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LIVING FAITHFULLY

Following Christ in everyday life



John Pritchard



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A word at the beginning



What does it mean to follow Jesus in everyday life? It's a pretty basic question but one with which we struggle. We know what it is to run churches, offer worship, raise money (endlessly) and organize everything from flower festivals to children's holiday clubs. But how does all this relate to the issues we face as we walk through the door of our office or school or hospital? How does it have any bearing on how we spend our money or conduct our marriage? How does it help us handle our sexuality or live in an online jungle?

This book emerges out of a lifelong frustration that in the Church we spend huge amounts of time tending our back garden and not enough time on the streets. Much of the energy of church life is swallowed up by an understandable concern to secure our buildings, finances and structures. We know that the purpose of it all is out there on the streets where ordinary life is going on regardless, but it's very hard to relate the domesticity of the back garden to the complexity and sheer messiness of street life.

I'm as guilty as anyone of this imbalance. But I continue to be driven by the conviction that 'God so loved the world' that he came to the world, died in the world and rose for the world. The Church is a wonderful and absorbing gift, but it shouldn't be the main focus of our concern. So how can we more effectively relate Sunday worship to Monday life? How can we close that gap and step out more confidently into the week, knowing that the Christian faith has far more to contribute to the welfare of society than society thinks? How can we help each other discover the exhilaration of living faithfully on the streets?

A word at the beginning

The Diocese of Oxford has had a strategic framework called Living Faith in which we have tried to explore what discipleship looks like in everyday terms. This book is a contribution to that process, dedicated with affection to the clergy and laity of that fascinating diocese, but it's intended to offer a much wider readership a 'starter kit' on a whole range of issues we all face as soon as we leave the safety of church on Sunday morning. For each chapter, I've included a section entitled 'Taking it further', in the hope that it may lead to stimulating discussion in church groups. That's where the real engagement might take place.

As ever my thanks go to Alison Barr, my loyal and talented editor, to Wendy, my patient wife and lifelong friend, to my team in the office – Amanda Bloor, Christine Lodge and Debbie Perry – who defend my space, and to all those whose way of living faithfully has inspired my thinking.

This book is only an introduction, but the question of how to follow Christ in daily life, Monday to Saturday, is both urgent and full of fascination.

John Pritchard

The case for the prosecution



‘Religion is what an individual does with his solitariness.’¹ So said philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, and many of us have been only too keen to agree. The trouble is we’ve been wrong, and the consequences for the Christian faith have been disastrous.

Christianity is a public faith, lived out in specific actions. Indeed, Christianity is a verb before it’s a noun. The problem, however, is that people of faith love to hunker down in subdued lighting and think about God and the universe; emptying the bins and doing the washing up just doesn’t have the same attraction. We follow a man who seems to have spent the entire three years of his ministry outdoors and in public, but we have a preference for reflection, private prayer and house groups. I exaggerate, of course; Jesus spent hours in prayer, and Christians do huge amounts of good in their communities, but I want to highlight the problem clearly.

The issue goes deep. See if the following makes sense.

What’s the problem?

A group of well-meaning and sincere people once had an overwhelming experience of God. It was so vivid and extraordinary that they immediately wanted to mark the place where it had happened so that they, and generations after them, would have a permanent reminder of the time and place that God had appeared to them. So they placed a stone in the ground. Soon, however, they felt the need to honour this special place more adequately, so they put up a building, modest but distinctive, so that others too would know how special this place was.

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The group of people didn't want to leave the Special Place because it meant so much to them. Moreover, they developed a range of rituals appropriate to such a Special Place; you couldn't treat it as if it were an ordinary room where you left the dirty washing on the floor and forgot to make the bed. You needed to move with dignity, to acknowledge particular parts of the building, and to speak with care. Indeed, they developed a use of language that was rich, refined and somewhat obscure, in order to demonstrate, again, that this was a Special Place, and if you came in here you should not expect normal human interactions, but rather a specialized form of human behaviour appropriate to the memory of the divine presence.

Inevitably, in time, the Special Place came to be seen as the domain of God and the area outside the walls as the domain of not-God. The holiness associated with the presence of God could only be guaranteed within the walls of the building. Outside – well, 'there be dragons'. God might or might not be active out there but, if he was, it would obviously be in a much diluted form. In any case, there was so much nastiness and corruption beyond the high walls of the Special Place it was best not to go there too much.

