

Sunday 22nd September 2024 - This Little Light Of Mine: Journeying Through The Stages Of Faith

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0 : 00] Good morning. Good to see you. Quick question. Hands up. Who likes to travel or would like to travel if you had more time and more money? Okay, yeah, quite a few of you in the room.

Yeah, no surprise, eh? Well, you're not alone, all right? 86.2 million trips were taken by Brits last year, and that's up quite a bit from the year before. We are a nation, and looking by the weather today, we are a nation that loves to travel, the UK being the single most popular destination, about 17%, and then Spain and Greece hoovering up around a quarter of all other UK travel. Now, of course, there's the fly and flop holiday, you know, when all you really want to do is get in the sun and relax, isn't it? And there's nothing wrong with that, because, like, if you've had a, you know, exhausting, you know, time at work or whatever, you know, sit by the pool or whatever, but then if you're feeling maybe a little bit more adventurous, there's, you know, maybe a road trip or sightseeing or even backpacking across Europe or going to a city break and kind of exploring that city. And those sorts of journeys, I think, offer the opportunity of immersing yourself more fully into the culture of the place that you're visiting. And it can be as much a physical journey to take all the sights and sounds in as it is an inward journey of finding out more about yourself and how you cope when you're outside of your comfort zone.

Who's been watching this? Quick hands up, any of you? Yeah, a few of you. Not everybody, but a few of you. Now, I don't know if you have or not, okay, but this series, Celebrity Race Across the World, it just come to an end. Me and Lisa, we've been glued to the TV on this one, watching the ups and downs of the four different couples that have spent a month trying to get from northern Brazil to southern Chile, kind of by a very circuitous route going up and down the country in the shortest possible time, without smartphones or any bank cards or credit cards, and with just £36 cash a day.

So here's a trailer if you haven't seen it. I want a hammock and a glass of carbon, please. Jeremy and I were really ready for an adventure.

I'm going to eat pretty love the hell out of it. The tough reality of the race kicked in. We're in trouble here, mate. Where are we going, mate? We're in the middle of nowhere.

[2 : 54] I don't think that's coping well. For four celebrities and their loved ones. I've got a neatness right now. You've got a lovely cheap room and you've got a miserable wife, so well done. One more day like this will break us.

God, I was so naive. The 12,500 kilometre race, this is another level. Mate, lemonada. From the Amazon to the Andes. This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

This makes me fall in love with life again. Woo! Has strengthened them. You get knocked down, you can get back up. That's what it's all about. I feel like I'm winning. And their relationships. Have I let you down?

You never let me down. I wouldn't have wanted to have done anything else with anyone else. Proud of you. Now, the final stretch.

That's a volcano. And a mountain to climb. This is it. Which team will triumph? It's really steep. This is our last sprint together. Let's do it. I can slip back. Let's do it. There's a flood.

[3 : 54] And a race. Turn it up! Across the world. Now, it is a race, okay, for the different couples.

But really, really for me, watching this, it's been about their inward journey. Okay. Them finding themselves and each other as they experience different challenges and spend time together.

And it was good fun. It's been good fun to watch. But underneath that, I think it's a really life-affirming series. You know, the power of taking a journey with others.

And there's this rich seam of just how important journeying is that runs all the way through the Bible, I think.

You know, from Abraham's journey to Canaan, the exodus and the exile and the return to Jerusalem, or, you know, Jesus walking and talking on the road to Emmaus, or Paul's missionary journeys.

[5 : 01] You know, that's just to name a few. Journey is a powerful metaphor, I think, for faith. And I think the reason journey is such a kind of helpful image is that it focuses on the process of growing in faith, not the destination.

You know, that we somehow have arrived, that we figured it all out, or that we've made it. And I think Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians in chapter 3, going from verses 17 to 18, puts it quite well.

He says this, Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

For this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. Now, I'm going to come back to this passage later on, and I'll put some more context on this. But for now, just notice how Paul speaks about our faces being unveiled.

