



St Alkmund's

Duffield Parish Magazine



June 2021

Picture: Kieran Harrod

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THE VICAR'S LETTER

JAMES HUGHES



Dear Friends,

At last it feels as if we are getting back to some kind of normality. We rejoice in the things that we are able to do that we couldn't do a month ago, particularly the opportunity to have people in our homes again, and to see family members *properly* whom we haven't seen for a long time. I am looking forward to writing these letters where the first thing on our minds is not Covid.

Church is gradually opening up, and during June we will be opening up further. We are expecting to be able to reopen our midweek young people's groups (Impact on a Monday for those aged 11–14, and Ignition on a Tuesday for those aged 14–18) face to face at the Church Hall. We are planning for some events at church towards the end of June and into July, to take the

opportunity to mark the 'end' of Covid restrictions, to rejoice, and to mourn and remember those we have lost. We are looking to launch a new Café in the Church Hall, particularly for those who are recovering from the effects and impact of Covid.

All these things we are planning to do, but one of the things we have learned over the last year or so is to sit lightly to our plans! So please do keep an eye on our social media and the website as we update regularly with what is coming up.

We are really looking forward to being able to meet more people face to face over the coming weeks. Church is open on a Sunday morning if you want to join us, and you can always follow the live stream on our YouTube channel.

See you soon—and not just on a screen!

Yours in Christ,

For regular updates and information from St Alkmund's, find us online at:

Website: <https://stalkmundsduffield.co.uk>

Facebook: StAlksDuffield

Twitter: @StAlksDuffield

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/company/st-alkmund](https://www.linkedin.com/company/st-alkmund)

And don't forget our Benefice YouTube channel, which has livestreams of our Sunday services and other regular content including Morning Prayer and 'Songs of Praise':

www.youtube.com/TheUnitedBeneficeofDuffieldLittleEaton

From Mother's Day to Father's Day

Christian apostle Saint Paul makes it very clear in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 13 that the greatest of all spiritual gifts is love. Sonora Smart Dodd (1882–1978) held her father in great esteem and conveyed much love for him such that she is recognised as the founder of Father's Day.

In 1909, she and her husband John Dodd attended the Mother's Day service at their church in Spokane, Washington, USA. As Sonora listened to the sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Henry Rasmussen and heard the virtues of mothers and motherhood from the Bible, she thought about her own childhood. Sonora's father William Smart, a Civil War veteran, lost his wife as she gave birth to a sixth child.

Sonora was only sixteen at the time and the eldest. Her character developed through helping to raise her five brothers. Through the difficult years following her mother's death, Sonora watched her father care for the six children with love and devotion, and saw him work hard as a farmer and make sacrifices in order to give them all better lives. He was a courageous, selfless and loving man. She thought how important fathers are in raising children, felt inspired to campaign for



better recognition of fathers and this consideration eventually led to the notion of Father's Day.

In 1910 she approached the Spokane Ministerial Alliance and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to establish Father's Day as a holiday in the same fashion as Mother's Day.

Due to the support of local organisations, and Sonora's dedication to the cause, the first Father's Day was celebrated on June 19, 1910. Sonora advocated for the day to be celebrated on the first Sunday in June, which was close to her father's birthday. However, that didn't allow pastors enough time to prepare for their services, so the first Father's Day was celebrated on the third Sunday in June. Sonora Dodd's efforts to celebrate and promote Father's Day were a practical expression of the Bible's mandate and what the Lord had ordained in the Fifth of The Ten Commandments: "Honour your Father and your Mother."

Political leaders and local businesses supported Sonora in her efforts to get Father's Day recognised nationally. President Woodrow Wilson approved Father's Day in 1916, and by 1919, when Sonora's father died, Father's Day had become a popular occasion celebrated across the United States of America.

In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson signed a Presidential Proclamation that decided the third Sunday of June as Father's Day in the United States. It was

in 1972 when real success was found, as President Richard Nixon declared Father's Day as a 'permanent national observance.'

Today some 72 countries celebrate this event on the third Sunday in June, including the UK.

Stories such as this encourage us to cherish and respect our parents. As we

receive Jesus' love, wisdom and friendship by being kind, loving, generous and forgiving of ourselves and by listening and seeing ourselves through Christ's ears and eyes, we can embrace Saint Paul's ideal to love one another.