Hence the emergence of the Church's great heresy – the sacred–secular divide. This is the dualism that has crippled the Church's mission since the time of Constantine. It's the spiritual crime that has often tried to imprison Christ in his Church when the Great Lion of God has been wanting to roam the world. These are some of the consequences:

- Good Christians have been confined to barracks instead of being released as frontline missionaries in their daily lives.
- The world of work, where most people spend so much time and where much of their identity is shaped, is often unrecognized and undervalued in church life and teaching.
- Little time and resource is offered to support Christians in relating their faith to their daily lives and the complex personal and ethical decisions they have to make there.

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- The Christian faith is not brought sufficiently into relationship with a whole range of social and psychological factors that shape our lives, from politics and finance to sexuality and science.
- Christians are left with schizophrenic lives, experienced as sincere faith in the personal sphere and confused secularism in the public sphere. For one hour a week (in church) the focus is clear; for the other 167 hours in the week you're on your own.
- Believers are expected to come to church on a Sunday as empty receptacles, ready and waiting to be filled, and without a distinctive identity as a secondary teacher, a bank employee, a carer, a volunteer at the Citizens Advice Bureau and so on.
- What we've followed during the week in the news about welfare reform, the pensions crisis, tax evasion, the Higgs boson particle, corruption in high places and other issues, is unmentioned and unmentionable, somehow off-limits, even to a gospel of global transformation.
- Followers of Jesus are recruited to be church officials and servers, lesson readers and cleaners of the brass, choristers and committee members – good causes all, but not the world-changing witnesses Jesus seems to have had in mind when he commissioned his little group of friends on a misty morning in Galilee to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28.19).

This is not just the experience of the faithful Christian in the pew. It's the experience of this bishop as well. The Church is a greedy master. Its centripetal forces drag me into church-related activity time and again when I would love to be out where I believe the centrifugal force of the gospel wants me to go. And sadly I'm not innocent in this. I collude with the seductive belief that the Church needs me to sort out its problems before I can set out from the Special Place. Just a bit more work and all will be well, and then I can get on with the real job. The devil laughs.

By now, faith is more or less burned into me. It's the core of my being, even if I fail, all the time, to live up to my calling as a follower of Christ. Nevertheless, I try constantly to remind myself that a living

faith makes a difference to the world both within me (what I call spirituality) and around me (what I call discipleship). This book is about how the first makes a difference to the second and how the second makes a difference to the first.

How could we think about this?

A key text might be the words of C. S. Lewis: 'I believe in God as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'² Because of my faith I see everything differently: not just the safe 'religious things', but everything. By the light of faith I should be able to understand and evaluate *Christianly* what's going on in my own life, my family life, my workplace, my friendships, my leisure pursuits, the way I spend my money and so on. I should also be able to respond *as a Christian* to my social and political commitments, to the culture I inhabit and to the news I imbibe, to the major ethical debates of the time and the current intellectual challenges to faith. 'By it [belief in God] I see everything else.'

When I talk to groups about discipleship in daily life I often bring out an orange and start peeling it.³ I suggest that our Christian lives are a bit like the segments of the orange: we offer to God those segments labelled 'going to church', 'praying and reading the Bible' (however intermittently), 'being on the church council' (or other such worthwhile activity), 'giving' (what we think we can afford). But then I point to all the other segments that somehow we keep to ourselves as if God isn't interested in them or we aren't interested in offering them to him. So God doesn't get a look at ethics in the workplace, stress, politics, sexuality, shopping, hobbies, sport, temptation, celebrity gossip, soap operas and so on. It's not that we're deeply resistant to the idea that all this is also related to God; it's just never really occurred to us to let Christ into those areas of life.

By contrast, I then pick up an apple and with a determined crunch bite my way into that unsegmented fruit. This is a better model for discipleship, I suggest. An apple isn't divided up into separate parts. It's

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whole and consistent, the only variation being where some part has got bruised or otherwise damaged. In the same way, following Christ is a whole-life commitment. Some parts of our discipleship may be bruised but Jesus came to address every aspect of our lives with his transforming message. Paul said:

I appeal to you . . . brothers and sisters, to present your bodies [that is, your whole lives] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. (Romans 12.1–2)

If you'll excuse the simplicity, discipleship is about being an apple rather than an orange.

What could we do differently?

There is, however, another side to the somewhat depressing picture I've painted of faith being unconnected to everyday realities. The fact is that many Christians get on with trying to make a difference in their communities, often without making a conscious connection with their Christian faith. 'It's just what you do,' they might say. At a semi-conscious level they know their faith is a motivating factor, but that link is just as likely to be downplayed on the grounds of modesty. The British don't wear their faith on their sleeves. The link might also simply be unrecognized because it's not been made in the teaching they've received at their church, from Sunday School, through confirmation, to Sunday sermons. Nevertheless, they get on with loving their neighbour and building community.