So he isn't primarily talking about the way we gaze by faith directly at God or at Jesus, but rather how we gaze at the life-giving Spirit that is shining in the faces of others around us, and as they reflect God's glory in what they say and in what they do.

[6 : 44] You know it. You know it, don't you? You know it when you see it. Even people who don't profess faith, you know, they say things like, there's something different about you.

Okay? About the way that you speak or the way that you live. Okay? And that's the Spirit, isn't it? At work in people, and then changing us from one degree, as it says here, to the next.

And it's a process that continues throughout our life. We never arrive, but we continually grow closer to who we were created to be.

A journey also implies that we keep on moving, that we don't settle anywhere for too long. And this idea of, you know, pilgrimage or pilgrims, always on the move.

Maybe physically, you know, if you're on the Camino. But certainly mentally, spiritually, or emotionally, being open to embrace transition and change, and facing challenges with grace.

[8 : 01] You know, maybe expecting the unexpected on the journey, if you remember Paul's encounter with Lydia. Yeah. And then lastly, I think there's something about the importance of companionship on a long journey.

And yeah, of course, there are times when we need to walk alone. But then there comes a point when that might not be good for us. You know, we can become too isolated.

When you stumble and graze your knee, it's good to know that there's someone there to offer you a hand back up, isn't it?

And so it is, I think, with our journey into faith. We do it together. Okay? We are the body of Christ. Different people, different experiences, different backgrounds, different ages, supporting and learning from one another.

Reflecting, okay, God's glory. Shining like a mirror to one another. And so I think it's helpful to reflect on where we're at then in terms of our faith journey.

[9 : 12] And there are some different ways of looking at that and understanding these different stages in our faith. And I'll just look at a few that I think might be helpful this morning. So the theologian, some of you might be familiar with him or his work, Walter Brueggemann, talks about faith in terms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

And he does that through a journey into the spirituality of the Psalms. You know, and if you know your Psalms, you know, it's gritty, powerful, and this is a deep gaze, okay, at the honest, visceral, kind of real-life experience.

Messy. And those experience, how they shape us and change us. And I think Psalms is a really, you know, powerful and good place to kind of get real with our faith.

And if you want to, I'm not going to say too much about Brueggemann's work, but if you want to get deeper into this, then I think on the Monday morning service at the moment, they're following a series through Psalms, and I think some of those are up on YouTube.

So please go and take a look. I think another way to reflect on these stages of faith is this image of the rings in a tree trunk.

[10 : 35] You know that each year a tree lays down another layer, yeah, that goes around its base to provide extra strength and support.

And the thing is, all the rings are important, aren't they? And that's equally true for us. All our experiences matter, and they're all part of our journey.

So in the natural world, when floods and fires happen, you can often see the effects of these in the rings themselves. And it's the same for us. You know, our experiences lay down layers, and they shape and they change us.

And maybe there are some cracks in there. You know, difficult times, illnesses, times of loss or grief. And very often, you know, we know that it's those very experiences. As difficult as they are, they're the ones that God uses to change us.

You know, we learn to be more patient, to be more forgiving, to make more room for grace and mercy in our lives. And so I think these rings is quite a powerful image. Now, I said I'd come back to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

[11 : 47] And let's just have another look at this. So Paul here is talking about living this unveiled life, which harks back to the story in Exodus 34.

That describes how Moses came down from Mount Sinai after talking to God, and his face was literally shining.

Light pouring out of him. The word is Shekinah. The intense light represents God's presence. You know, Moses' face was a reflection then of God's glory.

His little light was well and truly shining. And it totally freaked out the Israelites, you know, understandably.

And even his brother Aaron was too frightened or too afraid to come near him. And they made him put a veil over his face to hide that divine kind of radiance.

[12 : 54] They just couldn't handle it. And so when Moses would talk to the people, he covered his face. But when he talked with God, he took the veil off.

And Moses was changed through that encounter with God. The Greek word here is actually metamorpho, right?