Paul Wiggins

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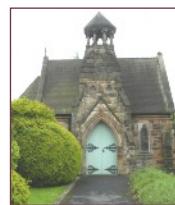
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Where's the Bear?

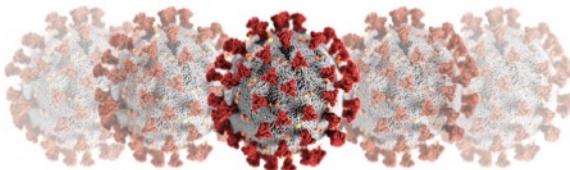
Alkmund Bear has been enjoying a lot of outdoor activity lately. He went on a lovely walk with us around Farnah Green and the Chevin. But the local stiles did cause him some problems! He almost got stuck in a 'squeezer' stile (he thought that they are getting narrower, or is it too much marmalade in lockdown?!) and then struggled on the very steep steps to get over a wall. However, with some help he managed and he enjoyed his walk. Fortunately, it was a dry and sunny day, so he didn't get his fur dirty!

Alkmund reminds everyone to continue keeping safe, and he's looking forward to see you all again in the summer.

John and Mary Birkby



Beyond COVID Drop-in Space/Cafe



The COVID-19 pandemic has, in one way or another, affected everyone and impacted all ages. Some have been affected by isolation and loss of social contact. Others have been ill with COVID or watched loved ones being ill with it and lived in fear of losing them. For many who had COVID, some symptoms persist beyond the initial illness. An estimated 1.1 million people in the UK are currently reporting “Long COVID” with symptoms including fatigue, brain fog and breathlessness. Many people who have had COVID have not had a chance to talk about what happened to them and to share their experience. Some people have lost loved ones to this terrible virus and others have lost loved ones during this period due to other conditions or circumstances, but all have been affected by restrictions on funeral arrangements and the limits of social distancing, adding further anguish to the grieving process.

The church family at St Alkmund's are therefore setting up a drop-in space for people who have been affected by COVID in any way. Evidence emerging from COVID research suggests that there is a great need for people to have an opportunity to talk about their experiences. This is something we can offer to our community which is not currently available through any charities or any other organisations. However, we are not offering a COVID-recovery programme (these are available through the GP/NHS). Rather, a safe space for people to come and chat (or just come and “be”), and to be heard.

The Drop-in space will be held weekly on Thursday afternoons from 1pm–3pm in the Church Hall. If the Government’s plan to lift restrictions goes ahead on 21st June, the start date will be Thursday 24th June. If Government guidelines change, the start date will be postponed. Posters will be around the village, and the church website will have the details nearer the time. There will be refreshments (including cake!) available throughout the afternoon. People will be free to come and just sit with refreshments, have a chat (or not), go for a short walk (time determined by those wishing to go and their energy levels), do a crafting activity, plant seeds, do a jigsaw or another activity. The drop-in space is aimed at enabling people to feel relaxed, have something to do with their hands if they want to, have space to think and, if they want to, talk about their experience of the pandemic, whatever that might be.

Bring a friend if you would like to. Everyone is welcome.

Fiona Lindop



Who Moved the Stone?

By Frank Morison.

Jesus of Nazareth was executed around about AD30, after a mockery of a trial. He was buried on a Friday, and early on the Sunday morning “the third day” he appeared alive to his followers, both women and men. His ministry, teaching, death and resurrection form the bedrock of the Christian faith: Christians worldwide believe that Jesus is God made man.

For those not familiar with the story: In the last week of his life, now known as “Holy Week”, Jesus travelled to Jerusalem with his 12 disciples, knowing that his death would follow. He entered Jerusalem on the Sunday, now called Palm Sunday. He spoke to many different groups of people and performed some miracles. On the Thursday evening he ate a meal called the Passover meal, which commemorates the escape of the Hebrew people from Egypt. At this meal he shared the first communion, and told his followers that he would be captured, tried and executed. Later that evening he went to pray just outside the walls of Jerusalem, the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was betrayed by his disciple Judas, and captured by the Jewish authorities. He was tried—in the middle of the night—and then taken to see the Roman Governor. Despite Pilate’s reluctance, he condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion, and Jesus was mocked, mistreated and executed on Good Friday. Early on the Sunday morning, first some loyal women, and then disciples John and Peter saw that he was not in his tomb. Later that day he appeared to other disciples.