In 2000 the Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam published a much-read book called *Bowling Alone*⁴ in which he recounted the story of the loss of community in the United States, using the evocative image of people bowling alone in the nation's bowling alleys, rather than in clubs. However, in 2010 he published a second book called *American Grace*⁵ in which he describes his discovery that community and what is often called 'social capital' is actually alive and well in one place more than

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any other in America, and that is in the nation's places of worship. Jonathan Sacks offers this précis:

If you are a regular church or synagogue attendee, you are more likely to give money to charity . . . You are also more likely to do voluntary work for a charity, give money to a homeless person, give excess change back to a shop assistant, donate blood, help a neighbour with their shopping, spend time with someone who is depressed, allow another driver to cut in front of you, offer a seat to a stranger or help someone find a job. It goes further than this: frequent worshippers are also more active citizens . . . They take a more active part in local civic life, from local elections to town meetings to demonstrations. They are disproportionately represented among local activists for social and political reform. They turn up, they get involved, they lead.⁶

There is, therefore, a massive potential for Christians to make a difference in their neighbourhoods. That potential is being realized in the way a thousand flowers bloom in the villages, towns and cities of our land every day. What intrigues me is how little these connections are recognized in our teaching and in the conscious discipleship of most Christians. Sunday church and Monday's decisions are too often kept in isolation, not by design but by the accident and neglect of our church life and teaching. And maybe by the faint embarrassment many Christians have with a faith that's too overt. Someone said that most British Christians go to church as they go to the bathroom – with the minimum of fuss and with no explanation if they can help it.

The other deficit in our whole-life discipleship is the difficulty we have in relating our faith to the major social and political issues of the day. At the local and personal level, Christians are often deeply involved in acts of kindness and commitment, but the biggest question of our time has a global reference. Put simply: 'How then shall we live?' Given the bewildering complexity of an interconnected, online world with its huge potential for technological advance or disaster, in a planet that's rapidly becoming exhausted and where we never seem

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able to stop fighting – how then shall we live together in a finite and fragile space?

Christians believe the answer lies in a radically different world view, one that honours God as Creator and Jesus as the trailblazer of a new path for humanity. We need to stop playing religious games and start seriously following Jesus. Eugene Peterson calls discipleship ‘long obedience in the same direction.’⁷ Extreme discipleship will involve everything we’ve got, what Jesus called loving God ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength’ (Mark 12.30). It will involve constantly turning our lives towards God as a sunflower constantly turns its face to the sun. It will involve having the love of God and the life of Jesus as our constant points of reference. It will involve living in God’s world, in God’s way, with God’s help.

That’s what it means to be a disciple.

They said this

A man can no more possess a private religion than he can have a private sun or moon. (G. K. Chesterton)⁸

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can. (John Wesley)

When Bob Geldof met Mother Teresa he was both impressed and daunted by her work. ‘I could never do what you do,’ he said. She held his hand and said, ‘Remember this. I can do something you can’t do and you can do something I can’t do. But we both have to do it.’ (Alan Hargrave)⁹

Taking it further

Anchor passage: Romans 12.1–2, 11–end

Read once, take a full two minutes to reflect, then read it again.

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To think about

Opener: ‘Present your bodies as a living sacrifice . . .’ How healthy do you think your body/whole self is as a disciple of Christ? What would a ‘spiritual doctor’ say?

- Where are we, and most Christians, ‘conformed’ rather than ‘transformed’ (v. 2)?
- Which of those short, sharp exhortations in vv. 11–21 do you find most of a challenge?
- When do you think you have received most help from your church in living out your faith from Monday to Saturday?
- What would you like your church to do to help people relate their faith to the everyday decisions that face them?
- What area of your discipleship would you most like to get sorted out?

Prayer: Write on a small piece of paper an area of life that you intend to integrate more fully with your faith this week. Pray over it quietly, offering it bit by bit to God. Then place the piece of paper in a wallet or handbag, and resolve to look at it again at the end of the week to see what you and God have done about it.

Gracious God,
you make all ordinary things to be holy,
and all holy things to be of use in the world.
Help us to see all of life as a gift
and our whole life as an opportunity to serve and to save
through the love you pour into our wounded world.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our servant King.

PART 1

Facing God



Until I was 31 I was confident I could achieve more or less any task I took on in ministry as long as I had enough time to do it. After the age of 31 I knew I needed God's grace and strength to do anything at all. What made the difference was an episode of nervous exhaustion, when I found that all the essential organs of my body were making their displeasure known at the same time because they were being starved of sufficient energy to perform their normal tasks. I needed to stop. From then on I knew from experience rather than from theory that I needed the strength and wisdom of God to be an effective disciple.

