

# FAITH IN DARK PLACES



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New extended edition

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First published in Great Britain in 1996

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST  
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

Reprinted once  
Second edition published 2013

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-07041-1  
eBook ISBN 978-0-281-07042-8

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong  
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press  
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

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## *A conspiracy of silence*

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Journalists are not all held in the highest regard these days, but we'd be in a mess without them. How else would we know what is going on in the world? Social media would partly fill the gap but it is fragmentary by its nature. So we should be grateful we've got the Press, imperfect though it may be.

Writing the first edition of this book some years ago was like uncovering a news story: the story was that the Gospel is good news *from* the poor. As time has passed, new discoveries have come to light. Pieces of the picture, whose significance had been overlooked, suddenly snapped into focus. There was a lot more to the story than first appeared.

Even so, I was impressed when SPCK agreed to publish this extended book. After all, I had shown them the new material – and it looked quite alarming.

I said that Jesus was crucified because he hated paint; that the Magnificat is good news for the rich as well as the poor; that most people could beat Usain Bolt over 100 metres; and that we may need to change our traditional image of God. I told them how much I worry about a beloved friend who is a tightrope walker; and why you should never say the Lord's Prayer last thing at night. Not if you take the words seriously.

Why has this extended book been written? Because, in all the suffering and heartache of an unjust world, there has been a conspiracy of silence – by the Church and by a lot of other people. They have used the excuse of neutrality to walk by on the other side. They have chosen dignified silence rather than risk the challenges of life. Even when children starve and the poor cry out for help.

Christians often think of silence as a holy disposition. 'Be still and know that I am God' is a Bible text much quoted by

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religious people. But we are not called to be silent or still: silence and inactivity in the face of suffering are themselves acts of violence and injustice.

There is no neutrality.

*David Rhodes*

# *Acknowledgements*



I would like to thank some very special people whose lives have been an inspiration to me, although in the eyes of the world they may not seem very important. They are people like Eve and Rachel, Mick and Brian, Corinne, Jack and Lee. Some have died and we mourn their tragic deaths. Others survive, despite all they have suffered, and we give thanks for their courage and their generous love.



# 1

## *The big question*

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This book is an ordinary person's attempt to answer a very important question. The question is simply: what is real in this life?

Each of us might want to ask the question in a slightly different way: what is there in this life that means anything? What is there that matters? What does it mean to be alive on this battered little planet of ours? And does it mean anything?

Seeking after 'reality' may sound as pointless as chasing after shadows, but perhaps we will find that when we actually engage in that search we shall make some surprising discoveries.

The book explores the unlikely suggestion that much of what western society counts as important is probably a huge deception: but that, unexpectedly, those things and those people we often dismiss as being worthless may in fact be the most real and precious.

It is a story about failure and about hope. Its heroes are people whom society despises for being unemployed, homeless and sometimes alcoholic. People counted as worthless but who in strange and fragmentary ways, and despite their human weakness, faults and confusions, seem to embody what is real. People materially poor and physically ill who despite that can show us things of immense value; people who live close to death but who reveal to us what it means to be alive.

This book is not about religion but it is about God. It is about people and pain; failure and courage; laughter and prayer.

Who is it for? It is for people uneasy with the prevailing values of western society; people on the fringes of the Church; people who may suspect their own lives to be hollow; who want

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to find a worth that does not damage or exploit others. People who want to be able to make sense of life: and to be allowed, in their own space and time, to encounter God – but perhaps not the God they have come to expect. It may even be for the Church as it seeks a deeper encounter with God and struggles to respond to that meeting.

And who is it from? It is from people consigned to the margins of society from where, it is assumed, they have nothing and can give nothing. People who may be the very ones who can give us life.

## *How it began*

This story was not planned: it was discovered, almost by accident. It was stumbled upon by people intent on doing other things, who gradually realized that the world is not entirely as they thought it was, and that the voice of God may be heard in the most unlikely places.

They are people like the man taking part in a project to learn about life in the most deprived areas of the inner city.

The catch was that the people taking part in the project were not going to learn by reading books – they were going to learn by doing: walking the streets and meeting the people. Above all, they would be following the pattern of Christ, who challenged his disciples with the words: ‘Follow me.’ Come from where you are and where you feel safe, to where I am. It sounded easy, but for many people this was a demanding and uncomfortable experience, as one participant discovered.

As he parked the car the man was angry. Angry with himself. Switching off the engine he sat for a long time as if unsure what to do next. He looked at the sheet of paper with the hand-drawn street map on it.

Reluctantly, he got out of the car and glanced uneasily around him. The alarm system gave a loud bleep as he locked the

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car and the man looked anxiously down the road for any sign of trouble.

The car stood out in the poverty of the surrounding area. Even his clothes – faded jeans and an old golfing sweater – looked out of place. He was less than two miles away from his own home in the leafy suburbs. It was the same city but it might as well have been a different planet. He was a stranger here.