90 years ago, one man set out to disprove this narrative.

Frank Morison is the pseudonym of Albert Henry Moss, an English author who wrote seven books of which this is the best known, which was first published in 1930, and still in print today. The first chapter gives a personal introduction explaining how the book came to be, resulting in conclusions that are in contrast with his pre-suppositions: this is neatly captured by the chapter title: “The book that refused to be written.”

The rest of the book is a detailed personal view of the events of Holy Week, leading to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, which form a cornerstone of Christian faith.

Morison starts his review on the evening before Good Friday, and presents a well-argued case for the events of the following days. While using the four gospels as his primary sources, he is not afraid to use other supporting sources, and also a good deal of deduction and sometimes conjecture to fill in the gaps. His arguments are persuasive.

Reading about Maundy Thursday evening, I was surprised, having heard sermons on the foundation of the Holy Supper regularly, to learn a good deal of new detail presented and inferred from the gospel narratives. I found the analysis of the timings of the evening, the movements of Jesus and the disciples, the treachery of Judas, and the machinations of the Jewish hierarchy to be thoughtfully presented and illuminating.

There is an excellent discussion of the problems faced by Caiaphas, the chief priest, and Pilate, the Roman Governor. In particular, the character of Pilate is revealed through other historical information, including the detail that his wife was probably a granddaughter of the Roman Emperor Augustus.

The details of the crucifixion are (mercifully) skimmed over, but the reality of the death of Jesus emphasised. The movements of the disciples, and more particularly the women in Jesus's disciples are analysed in fine and illuminating detail.

Then we move on to the following Sunday morning ("... on the third day ..."), and the disappearance of Jesus from the tomb, and his re-appearance to many people, leads on to the key Chapter 9, "The historic crux of the problem": How, in a few weeks after the death of Jesus, did his followers change from frightened and traumatised mourners to confident followers who believed that their Lord had risen from the dead? Morison looks in detail at three key people influenced by the resurrection.

There is Peter, an uneducated fisherman, whose blunt honesty is on occasion rebuked by Jesus; Peter, the man who denied Jesus at his greatest crisis, rose up, only seven weeks after the death and resurrection to speak to very large crowds in Jerusalem, such that many were convinced and chose to believe and follow Jesus. If he had had the slightest doubt, he could not have done this.

There is James, the brother of Jesus, who after Jesus's death and resurrection was to become a leader of the church in Jerusalem. He believed that his brother had died and risen from the dead. So much so that he devoted the rest of his life to spreading the good news, and remained faithful even to martyrdom. He could not have done this unless he believed with his whole heart.

There is Paul, the third key person, who is transformed from an active persecutor of the early Christian church. The Bible records that he stood by whilst others stoned Stephen to death for his belief in Jesus. He even travelled 180 miles to Damascus to seek out and arrest Christians. But God met with him in a miraculous way. He made himself known to the Christians, through a reluctant man (Ananias), and became the leading teacher of Christianity through modern Turkey and Greece, re-visiting Jerusalem, and ending his life at the hands of the authorities in Rome. Would he have done this without belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus?

In "The witness of the great stone", Morison addresses the role of the guards, and the problem of how "the great stone" came to be moved. Finally, Morison draws his case together in the final two chapters, drawing his conclusions from the facts and analysis that he has presented. He concludes that there is indeed historical evidence to support the words from The Apostles Creed: "On the third day he arose again from the dead."

Morison is not a dispassionate author. He puts himself into the story in many places—"I think ..." —and his passion for his subject stands out from every page. Frank Morison set himself a mission, and came to a conclusion that has influenced many readers for over 90 years.

We know what Frank Morison thinks—he has told us. But what do you think?

Jesus is not a myth. He lived in Israel 2,000 years ago. He preached and healed. He was reviled by the religious authorities, who conspired with the Roman ruler to have him brutally executed. He was put in a tomb, but rose again. There is excellent documentary supporting evidence—much better attested than any other documents from that era. Frank Morison, although his style is dated, gives us a provocative account of the facts around Jesus's death and resurrection.

It is worth spending a few hours reading it. And then deciding what you are going to do about it.

The book is readily available in print. Wikipedia entry "Albert Henry Moss" also gives a link to the full text:

<https://www.gospeltruth.net/whomovedthes tone.htm#1>

Coincidentally, *Who Moved the Stone* was also reviewed in the Little Eaton Easter Parish Magazine by MH.