Which is interesting because it's the same word that's used in the transfiguration of Jesus. I think kind of what Paul is getting at here is that through living this unveiled life, a life in full view, if you want, we encounter the living God in all sorts of places with all sorts of people.

And that, like Moses, that gradually changes us, reflecting more and more of God's glory. Now, if I remember correctly, remember Matt, you shared, it was a couple of years back now, about the spirit prompting you to recognize and see the real worth and value of the guy that was cleaning the concourse at Birmingham New Street.

Yeah, you're nodding, that's good. When he was waiting for a train. It's like God comes into our spirit and just speaks deeply to us about the people around us.

[14 : 20] Well, what if letting our light shine is about recognizing the presence of God all around us? And every taste we get of that presence is an opportunity to kind of reflect his love back, to spill out of our lives into the lives of all the people that we encounter.

Now, I don't know, maybe for most of us, it's not so much, you know, the dazzling Shekinah of God, maybe it's more like a dim nine-watt bulb at times.

But, you know, this journey that we're on isn't a sprint, is it? It's a marathon, okay? Just like that series, Race Across the World. There will be detours.

There will be reroutes. There will be delays and unexpected surprises that we're going to have to navigate. What matters, though, of course, is that we keep on journeying, that we stay in the race?

Okay, one last way of thinking about these stages of faith that we go through. From the writer and theologian Brian McLaren, he identifies four stages.

[15 : 26] I haven't got time, I'm afraid, to go through all of them, but I'm just going to look at two of them. The first of which he calls simplicity. So early on in our spiritual formation, you know, we have to establish boundaries that give us a sense of order and of structure in our faith and a clear sense of what is right and what is wrong, and that's really important.

And we build a container for our identity as Christians and as part of our new fellowship. And thinking back, you know, 35 years ago when I became a Christian, that was totally necessary and really important as part of my early kind of spiritual development and formation.

And naturally, you know, we get shaped by the people around us and the norms and practices of our, you know, our church community because we find meaning in belonging, and it is so important.

Now, sometimes, and in some churches, not this one, but in some churches, that can become quite rigid and even at times maybe even toxic, you know, just kind of looking at very simple, easy answers to complex issues or maybe just seeing things in very binary terms.

You know, you're either in or you're out. Us and them. Inies, outies. Everything gets painted in very black and white terms.

[17 : 02] You know, I think for people looking from outside into the church, a church that's like that, it's not very attractive.

It can feel very exclusive and judgmental. You know, it's our way or the highway. So simplicity is a really good place to start, okay?

But it's not a really great place to finish. And for many people, sooner or later, they move into the next stage, and that's complexity.

And we start to question things. Our experiences don't quite match up to the kind of black and white way of looking at things and at people. And we become aware of a lot more subtlety and nuance in the world.

And maybe, maybe the people we thought were the good guys, you know, turn out to be not so good. And as we get exposed to people from different cultures and religions, and we start seeing things from a different perspective, so we become a lot more, I think, pragmatic in our faith.

[18 : 13] And we're keen to learn more and to kind of keep kind of pushing. And that reflects, I think, in the way that we read and understand the Bible. And we see the diversity of literature that's in there and the language and the history and the culture.

And then I think we come to, you know, realize that the text is much more nuanced and complex than we thought. So applying very literal interpretations is not very helpful.

Now, Brian McLaren argues that a lot of people, and I would argue, actually, that I think most churches in the UK stay here in stage two. There is always more to learn and more to do in terms of actually kind of putting our faith into practice.

And, you know, and I think, you know, here at St. John's, kind of engaging and living with our community is a big, big part. And I know most people here, you know, it's one way or another involved in that.

And I think it's, you know, what makes us in some ways so unique. Now, as I said, I haven't got time to unpack the other two stages, which are perplexity and harmony.

[19 : 28] But these are characterized by what we might call a crisis of faith and the resolution of that, which, of course, is a really difficult place to be in and then to come through on the other side.