The man was angry because he was afraid. He was in one of the worst areas of the city for muggings. This was well known. He had often read in the papers about people being knifed by young thugs wanting money for drugs. This was a place of danger and he felt vulnerable and very much alone. He glanced at his little map again and set off. He had been given a task and it was too late to turn back.

His task was an important one: to pray.

Along with several other people who were also to set out alone to walk these unfamiliar streets, he had been asked to spend the next half hour in prayer.

He was setting out on a walking meditation. This idea is often used on religious retreats where people walk country lanes and reflect on the blessings of God's creation. In the quietness of their walk they become aware of colours, textures, scents and sounds: the blue of the sky, the sound of birdsong and the wind in the trees. It is a way of praying using the world around them instead of familiar religious words.

Such walking meditations usually happen in idyllic rural settings – not in the multiracial inner city with its broken pavements and boarded-up shops; where trees are things for kids to swing on and few birds sing.

As the man walked down the street he felt uneasy; not sure whether he would return unharmed. And would his car still be there if he did? He scanned the pavement ahead for signs of danger and found himself listening for running feet behind him as a mugger closed in. But the only people he saw were two women with a pram. They broke off their conversation to

smile and say good morning. And the only footsteps he could hear were his own.

Gradually, as he walked, the fear began to recede and the world came back into focus. He turned a corner into a busy street and was suddenly hit by the din of traffic as buses, cars and heavy commercial vehicles choked the air with exhaust fumes. A few yards away in cramped side streets people live in the most densely populated area in Northern Europe.

The man thought of his own home with its lawns, the new conservatory, and the double garage. He thought of his children with their school uniforms and music lessons. Children whose lives were a million miles from here.

Occasionally he remembered that he was supposed to be praying. He wondered what God was making of all this mess. And what the answer was.

Finally, still clutching his crumpled map, the man completed the long circular route. He had not been mugged, and ahead of him down the street he could see his car. Amazingly, it had not been stolen or vandalized.

The people he had encountered had been friendly. He thought back to the Asian greengrocer's where he had bought a lettuce. Why a lettuce? Only because he had wanted to venture into a shop in this strange world and a lettuce was all he could think to ask for. The woman had wrapped it in newspaper and then stood chatting with him for ages. The lettuce on the car seat beside him now seemed like a trophy: a prize for being brave.

As he started the car engine the man felt a strange reluctance to be leaving. A place of fear had become a place of human encounter. He wanted to go back and say thank you: but for what? He was seeing this battered fragment of the inner city in a new light.

As he drove home with his lettuce he was beginning to feel differently about the city and the places where you know you will be mugged – because it is well known and always in the papers.

## *A day in the city*

Other people taking part in the project also had encounters that threw a new light on their city – and challenged some of their assumptions about the values and priorities of western society.

One of the most unlikely parts of the project required the participants to spend a day in the city centre with only £1 for food. As with the walking meditation, the idea was to experience a little of life as it is lived by other people. It did not pretend that living on £1 for a day would show well-off middle-class people what it was like to be poor: but it was a symbolic way of setting aside their wealth for a few hours, and being alongside people whose lives were stunted by poverty and the lack of choices.

The idea was to spend the day with no other purpose than trying to see the city and its people through the eyes of God, and being attentive to what was happening in this small part of God's world.

After a short briefing session and a few moments of prayer at the city centre church that was being used as their base, the participants went their separate ways to spend a day in the city. Leaving cash, credit cards and cheque books in the church safe, they would not be allowed back for eight hours.

A woman participant described one incident from her retreat on the streets in the following way:

The first few hours seemed very artificial: almost exciting. I explored the city as though I was a sightseer, even though I have lived here all my life. I did a lot of walking and eventually my legs began to ache. I suddenly realized that the day had been planned to run from mid-morning to early evening: spanning two meal times. I began to feel a bit uneasy.

I bought a carton of milk and a small chocolate bar and sat on a bench in the city square to rest. I watched the people going past. They all seemed to have somewhere to go and things to do and it made me feel a bit useless. Nearby, other people were

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sitting drinking or begging. They made me uneasy so I walked some more.

Finally I just had to sit down. It had got hotter and my mouth was very dry but I had long since spent my £1. The only place I could find to sit was on some church steps. There was a beggar there as well but I was past caring. He asked if I had twenty pence for a cup of coffee. I could have laughed. I told him I had no money on me.

I thought I would feel bad about not having any money but in an odd way I felt a sense of freedom. As though there were no barriers. For once there was no question about whether to give money to a beggar: I had none to give. Nothing to give: nothing to lose.