This review supports the story Primary Disagreement, which you will also find in this June 2021 edition of the Duffield Parish Magazine. The impact of the book is pivotal to the story. I have imagined the response of two people who are forced to consider seriously the truth of the gospel narrative, and the impact on their lives.

Andrew Jackson, May 2021



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Mouse Makes

When Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins he sat down and wept. For days he fasted and prayed before God. Finally the opportunity came for him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, but it wasn't going to be easy....

Read Nehemiah's story in the **Old Testament** book of 'Nehemiah', chapters 1 to 7.

Here is Nehemiah's list of all the things that need to be done to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Fill in the missing gaps on the tower to help rebuild the wall.

PRAY	GATE
RUBBLE	BEAM
REPAIR	BOLT
RESTORE	BAR
BUILD	STEP
WORK	TOWER
STONE	HOUSE
TIMBER	POOL
WALLS	FINISH
FLOOR	DEDICATE
ROOF	CELEBRATE
DOOR	

		S	
E		A	E
		L	Y
		R	A L
B	M		
		E	A E
R E		R	
		L	
		S	
		E R O	
A E		I E R	
		D	
		K	P
		R E R	
		O	E
		B	

How many gates
were repaired?
Who rebuilt them?

How long did
it take to finish
the walls?

‘Monday to Friday Living’

In this article James Rollin reflects on his Christian upbringing and how his Christian journey has been one of ongoing learning and development over the years; he also reflects on how the Lord has been at work in his life in various ways, leading to his current work as a Trainee Minister at St Alkmund’s.



I was brought up as a Christian by my Mum, regularly attending church and Sunday school from a very young age and, as such, my testimony doesn’t feature a dramatic “road to Damascus” moment of conversion. Instead, my Christian journey has been one of ongoing learning and development over the years, ever since I made my first commitment of faith aged 11, at a Billy Graham ‘Mission England’ Crusade back in 1985, held at Bramall Lane football stadium in Sheffield.

My Christian life progressed significantly during my time at York University, which had a strong Christian Union, and I also attended York Baptist Church, a great Bible-based fellowship. Although I had grown up in (a Methodist) church and would definitely have already described myself as a Christian, my time at University was when I first experienced authentic (and sustained) expository Bible teaching and application.

Then, after graduating in 1995, for several years I attended Bessacarr Evangelical Church in Doncaster, which was another key time of further spiritual growth and Bible learning, prior to moving to Belper in late 2000 and joining St Alkmund’s in early 2001. Since that time, I have continued to learn from the faithful Bible teaching we enjoy week-by-week at church, together with attending the various teaching courses the church regularly runs.

Over the years I have clearly seen God at work in my life in various ways, guiding and directing it. For example, God was certainly at work in how my wife Emma and I met (thanks in a large part to the influence of other respected Christian friends), and He was also at work in how we were subsequently able to navigate various tricky challenges to find the right church—St Alkmund’s, as it turned out!—to settle as a married couple, and to be able to serve there together.

My faith has also been tested—and hopefully strengthened—at various points in my life; in particular during a couple of times in relatively quick succession where I faced instances of being without paid employment, the second one for a fairly lengthy period. It was an extremely difficult time, applying for many, many different jobs and constantly praying about the situation and asking for guidance, etc, but without any success. This was

especially true when I was seemingly ‘led’ to what really felt like the ‘right’ new job at the ‘right’ time after my first phase of being out of work, only for said ‘right’ new job to subsequently (and very unexpectedly) ‘go pear-shaped’ after barely two years in the role.

But, as has so often been my experience in my Christian life, it is when looking back after the event that I can see where the Lord was, and had been at work, even when I couldn’t see it and even when it certainly didn’t feel like it at the time. For instance, during my most recent phase of being out of work for an extended period, I used my time to take on several different activities at church on a voluntary basis, including preparing and delivering talks for a number of the church’s midweek events. Looking back, I can now see that this was in fact all valuable experience and preparation for my current job as a Trainee Minister!