What's the problem?

Former Archbishop William Temple once wrote: 'When we fail in discipleship it is always for one of two reasons: either we are not trying to be loyal, or else we are trying in our own strength.'¹ If we are to be followers of Jesus it's important that we follow and don't try to get in front of him. It's possible to believe we believe in God when in reality we are only believing in ourselves and our own capacity to be Christians.

In running the Christian race it would be a strange disciple who ran with a full-length mirror held out in front of him, enabling him to look at himself, assess his own performance and adjust his own

appearance for maximum effect. And yet that's what it can seem like if we make our point of reference our own selves, so that it's 'my faith', 'my ministry', 'my spirituality' and so on that absorb us. 'How am I doing?' may be a legitimate question every so often, but Christian living is not an exercise in narcissism. Our constant point of reference as disciples has to be the figure of Jesus.

How could we think about this?

I remember a conversation I had with an ordained RE teacher when I had recently found a faith for myself rather than a faith from my family. I was trying to explain the difference I now experienced, and spoke about now being a 'committed Christian'. He rather abruptly asked me what I meant by a 'committed Christian' as opposed to an ordinary one. I was irritated; it was so obvious. Once it had been a faith in which I believed in God in an unexamined and ineffective way and went along to church in pursuit of girlfriends; now it was a faith with the living Jesus Christ at its heart and the promise of a deepening trust and friendship with God for a lifetime.

I might have been a little gauche in the way I expressed myself but there is, surely, a difference in those two versions of Christian faith. Even if we have been lifelong, faithful members of the church community, most of us can identify a time when faith became a more significant dimension of our lives, when the graph of faith went up more sharply. Christians have all sorts of ways of describing the experience: 'God moved from the edge of my vision to the centre', 'a second-hand faith became a first-hand faith', 'God moved from optional to essential in my life', 'Jesus stepped out of the pages of the Gospels and into my own experience.' In my case I often say that I had many of the pieces of the Christian jigsaw scattered around, but I seemed to have missed the big central piece – the living Jesus – and it was when that piece went in that the rest of the jigsaw fitted into place.

This move from the edge to the centre is when the journey of discipleship properly starts. Before that, the Christian faith is rather like

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looking at maps and reading guidebooks; after that, faith is walking the paths among the lakes and mountains, and following the Guide who knows the territory like the back of his hand.

The move from one to the other, however, has no blueprint. After all, we may cross a border into a new country by simply wandering along a country path with minimal awareness of where we're going, or by coming to a border post and making a conscious decision to enter the new territory, or by rushing through a highly defended border-crossing with guns blazing around us. Whichever way it is, we find ourselves in new terrain and gradually, over time, the differences in the countryside, the architecture, the language, the culture, become clearer. The culture of the kingdom of God should emerge naturally as one of love, justice and joy as we travel deeper into its heartland.

The journey of faith, therefore, may be quick or slow, or quick–quick–slow. It may be alone or accompanied, more intellectual or more emotional in character, and with a wholehearted or a fingertip faith as a result. No matter how it happens, what matters is that the journey has entered a new and potentially exciting phase, and the term 'disciple' seems appropriate at last. It's sobering to remember that Jesus never seems to have invited anyone to come to church (synagogue). It isn't churchgoing that is of the essence of being a Christian, but following Jesus on the path of daily discipleship, being different and making a difference as we go.

☆ *In 1938 . . . I [Simone Weil] was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow . . . I discovered the poem . . . called 'Love' [by George Herbert]. I learned it by heart. Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that . . . Christ himself came down and took possession of me. In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the possibility*

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The group of people didn't want to leave the Special Place because it meant so much to them. Moreover, they developed a range of rituals appropriate to such a Special Place; you couldn't treat it as if it were an ordinary room where you left the dirty washing on the floor and forgot to make the bed. You needed to move with dignity, to acknowledge particular parts of the building, and to speak with care. Indeed, they developed a use of language that was rich, refined and somewhat obscure, in order to demonstrate, again, that this was a Special Place, and if you came in here you should not expect normal human interactions, but rather a specialized form of human behaviour appropriate to the memory of the divine presence.

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Hence the emergence of the Church's great heresy – the sacred–secular divide. This is the dualism that has crippled the Church's mission since the time of Constantine. It's the spiritual crime that has often tried to imprison Christ in his Church when the Great Lion of God has been wanting to roam the world. These are some of the consequences:

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