We got talking and I was surprised that the man was quite educated. He smelled a bit with that ripe smell of old sweat and his hands were dirty. I remember the nicotine on his fingers and his dirty nails. After a time I actually began to enjoy our conversation. A while later someone stopped and gave him a couple of coins. He got up to go and get another drink. As he stood up his old beer can fell over and rolled across the pavement but it was empty.

I called out goodbye and he shouted something I didn't catch and was gone. I felt a bit lonely on my own. I wondered what God thought of my friend and his beer cans. I looked at my watch: still four hours to go before we were allowed back. What a crazy way to spend a day.

I thought about walking some more to kill time when I suddenly realized my friend was coming back carrying a plastic cup of coffee.

We shared the cup and talked some more. What was I doing? Where was I from? I felt oddly embarrassed to say I was praying about the city and that I was from a church, but he didn't seem surprised.

For a few minutes he was silent. Then he turned to me and said: 'Most of us on the streets believe in God, you know.'

I mumbled some sort of approving words trying not to sound patronizing but they didn't come out right and he wasn't listening

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anyway. He was looking out across the street. Maybe looking out across his life. He had a thoughtful, distant expression on his face. He looked very sad.

‘Yes, we believe in God,’ he said quietly. ‘We’ve got no one else to cry to in the night.’

We sat for a long time and eventually I stopped crying. Crying who for? Crying for him, crying for me, crying for this stupid, selfish world and crying for my stupid, selfish church with its petty bickerings.

Finally he said he had to go. I got up to shake his hand but on impulse hugged him. I smelled the stale beer on his breath; the stubble on his face scratched like my father’s did when he hadn’t shaved.

‘Take care,’ he said, ‘and God bless you.’

‘I don’t even know his name,’ the woman said later. ‘I wish I’d asked him who he was.’

\* \* \*

These two people taking part in their church project both had profoundly significant and moving experiences. But what, if anything, does it mean? Are these isolated incidents, or are other people encountering this reality in these strange places and among these unlikely people?

As we look around we find others stumbling on this discovery and catching glimpses of this common reality, both in the events of everyday life, and powerfully and overwhelmingly in the gospels.

The rest of this book is simply a detective story about who else is making these discoveries, how the clues fit together, where they lead, and what they might mean.

And the first clues are a bicycle and a ruined abbey.

## 2

### *The sacrament of failure*

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It has been said that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. A bicycle, for example, is more than a collection of the different parts that make it up. In addition to all the collected components it is something more: a machine with a function and purpose.

So it would sound contradictory to say that the part can be greater than the whole: that anything can be ‘more’ when it is incomplete than when it is complete.

It may sound contradictory – but it may also be true.

Far out in the gentle countryside of the Yorkshire Dales stands a ruin called Fountains Abbey. It was built by a community of Cistercian monks back in the twelfth century. The abbey lies in the hollow of a valley, with a river running through the grounds. In its day it was a magnificent example of church architecture – a huge and amazing building in an empty landscape dotted with windswept sheep and the occasional peasant’s cottage.

The towering arches, mighty buttresses, superb stained glass windows and magnificent carved woodwork must have been simply awesome to people trying to scratch a living from the land.

But then, in the sixteenth century, this mighty edifice was destroyed under the dissolution of the monasteries. Its religious community was scattered, the roof fell in and the windows were smashed. Over the years its stone was taken for local building and the abbey became a ruin.

But that was not the end of the story.

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The abbey is obviously incomplete today; only a fraction of the original building remains. It is roofless and wordless, but despite that – or perhaps because of it – its impact on the visitor is probably much greater today than in those earlier times when it housed a wealthy religious order. The roof is now the sky and the open walls take in the world where before they shut it out. The stone floor has become grass and the place of the high altar is empty – but full of significance.

The sun shines down into the open spaces of the great nave and sanctuary, warming the stone as it never could when the abbey was complete. The birds make nests in crevices in the broken stonework. Even the most casual visitor seems moved by the enormity of the damage and the dignity of the remains. There is a sense of stillness and presence.

The abbey will never regain its former greatness. No one will come and restore it to its original state. It will never again be whole or complete. It will always be fragmented, and damaged beyond repair. No formal monastic worship is likely to take place there as it did in the long distant past. God, even though he was worshipped there, does not undo the damage or recall and reassemble the religious order that built it. But, in a strange way, it may be that God uses the ruin as it is to waken people's minds to the infinite.

The damaged and incomplete fragment may be greater than the whole ever was when it was controlled and limited by the mind of man. Tens of thousands of people, who would never go near a monastic order or seriously think of God, are drawn to a silence and an encounter not by the wealth and success of the Church, but by an example of its colossal failure.

The damage and vulnerability of the ruin somehow makes its message more accessible, as though the visitor can enter its story and almost feel compassion; perhaps identifying with feelings of failure and uncertainty in their own lives.

When we are so often cynical and disappointed by the finite, we may be touched by the glimpse of the infinite opened up