I started as working for St Alkmund’s as Trainee Minister on 4th November 2019 (as it turned out, just days before the major flooding we had that year, two days before Remembrance Sunday!). My role includes leading and speaking at Sunday services and various midweek meetings, as well as supporting a wide range of other activities and events across the life of the church, together with supporting the services and our United Benefice activities at our sister church St Paul’s Little Eaton. I have also continued some of the things I previously did at church, including leading growth groups, together with occasionally (when time allows!) playing guitar and bass in our music group.

I have also learned over the years in my Christian walk—again, often from when looking back after the event—that no experience is ever ‘wasted’ with the Lord. Amongst some of the many Christian books which used to belong to my late Mum, I recently discovered an old postcard she’d kept from her sister’s church in Portsmouth. Dating from 1986, it was the church’s annual Bible-verse for that year, taken from 1 Corinthians 15, verse 58: “*Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord*”.

And that verse—“*...that your labour is not in vain in the Lord*”—has as I say, been so true for me over the years, particularly during the current period of all the Covid-19 restrictions. Previously, I worked in the rail industry in various communications and public-relations roles, where my work included writing and editing of all kinds (I now manage content for the church magazines, which have come into their own during Covid-19 as a key means of communication), together with social-media activities, including producing corporate videos for YouTube—and the latter experience has proved to be unexpectedly valuable as we’ve had to move to online/streamed services during the pandemic!

The Lord does indeed ‘move in mysterious ways’ but I know I can trust in him, both for my ultimate salvation and also to lead and guide me in the right way through my life—even when it might not ‘seem’ to be the case at the time. ●

“Primary Disagreement” or “The Making of a Modern Martyr?”

It is a bit of a shock when your school dispute ends up on television.

My name is Mark Jones, and I am the Headmaster of Much Mumbling village primary school. As it says on our prospectus: ‘We are a Church Aided primary school, and our ethos is Christian. Those of other faiths and none are most welcome. Parents send their children to our school because it is well regarded, on the understanding that it is a Christian Church school.’

But that doesn’t mean that they all like it.

—ooo OOO ooo—

The delegation came to see me, by prior arrangement, but without specifying the subject, one busy Tuesday morning. I had absolutely no idea what was coming.

‘Headmaster, we have a problem which needs your attention.’

There are ways to approach a headmaster, I thought; this isn’t one of them. Their spokesman was Alan History. That is ‘Dr History’ to you and me. I don’t know what his friends call him, because I am not aware that he has many. A rather austere man: I could see why the group would want him as their representative.

‘We understand that you hold a Christian Assembly every day, and that you allow the vicar to come in to speak to the school not only once a week in assembly, but also to each class once a term, and to run a Christian Club after school once a week. That is an awful lot of indoctrination, Mr Jones.’

If Dr History had read How to Win Friends

and Influence People, I don’t think he had remembered much of it.

‘Your facts are correct, sir, but I would take exception to the word “indoctrination”.’

Eyes narrowed in the delegation, which was clearly hostile. This was going to need a measured approach. My own instincts had some sympathy with their point of view, but I wasn’t going to tell them that: they had got my back up from the start. The curriculum covers a range of religions, and we teach about them all.

‘Let me be clear,’ said History. ‘You are allowing a representative of a cult group to influence our children without any checks and balances. You make only token reference to other religions, and no reference to the secular society in which we live, and which has clearly become the accepted norm in our modern society.’

I held my hand up.

‘You make your point very forcefully. But you are not making any attempt to carry me with you.’

‘We do not need to, Mr Jones. There is sufficient agreement between the parents, notably those on the Board of Governors, to make your position very uncomfortable. Do I make myself clear?’



I could feel myself going red. This was definitely a time to count to 10; which I did, slowly.

'I see that you do not believe in wasting time. I also see that you are rude and discourteous.'

There were some angry stares, but there was also some shuffling. It was clear that at least not everyone present was in agreement, especially in the approach.

'We intend to call a meeting,' said History. 'As there are only two suitable halls in the village, this one and the church hall, it is clear that the meeting will be held here.'

The man was clearly in his element. I decided to let him run on.

'When did you have in mind?' I asked, while thinking hard.

'Tuesday evening next week, at 7pm.'

He had made a stupid mistake. I paused for the inevitable come back.

'You can't do Tuesday here,' said three voices at once, 'it's Country Dancing night!'

From the sublime to the ... I paused: thank goodness for the dancing club. I thought quickly:

'It might be possible for the dancing club to meet in the church hall?' I suggested, tongue in cheek.