Suffice to say, living in humility, you know, kind of comfortable with paradox and mystery and holding truth in tension, portrays this stage of harmony, which I think often is kind of characterized, that's St. Francis, by a more contemplative life.

Now, I'm not expecting you, anybody, to want to read it or even read it or whatever, but this book, okay, Faith After Doubt, unpacks these four stages in a lot more detail.

It's written by Brian McLaren. I'm not suggesting you read this, and for many of you, you know, I doubt it will speak to where you're at.

But the thing is, I suspect it does speak to where a lot of people, particularly those who don't want to be part of the church anymore, you know, I suspect it does speak to them.

[20 : 51] Thanks. Really good. He's written quite a few books, okay. So, you know, it may not be for you to want to read that, and it is quite an uncomfortable read as well.

I think he's making the point, okay, in the book, that questions and doubts are not the enemy of faith. I think that we've historically kind of made out, but rather a doorway into a more mature and fruitful kind of faith.

You know, that faith and doubt are not opposites, that they're more like twin sisters, and that we have to learn to honestly kind of walk alongside.

Because, you know, where there are no doubts, no questions, no perplexities, there's not really going to be much growth. So just one last point on these stages of faith.

going back to this image. I think it's important to say that each stage is a necessary part of laying down those rings.

[22 : 05] There's no spiritual superiority here, okay. Each ring builds upon the last. We're not just the last ring.

All right? We're the... Bless you. We're the whole tree trunk. All right? It all matters, the whole lot. And this stuff is, of course, important if we hope to find a way to honestly share and live out our faith with those around us.

Just a quick statistic. 2021, the British Social Attitude Survey, it's a big UK census survey that's carried out, found that 53% of people now identify as non-religious.

Okay. Let's be honest. No surprise there. Yeah? No surprise there, really, is there? However, it is the fastest growing category.

Every year, statistically, it's going up and up and up. Basically, people are increasingly saying no to organized religion and what they perceive, okay, the church to be about.

[23 : 39] Of course, that doesn't say anything about their beliefs or their spirituality. In fact, a large number of people, and this is in the survey as well, who reject religion also describe themselves as being spiritual.

Now, I suspect what they mean is that they want to connect with something much bigger than themselves and in that find a freedom and a peace and a fullness of life.

And I think, you know, sometimes there is a tendency, isn't there, to understand religion as belief. And I think Matt sort of touched on that last week as rationality, as accepting the truth of a series of propositions.

You know, and I'm all for the creed. I think that is important. Okay. But actually, for most people, most of the time, that's not what's going on. Can you remember, if you think back a couple of years, the huge number of people that kind of queued up to go and pay respect to the queen of the coffin that was at St. Giles Cathedral.

Many of them, and it was commented at the time, many of them made religious gestures as they walked past the coffin. You know, I think that was much more to do with a spiritual response that is almost instinctive.

[25 : 14] Okay. Whether or not people have a specific set of beliefs, there's something deeper. And it's not something, I don't think it's something that's superstitious.

Rather, to me, what that says is that God's spirit is already at work in people's lives at a much, much deeper level.

And it's often hidden. But times like this, I think it becomes more visible. It surfaces. You know what? If we want to connect with that spiritual reflection in others to share our faith, we've got to be tuned into that.

We've got to be hearing it, to be feeling it, and to be seeing it. And then at the same time, be vulnerable and honest enough to share our own experiences and challenges and doubts.

And yet, and yet, in the midst of all that, our trust and hope in the risen Jesus. you know, and to do that as a, as compassionate fellow travelers on the journey with others, not as religious gatekeepers with all the answers.

[26 : 39] Because the, the, the trouble with thinking that we have all the right answers, you know, the ABC of faith, is that that can be a really cheap faith. I think certitude is a, is a poor substitute for authentic faith.

It's too easy. And I think people see through that. There's no wrestling with doubt, no dark night of the soul, no testing yourself with hard and perplexing questions.

