

Renaissance

Reverend Peter came out of the wood and tarpaulin shelter they had built for him against the side of a windowless minibus in the corner of the car park. He shook water from the canvas door flap. It had rained heavily during the night. This was his home and office for the time being. Half a destroyed signboard propped among rubble in front of it read, '*dist Church*'. He was watched by an increasing number of people joining the already long queue at the side of the church, where weary helpers were beginning the daily hand-out of loaves and vegetables. Peter stretched and stood still for a moment, as he had done every morning of the last six months, looking up at the remains of the church. The front of the main building was ruined, but inside were several partitioned units which the army had erected for them. That left school rooms, hall and a kitchen where meals could be prepared for the families camped out among mounds of rubble covering the car park. One partition was imaginatively coloured now. It was a meeting place where young families could support each other.

The queues were mostly of local people although some came from all over the city. There were large encampments in the parks. Peter had been to see them and he had also looked in to those homeless people the army had prepared for in the castle grounds. It reminded him of a mediaeval plague scene. He reflected now, sadly, how overcrowded they could have been if more people in the neighbourhood had survived. A number of houses were still standing. People in the surrounding area who still had liveable space were learning the basics of sharing in quite a unique way.

At the distribution table Maureen passed Peter a small loaf of bread, carefully wrapped in tissue. He noticed an inquisitive look from the queue. '*Not for me!*' he assured the onlooker. '*It's for the communion.*' Later he would gather those who would come to pray. The army padre had arranged for another small partition in what had been the communion area of the church. It was used for counselling and for prayer. Known as *The Holy Room* it was used most days – far more than it used to be! Sundays, Fridays and Saturdays it was used by Christians, Muslims, and Jews and other times for anyone who needed to reach out to someone or something to afford them comfort. It was well used too at odd moments during the day by the army of volunteers around the area. '*It's really 'Come as you are' No Sunday clothes!*' one regular observed. That was particularly true after months of regular wearing the same clothes and with limited washing facilities. The church had organised a weekly wash day, using old, re-claimed washing machines and driers, but use was limited to the few hours when power was available.

A clothing store had been opened in a small cabin at the roadside end of the car park. Help with clothes – used and new – had flowed in generously from the south. Peter called to see all was well. He waved a greeting to an armed patrol on the street. He knew them well. They came to check on him most nights. There were growing problems with looters and drug dealers for whom weapons seemed to be more easily available than food. '*They are saying there was a big error at the nuclear power plant*', clothing manager George gathered rumours just like they did second-hand trousers.

'No', Agnes joined in. *'It was definitely an earthquake or a mis-guided missile. We don't get any clear information in the news. I wish they'd tell us.'*

A siren sounded. It was an ambulance picking its way along the obstacle course of the main road. *'Somebody else with a long wait, pour soul!'* said Agnes. *'Much of the hospital is still out of action. Staffing is the biggest problem, I hear. They've moved a lot of patients over to the coast. Things are recovering there. We took the worst of it. I can't bear to see our cathedral in ruins. People are still dying though. With strange symptoms apparently. Hope we don't get cholera or something worse. I can't believe we've been living among so many vermin!'*

As the morning went on people continued to arrive with more clothing and with fruit and vegetables from the supermarket. With government help it had been turned into a foodbank. There were endless queues there. A sound of falling masonry broke into the conversation. It was not far away. Agnes clutched Peter's arm. *'What's that? Not another tremor!'*

'No,' George was reassuring. *'Don't panic. It's the biscuit factory. They're demolishing the front half of it. It's not safe. They lost a lot of their staff, but biscuits aren't a priority for many people now. Let's hope we'll soon be getting back to normal. The lakes are clearing now. The army are operating from there. I don't suppose there'll be many visitors there for a year or two.'*

'It'll be a while before we begin to restore the church I expect.' Agnes thought it time to add a brighter tone to their conversation. *'It's been good of you to stay Peter. You could think about getting away now. Get to see family. You must be tired of funerals.'* She paused, suddenly realising she was on sensitive ground.

'Re-settling without June is not uppermost in my mind just now,' he replied. *'I'm not sure I like the idea of being a refugee in my own country anyway. People say I'm doing a good work here but so are all of you. I know others can say prayers and deliver bread and say comforting words but when I wonder if I'm really needed, I think, Yes! This is ministry and church as I've always dreamed it should be. Representing Jesus among the people. Caring, providing, comforting, sharing faith and hope. I've lost everything. They may not need me, but I need them. I need all of you.'*

Children shrieked from across the car park. They could play in the worst conditions. They were calling *'Reverend Peter. Come and see! Come and look at this!'* Reg had been sorting among rubble. *'Look what I've found.'* He turned the piece of timber round and brushed off the mud streaks. It was the missing section of Peter's notice board. They could just make out the words, *'Wigton Road Metho.'*

'Do you think it will ever be the same?' asked Reg.

'Nothing will ever be the same.' George had joined them.

'But the church will be here.' said Peter looking at them with a pained smile. *'No George. Don't look up at the walls. Look around you - the service - the love - the sacrifices - the prayers..... The real church was not destroyed. It's been here all the time!'*