History flushed; he knew that he had been wrong-footed.

'I will ask the vicar when I go to see him,' I offered.

'Why do you need to see him?' The question staggered me.

'Well let me see: how many reasons would you like?'

'Firstly, because he is the chair of the board of governors.

'Secondly, because this affects him directly, and you have insulted him: I believe the terms chosen were "indoctrinated" and "cult".'

'Thirdly, because you need me to get access to the church hall if you want your meeting to be held next Tuesday.'

'And fourthly, and certainly not least, I need his advice on how to respond.'

'Now, I am a busy, and now rather busier man. Thank you, I will be in touch shortly. Who is your contact?'

There was an embarrassed pause. 'Send it to me,' retorted History.

'With pleasure,' I said. And they left.

I looked at my watch. If I was quick I could pop over to the vicarage for an urgent visit.

'Sophie,' I said to my secretary, 'please call Vicar Paul, tell him that I am on my way over, and that it is urgent.'

'Is anything wrong?' she said with concern in her voice.

'You could say that,' I replied.

—ooo OOO ooo—

Vicar Paul had clearly dropped everything. I walked into the study and there was already a black coffee with two sugars and a biscuit ready to go.

WELL, there I was, with a couple of quiet hours that I had set aside for completing next Sunday's sermon, when the school secretary rang with her urgent message. I put the sermon to one side, and called through to Pam to sort out a quick coffee.

'Good Morning, Vicar,' said a clearly flustered headmaster.

'My name's Paul,' I smiled, 'you might start using it.'

There was a wan smile in reply.

'I'm sorry, and thank you, please call me Mark.'

'About time too,' I thought. Then I put unworthy thoughts to one side.

'Thank you, Mark, please tell me how I may be able to help you.'

The headmaster repeated verbatim the short and shocking meeting that he had just suffered. I too was shocked: I really hadn't seen that one coming, despite one or two news stories which have flared up from time to time in the newspapers.

'What should we do, Paul?' he concluded. I liked his approach.

I thought hard, and quickly.

'Let me ask you some hard questions.'

He looked uncertain, then nodded in rather tentative agreement. →

'I think it would be fair to say that you are somewhat lukewarm to Christian aspects of your school?'

He flushed. 'You are correct.'

'But, from the way you recounted the meeting, I don't think that they have helped themselves one tiny bit in getting your support.'

'You can say that again!' he said, with feeling.

'And, I will take it for granted that you will do your utmost to give both sides a fair hearing.'

'You honour me, sir,' he said, most unexpectedly.

'This could do the school untold damage if handled badly,' I observed. He shook.

'Let me lay out the alternatives,' I proposed.

'If you support the protesters, you will have to ban me from the building. Which, of course, you can't do, because I have a role in your Church School, and I am the Chairman of the governors due to that position. You could, however, ban me from taking a role in assemblies, and from running a club. I don't think that you can stop classroom visits, but you might be able to restrict the things I talk about.'

He nodded. 'That sums it up pretty well.'

'Alternatively, you could reject the protest outright. However, that would put you in a difficult position, and there might be pressure for you to resign.' He blanched. 'And with two children in the primary school and one in the secondary school, I think that would very seriously disrupt your family life?'

He put his face in his hands.

'VICAR, what am I going to do? Help me Paul!'

'Your only approach is to be rigorously fair to both sides. I have an idea, but I want you to work it out for yourself.'

'I am correct that Dr History is a lawyer?'

'He has been, I think that now he is a History academic.'

'Excellent,' I said.

I went over to a bookcase, and picked out a paperback called *Who Moved the Stone*, by Frank Morison*.

'Read this, at once,' I said. 'I think you will see a way forward. You can stay here if you wish.'

'Thank you again,' he said, and started to read.

—ooo OOO ooo—

The meeting took place the following week: But not on the Tuesday. There are some things you cannot move, and the village Country Dancing Club is one of them!



The school hall was packed. Although unintentional, the two sides of the argument ended up effectively on two different sides of the hall. Mark opened the meeting with a short statement of the problem. He then allowed both sides to speak. Of course Dr History went first.

He is a very good speaker, and used to both addressing a courtroom and teaching undergraduates, so his presentation was formidable. However, it did strike me as a bit too academic, and also unduly confrontational.

