

Forgiveness

PART TWO

This is an extract from *God's Great Mystery Trip (from Atheist to Chaplain in Fourteen Days)* by Scott Fellows

It is August 1983. Scott – having gone through a bitter divorce and hit rock bottom – is invited to Greenbelt, a Christian music festival, by Dave, a Christian acquaintance. Although reluctant at first, Scott is surprised to find himself enjoying the positive ethos of the event in spite of three days of solid rain. In this extract we join Scott early on the Bank Holiday morning...

It was the last day of the Festival. I poked my nose out of the tent, expecting more rain. I got a blue sky and sun, lots of it. I hadn't slept well that night. Apart from the damp and discomfort, I'd been woken very early by an over-zealous rendition of *This is the day the Lord has made* by a camper van full of children. At breakfast, the early morning chorus was the sole topic of conversation.

'I know their youth leader,' said Dave, biting into his bacon sandwich, 'I had a sharing time with him a couple of days ago in one of the seminars.' I didn't know what Dave meant by 'sharing time', but I liked the idea. 'I wouldn't mind sharing one or two things with that group right now,' I said pointedly.

My thoughts turned to questions of organisation and management. 'Dave, I don't think I've seen any police around, where's the security?' 'Don't need many police, I think there's a couple around somewhere.' This was even more unbelievable than the absence of drugs which I'd already noted.

In spite of Dave's invitations I had studiously avoided attending any

seminars. I didn't want to be lectured, besides I'd heard it all before. Part of my education had been at a Cathedral school where morning prayers were said every day in the Cathedral itself. I had been confirmed, aged twelve, in the same Cathedral by the bishop with my father and mother in attendance. I had sung in the local church choir, first as a soprano then as a tenor. Finally I had read theology and English literature at University. Something had attracted me to the church all those years, but I didn't know what. Nothing had seemed really real. Saying prayers in the morning was merely part of the daily ritual at school, being confirmed was just the thing you did at that school at that age. In the choir, I had sat through hundreds of sermons, but listened to very few. I knew the order of service and the liturgy off by heart, a natural result of having to recite it countless times as a choir member. Church, as far as I was concerned, had almost become a place of work, where you could also socialise and get a few laughs afterwards. It was a club like any other, only instead of going on fishing trips, or making model boats or collecting stamps you sang and you happened to sing in a church.

At university I had studied the Bible just as I would have studied any other historical document. I looked for flaws in the

text, for discrepancies between texts and for ambiguity of meaning and found plenty. I was surprised, at first, to discover that several of my theology lecturers were atheists and made no secret of it. Initially I found this hard to understand, it seemed rather like asking a Nazi to lecture people on the riches of Judaism.

As I studied more, however, I began to realise that you don't have to believe in something to be knowledgeable about it. I began to exchange the naivety of my earlier views for a more sophisticated standpoint and, in this case, sophisticated meant sceptical.

My scepticism had lasted from my university days to the present. I had still dabbled with faith, occasionally attending my local church whilst teaching at Ellerton Park. However recent events had more or less destroyed any remaining bits and pieces of belief I still had. As far as I was concerned no loving God would have allowed the total collapse of my life that had taken place over the last two years. Besides, one had only to look around at world events for proof that if there was a God, he was either on vacation or had a strange idea of love and mercy.

And yet for all that I still couldn't dismiss the real sense of caring and commitment I was witnessing at this annual get together of the nation's Christian youth.

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If the seminars couldn't hold the answer for me, perhaps I would find it amongst the stalls offering various Christian related arts and crafts. I wandered for a couple of hours, enjoying the sunshine and the relaxed atmosphere that it brought. After my time teaching in Egypt I was impressed with the number of organisations and charities working in the developing world. People were travelling to every corner of the planet under Christ's banner it seemed, but I knew that there was an equal number of organisations operating under other religious or humanist colours. I needed something unique, something which no other faith or organisational religion had, something real.

By late afternoon I was pleasantly exhausted. I'd walked around the entire site many times chatting with stall holders. I'd even bought a couple of items, a leather Bible-cover for Dave to say thank you for bringing me, and another item for myself which I wasn't going to show Dave. In a corner of the festival village I'd come across a stall selling merchandise that I was sure the organisers wouldn't approve of. Amongst this dodgy selection I found a greeting card that said: 'Jesus Loves You – it's just everyone else who thinks you're a plonker.' This appealed to the politically incorrect side of my humour, I had swapped conspiratorial glances with the stall holder as I handed over my money, like two spies meeting in enemy territory.

