bigger issues. However, I could see the value of jotting down some of the points of our meetings. It would be important to be able to refer to them later.

Minute taking and reading often seemed a chore until an important matter from a couple of years before was being disputed and then we could be sure of our facts and the position could be clarified. I always considered the minutes important firstly as a way of keeping business on track and reminding ourselves of things we intended to do. Reading them at a later date could also be a source of gratitude for all that we had achieved and for what God had done.

I recall reading of a prayer-group which kept minutes in order to discern at subsequent meetings what answers had been received for the prayers and to consider what action to take when there appeared to be a negative response. In the same way, and together with many others, I have sometimes kept a diary of prayers and answers. It is useful as a memo - like the minutes. It is too easy to pray once for a person or situation and then forget about it. Best of all though, the diary, like a file of special letters and cards from the past, becomes a source of thanksgiving.

I sometimes read the Gospels as 'minutes'. Remembering as a prompt to action and thanks. One of my favourite scenes at the Bible window was Jesus' Last Supper with his friends. It occurred to me that although he established it as a way to remember him it is also a reminder that he remembers us - all the time!

I watch the scene as Jesus kneels before his friends, a bowl of water on the floor and a towel in his hand; and then as he breaks bread and shares it with them all; and I remember how in a variety of ways we have been sharing bread and wine ever since with him and with each other and with his world.

Our Communion is like reading the minutes. We remember in the service the things we have neglected to do; the promises we have broken or only half-kept; we hear the Word of God from the scriptures; we receive the Lord in bread and wine and here is peace and joy and hope and love. And having said all that, the very heart of it all is our thanksgiving. Reading these minutes means we recall that the past is forgiven, the present a new experience of God in Jesus, and the future is prepared and assured for us with him for ever. All this is reason to record a vote of thanks.

Thanksgiving is rarely selfish. It soon turns into a testimony and the testimony becomes a witness. So I decided to make minutes of some of the times spent in his office. Some of them will be repeated with new ones on the BLOG (In His Office)

They have been written with thanks as well as for my encouragement, but they are also offered to those who read them as a testimony of Christian experience which may be a challenge to a deeper life of prayer and a reminder of how with Jesus, all life can be a joyful eucharist.