His main argument was that we are living in a post-Christian, secular, multi-cultural society. He said that Christianity was a mediaeval hangover with no shred of credibility. He stated that our children were being indoctrinated by a religious cult, and that if the school did not take action, then it was likely that legal action would be forthcoming from 'the authorities'. He did not however clarify which authorities he had in mind.

It was a formidable presentation, but did not sit well in a school hall with children's pictures of Holy Week and Easter day still in pride of place on the walls. I suddenly felt a bit sorry for him.

Then it was my turn. I knew I had to keep it short: I focused on the children's education and development. I spoke briefly on the long association between the school and the village church, and also observed that the school had seen a significant number of former students move into church roles around the country, including one senior bishop. I could feel that a good number of the parents were with us.

I took a sip of water. Then to my shock I noticed a local TV reporter taking notes in the corner. 'OK now for the big one,' I thought.

'In conclusion,' I said, 'I would like to challenge the assumptions about the current state of the nation, of the Church, and of the reality of Christian Faith. I will be brief. Very many people in the country are believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, and many more are sympathetic. Amongst those with no belief, there is a feeling that there is more to life. Around the world, there are more Christians than at any point in Christian history. We are part of that movement.'

I paused for effect.

'And finally,' I said, slowly, 'people believe in Christianity because it is true.'

There were some gasps, gestures, and even a bit of heckling.

Mark put his hand up, and turned to me.

'Please finish your statement, Vicar Paul.'

Interesting, I thought.

'... because Christianity is True.' I repeated.
'This is the key question tonight.'

There was applause from the Christian side. And, interestingly, there were smiles and signs of relief from the complainants. They thought they had it.



I sat down, and the Head stood up. Would he make a decision? If so, which way would it go? Where was he?

'Mr, ah, pardon me, I should say, Doctor, I take full notice of your complaints. You make a strong and persuasive case.'

There was notable shuffling from the

complainants, with more smiles and a couple of fists clenched in triumph.

'Here is my proposal: I ask you to make a serious critique to prove the invalidity of Christianity. You are a respected Historian, and an experienced lawyer. I can think of no one better to make your case.'

'I think your answer will settle the debate.'

Those on the church side raised hands to complain: I half-stood, and waved them down, with a forced sad look on my face. Oh, how much effort that took, when internally I was rejoicing.

Dr History was clearly flabbergasted.

'Let me get this straight—you want me to make my case—and you just accept it?'

'That is not quite what I said, sir,' the Headmaster said forcefully.

'I asked you to make a serious critique of the validity of Christianity. From your response, the output will be clear. Once you have applied your formidable intellect to this problem, the answer will be self-evident, a "no brainer", in fact.'

I looked around the hall: The faces were a picture. Most of the opposition faction looked overjoyed, and there were high-fives on their side of the hall. Many from the church side worried, but just a few looked impressed—a touch of genius, perhaps?

I felt a rush of satisfaction: Part one successfully completed!

But, most surprising of all was the response of Dr History. Initially, but briefly, triumphant, his face fell, and as I watched him walk towards the door, he looked quite crestfallen, even though he was surrounded by jubilant supporters.

The Headmaster clapped his hands.

'One more question. How much time do you need, Dr History?'

'None, let's do it now,' blurted out one over-excited supporter.

'Silence, fool!' thundered the good lawyer.

There was complete silence in the hall.

'I do not know,' he continued, unexpectedly. →

'However, I will accept two weeks, because we must move on from here. Shall we meet again, two weeks today?'

The meeting closed on the one point on which we could all agree.

—ooo OOO ooo—

The following days were a little frenetic. The local TV people got in touch the next day. They interviewed the Head, Dr History, and me, and gave a reasonably balanced presentation. However, as is often the case, they omitted most of my Christian viewpoint, and focused on the schoolchildren.

After a week, Headmaster Mark asked to see me.

'Thanks for seeing me, Paul. I read the book ...'

'I know,' I said, 'otherwise you would never have made your proposal to Dr History.'

He nodded. 'Then I read it again. I think it says that the author, who did not believe in the resurrection, proved to his own satisfaction that in all probability it is a proven fact.'

'A good summary,' I replied. 'And next?'

'Yes, and next, indeed. I made my offer to Dr History as a way through—as perhaps you intended?'

I didn't move a muscle.

'But now I am in a jam.'