As night fell everyone prepared for the final evening's entertainment. Dave's group had positioned themselves early right in the front of the mainstage. I was impressed with their advanced planning. 'I can see you've done this before,' I said laughing to Dave. 'Just once or twice,' came the reply. I was in a teasing mood. 'What I don't understand though is why you need to come here so early, surely with the amount of brotherly love in this place you could arrive last and somebody would make a space for you right at the front if you asked.' Dave gave me a

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straight look. 'Well it's true to say that I love my brothers and sisters in Christ and I'd do anything for them.' I prepared to respond. Dave beat me to it. 'Except, that is, give up my front centre pitch in front of mainstage on the last night of Greenbelt.'

I soon found out why. The atmosphere was supercharged as band after band led the audience in wave after wave of 'hands in the air' praise of their God. I watched in amazement, church had never been like this, there was an unrehearsed rawness about it that was deeply moving. It seemed to me that people were jumping up and down and waving their arms in the air not because of chemical stimulation, but because they were expressing how they felt about what they believed. Neither was it due, as the critics of such events often said, to group hysteria. The energy was already in the audience, long before the concert started. I had seen that by the way people had been behaving all weekend. This wasn't a

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false temporary high, the sort I had so often experienced myself at other concerts and which left you flat the next day. There was something lasting here, but what was the secret? I made a mental note to discuss these matters more fully with Dave as soon as I got a chance.

Then something happened that I wasn't expecting, the lead singer called for quiet and started speaking: 'If you're standing there tonight wondering what this is all about and wishing you knew, then this is for you. All you need to do is to open your heart and say this prayer with me.'

I braced myself, this was the embarrassing part. I had thoroughly enjoyed the music and wished they would skip this 'holier than thou' section. I had seen American evangelists do this kind of thing on TV and always cringed when I saw it.

I hoped this part would pass quickly. The singer started praying the Lord's Prayer. I was surprised, surely this was a bit old hat for such a hip gathering. I had expected more fire and brimstone.

Then the strangest thing happened. As I stood in the middle of the crowd something told me that this prayer was for me. I had an inescapable certainty that this was all especially for me, a certainty that grew with every passing moment. I had heard the Lord's Prayer a thousand times, recited it a thousand times, but now I felt, for the first time, the power behind the words, the reality that had eluded me all my life.

I started repeating the words of the prayer quietly to myself, I had no idea what was happening. I felt a mixture of nervousness and elation as I prayed, I glanced at the others around me, Dave and his group were also praying, as I found out later, not for themselves but for me.

A warm summer breeze blew across the field in which the crowd stood. I looked up, it was still just light, the sky a deep lustrous blue. I started to weep.

There was nothing I could do to stop it, I wept openly and uncontrollably. As I wept I gradually became aware of a feeling of lightness, as if my body was becoming physically lighter. I knew that something was leaving me, something that had been with me for a long time. And there was another thing, something that was entirely fresh and new. For the very first time I had a sense of my own guilt, my own faults that had led to the break up of my marriage. I saw myself through Jill's eyes and listened, for the first time, to the things she had said to me in our final days. It was too late for us now but not too late for me to learn. I felt profound gratitude that I was being shown the truth, all of it, and that I was ready to accept it with humility. I was both within myself and outside myself, watching what was happening from a distance, time stood still. I knew something amazing was happening to me, but I was no longer in

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control, there was another hand at the wheel.

Then, in that moment, I knew. This hand belonged to the Jesus of history, the Jesus I had studied and yet never really known. Now He was real and He was alive and He was standing beside me. I was overwhelmed, I dropped to my knees. I could still hear the words coming over the PA system: 'In the name of the Father and the Son.'

I felt other hands gradually lifting me, other voices gently speaking to me. It was the end of things and the beginning of things, the end of days and the best of days. I had gone to a festival organised just for me, attended a concert staged just

for me and said a prayer prayed just for me. The stripping away of my old life that had started two years before had led me to this place and this night. God hadn't been able to reach me while I had surrounded myself with my comforts and my scepticism, I needed a simpler, younger heart.

There was to be no sleep that night, I lay awake for hours in my tent, it was as if my whole body were on fire. I tried to analyse what had happened to me, but this experience defied analysis, you either accepted it or you didn't. Either way there was no doubting its reality.

In the morning, at six o'clock sharp, the dawn chorus of *This is the day...* started

up again; the camper van full of children rocking from side to side, just as it had done the previous morning. But this morning was different... very different. Now I understood why they wanted to sing and I wanted to sing too, I lay in my sleeping bag and sang along with them, sang for all I was worth, with my heart feeling as if it would burst out of my body, quite overcome with joy...

■ Scott Fellows

God's Great Mystery Trip (from Atheist to Chaplain in Fourteen Days) by Scott Fellows, available for £9.95 (plus £1.50 p&p) from:



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