

It was tempting to start my thoughts by singing “And now the end is near and so I face the final curtain’! But we have never sought to do the ministry of the shop ‘my way’, always God’s way.

Instead, we have just heard these words from the Magnificat:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my saviour; he has looked with favour on His lowly servant”

- I have chosen these words to introduce my thoughts on the Bookshop, because it is a remarkable story of God’s favour and blessing and I want to give Him the glory.
- We go out not with a whimper but with thanksgiving for the ministry it has been, and His faithfulness to his lowly servants.

My journey with the shop started 34 years ago:

Trained to teach I was faithfully, but reluctantly, looking for a job in teaching

One night at my Church home group, with gentle probing someone asked what I really wanted to do, I burst into tears and said, “I don’t know but I don’t want to go into teaching”.

That night they prayed for me.

The next morning in the local free paper I saw advertised a shop assistant role at the SPCK Bookshop. I stabbed it with my finger and said, ‘that is my job!’”

And of course, it was!

I was asked at the interview if, as a graduate, I wanted to make this my career. I think they thought I had my sights set on other things. Well 34 years later I think I can say I have happily made a career of it!

Over the years the Christian bookshop has evolved - moving locations around the city, changing owners, facing many challenges – the hardest by far, for me was the loss of my much loved manager Peter Hebden. I think he would be proud that we continued with the bookshop for a further 15 years. It was with thanks to Cynthia his wife, and the Diocese that they stayed faithful to the discussions they had already been having with Peter about buying the shop.

Their only condition: that I step up and be the manager, which I did.

It felt like a homecoming, moving from being alongside other shops on the high street to the centre of the Diocese where we could be involved in its ministry, servicing conferences, churches and so much more.

I couldn't have done it without the support of so many within SMH, the accountants, Pete Hobson, Danni and many others.

I have really enjoyed over the years the camaraderie of **all** the staff in SMH and I will miss you all.

Within the Bookshop we have had lot of lovely (and some challenging staff) over the years.

- It is good to see many of them here who have gone the extra mile for us
- Many who know Luke Fogg from his diocesan work, may not know he started with us in the shop. He came from Greggs and when asked by me in interview 'What excites you about working for us, his reply was "well it's got to be better than sausage rolls!" He was employed, we always enjoy a sense of humour in the shop.

It has been lovely to hear back from one youngster we took on who said: "*I honestly believe that without the experiences I had at CRL, I would not be where I am today*" "*on a personal level you were a great friend and mentor to me*"

What a privilege that has been, and also a testimony to God's grace, because I have high standards, I am sure I am not always the easiest to work for!

- Our latest employee has of course been the lovely Abbie. It has been a joy to see her develop and I have her permission to share this. When she first came, she hated using the phone and would finish a call with 'Bye, bye, bye getting quieter and quieter as she followed the receiver back to the phone. She now confidently says 'goodbye and thank you for your call'. She has really grown in confidence, to the point where her other manager commented on it, saying how Abbie was volunteering to make phone calls in her other job.

In addition to lovely staff, we have had lovely customers too. Many of whom I now count as friends. Their feedback in these past weeks has been amazing.

Who knew people saw me as a friendly, cheerful, helpful person!

I put it down to:

- the only training I remember having from my SPCK days on customer service: No customer needs to know your dog died before coming on shift, put your needs behind you, and serve people well.
- But it is more than that. We can clothe ourselves with love, as scripture tells us to do, but as we do that, God by His Holy Spirit then works that grace within our hearts, so it becomes part of us. There was a moment, in prayer time at

church, when I was lost in wonder, love and praise worshipping Him, when I distinctly heard God say: 'What does that level of devotion look like when you go to the shop in the morning?' That was a real turning point for me in treating every customer as someone God has sent. I don't always get it right, but the motivation is there, in wanting to express my love for God in my everyday work.

- And within that work the opportunities for ministry have been immense: someone places a bereavement card on the counter with a sigh and you get to ask them the background and listen to their stories. Seekers come in and buy bibles and you get to advise them how to approach bible reading suggesting they don't start at Genesis and work through.
- One customer wrote to say as a new Christian she was introduced to the shop by her vicar, we were there for her as she thought about pastoral ministry and we equipped and encouraged her as she trained to be a pastoral assistant.
- I could multiply this story 5,000 fold. God has taken the broken bread we have to offer and used it to feed all the people who have passed through our doors
- Many have seen us as the accessible face of the diocese, open during the week when churches are often closed. Easier to walk in to and start a conversation.
- It has been great working with the cathedral in this, they point people to us for resources, we direct people over for the services and chaplains. I have jokingly allowed the cathedral to adopt me of late, and I am thankful for the pastoral support they have offered as I face redundancy, particular thanks to Emma Davies.

In all of this I have much personally to be thankful for. I have changed:

My faith has broadened and deepened, taking home damaged books that I wouldn't necessarily have paid money for, I have appreciated afresh the broad diversity of our faith.

In this I have to pay tribute to Helen Newman who was my spiritual director. Her contribution to my life has been immeasurable, and I met her first in the shop.

With her gentle guiding I have learnt to hold lament and rejoicing together, which is standing me in good stead!

David Runcorn in the 'Reflections on daily prayer book' (well I had to mention a book!), said the other day.

"In the bible, faith is forged through the prayer of lament. Those raw cries of protest, anger, longing and questioning are signs of faith not the loss of it"

My prayer for myself and all the others who have expressed their dismay at the closing of the shop, is that we journey towards forgiveness, acceptance and hope allowing our faith to be strengthened.

There have been diplomatic questions about whether I am retiring, the answer is no, in spite of my grey hair, I have another 9 years before that date.

My desire has been to pour my energies into finishing well, then to take a short break and then to see what the next stage involves for me, and I know Abbie is on a similar journey.

Over the years the shop has held Psalm 90 at its heart:

May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us: establish the work of our hands for us. Yes, establish the work of our hands.

The more observant among you who have visited the shop lately will see part of *Psalm 31 displayed:*

¹⁴ But I am trusting you, O Lord,
saying, "You are my God!"

¹⁵ My future is in your hands.

Thank you all for coming to mark this ending, I am overwhelmed by how many are here. Thank you for your love and support I will miss you all, do please hold Abbie and I in your prayers as we seek to trust God, name Him as our God and place our futures in His hands.

Thank you! And thank you God!