And then being, being really honest. Being really honest about that. You know, I think maybe we also have a lot to learn from others who are not part of our faith community.

The, uh, biblical scholar and theologian, go to the next, Peter N. said this, we need to think differently about our faith.

A faith that is not so much defined by what we believe, but in whom we trust. We have, we have misunderstood faith as a what word rather than a who word.

[28 : 00] It's primarily about beliefs rather than primarily as trust in. When we grab hold of correct thinking for dear life, when we refuse to let go because we think that doing so means letting go of God, when we dig our heels in and stay firmly planted, even when we sense that we need to let go and move on, at that point we are trusting our thoughts rather than God.

We have turned away from God's invitation to trust in order to cling to an idol. Yeah. Yeah. I'd like to finish just sharing with you a short story in, comes out of this book, some of you might be familiar with it, Dave Tomlinson, he was at Greenbelt for those of you that were there.

The book's called Black Sheep and Prodigals, an Antidote to Black and White Religion. And I would recommend, this is a nice small book and really, some really interesting little stories in here.

Now, you may or may not agree with what he shares, but I just ask, I would just ask you just to sit with it for a bit, mull it over, and then over the next few weeks as we dig deeper into this series and what it means to let your light shine, just be open to the possibility that God is a lot bigger, more encompassing, more gracious than we might think.

When I told a neighbour who says she doesn't believe in God that 15 Muslim students came to our midnight mass at Christmas and they received communion, she literally wept for joy in the street.

[29 : 57] Go steady, Dave, she told me. You're going to get me out of bed on a Sunday morning if you're not careful. Most of us have had enough of black and white religion, not just when it leads to suicide bombings and terrorist attacks, but also when people insist on having a monopoly on God or truth about God.

And to be honest, I had no idea that the group of students were Muslims. Midnight mass is always bursting with visitors and faces I didn't recognise.

The students were just part of the crowd with no particular indication that they were of a different faith. When midnight struck, the church descended into its customary delightful chaos with everyone wishing those around them a happy Christmas and sharing the peace of Christ with a handshake or a hug.

A few minutes later, we stood around the altar. We have a large, round altar table in the centre of the church to celebrate the first mass of Christmas. And this is the point at which, in many churches, an invisible line divides the innies and the outies.

Those who qualify to receive communion from those who don't. No such distinction exists at St. Luke's. Our approach to communion is based on the example of Jesus in the Gospels where he ate and drank with all and sundry, often including people who were snubbed or rejected by religious establishment, so-called sinners.

[31 : 32] I therefore offer the invitation I give every Sunday. This is the table of Jesus Christ where all are welcome and no one is turned away. We therefore offer bread and wine to every single person here without exception.

And if you would like to receive communion, please come forward now. God welcomes all. And if people came forward for communion, it was clear that more than usual opted for the non-alcoholic alternative to wine.

But it never occurred to me that this was because some were Muslims. Afterwards, the students beamed as they spoke of the warm welcome they found among us.

With all the hatred and violence going on in the world, we wanted to join with Christians, brothers and sisters, in celebrating the birth of Jesus, one young man told me with a broad grin and a twinkly eye.

It was their first experience of being in a church and neither they nor we will forget it. The following day, in a Christmas post on Facebook, I told the story of our midnight encounter with visitors from the East.

[32 : 46] Maintaining that a common humanity is surely more important than religious denomination. Many people liked the post but there were also comments and emails from people who disagreed.

Some made reference to St. Paul's warning about eating the bread and drinking the wine unworthily. I replied that Paul's comments had nothing to do with whether people believed the right things or belonged to the correct religious group.

It was about people behaving in the wrong way. It was about division and discrimination in the community. About people showing contempt instead of compassion.

Ultimately, it was about not recognizing God in the other. what if letting our light shine is about recognizing the presence of God all around us?

Sometimes through unexpected people, unexpected places, and every taste we get of that presence, an opportunity to reflect his love back.

[33 : 59] You know, spilling out of our lives into the lives of all the people we encounter. Amen.