'If Dr History proves that Christianity is worthless, I can go back to my previous casual unbelief, but the entire underpinning of my school will be rendered worthless. But if he fails ...'

There was a long, a very long pause.

'If he fails, then Christianity is true, we can continue with renewed zeal.'

'...and...?'

'My life will have to change completely.'

—ooo OOO ooo—

The next day I had another visitor.

The phone rang.

'Hello, this is Stephen History speaking.'
'Hello, Dr ... History?'

'Can I see you, now? I'm sitting outside the vicarage in my car. I must speak to you!'

'Please come in at once.'

He rang off. 'Pam, coffee and biscuits. I have a most interesting visitor.'

—ooo OOO ooo—

'I need your help, sir.'

I could see that. The man had to disprove 2,000 years of history, or see his credibility go up in smoke. I expected him to waffle around the subject in the meeting, without proving anything. But I was wrong.

'Do you know why I am called Stephen?' An interesting starting point.

'No, but I doubt that it has anything to do with the Bible.'

'Well you are wrong, sir!'

'Please call me Paul. I like my friends to call me Paul.'

He smiled gratefully, 'Thank you, Paul,' said Stephen.

There was a pregnant pause. I decided to help him.

'You find yourself in a most difficult position, Stephen. A most difficult position.'

He looked at me in dumb appeal.

'I think that you have not yet succeeded in proving that Christianity is false?'

He shook his head.

'I am called Stephen. My parents named me after the Christian martyr, in the hope that I would learn from his example.'

'I did not want to believe, so I devoted myself to other things. But their example and teaching stays in my mind.'

'As I walked out of the hall last week I heard a supporter say "how hard can this be"—and then "look—he looks freaked out"—talking about me.'

'And he was right.'

'I have done no work for a week. I have read 20 books. I read the New Atheists, all of Dawkins, anything I could find on the internet, all to no avail. And now I am lost. What can I do?'

'I will tell you, if you will listen,' I encouraged him gently. 'Let us walk through this together.'

—ooo OOO ooo—

There was a great air of expectancy over the whole village. We had to make the meeting 'ticket only.' The local TV channel asked to film it. We agreed, on condition that the meeting was timed for their local news special, and that it would be live. Mark agreed at once, and Stephen, after much hesitation also agreed.



Mark opened the meeting.

'Thank you all for joining us this evening. The open question is whether Christianity is true or false. I will ask Dr Stephen History to provide his evidence and conclusion. From his conclusion we will decide on the next steps, should any action be required.'

—ooo OOO ooo—

Dr Stephen History rose, a little unsteadily. Then he gained in confidence.

'Good Evening, everyone. And good evening to those watching from home.'

'I am very grateful to the Headmaster for allowing me to address the topic of the reality of Christian Teaching and Faith. He agreed last time that he would take appropriate action based upon my conclusions. Do you still agree to hold to that decision, Headmaster?'

'I do indeed, Dr History. What is your conclusion?'

'For the past two weeks I have devoted myself to this topic. I have looked at material in defence of the Christian Faith. I have read much of the recent criticism of Christian practice, and at examples of deplorable behaviour by

those who call themselves Christians—as well as their detractors, of course.

'And on the central question of the reality of Christian faith, I have to say this.

'That there is no reasonable historical doubt that Jesus Christ existed—secular history gives some references, but the behaviour of the Christians in the early church, not least my namesake Stephen, bears witness to their belief. That Jesus died on a cross is beyond reasonable doubt. But the key question is—did he rise again, back to life?'

The detractors, who had been looking a bit concerned, suddenly relaxed.

'And my answer, as an academic historian, and proven lawyer, is that Jesus, the Christ, did indeed rise from the dead.'

There was general mayhem in the room, a mixture of cheers and gasps.

'And I will own the conclusion to which I have just attested. In front of this meeting, and to those watching on television, I will also say this—

'That through this study, the most rigorous I could make, I believe that Jesus Christ, who was dead, died for my sins on the cross and rose again. And from today, I will devote myself to his service.'

'And finally, to Mark, and to Vicar Paul, I say: thank you ... and keep up the good work!'

Mark stepped forward and shook his hand. 'I hope to see you in church on Sunday, Stephen, and I will introduce you to my family when we meet together to hear Vicar Paul speak.'

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This story links to previous months. The people and events in this story are a work of fiction. However they are based on events around the country where there is friction between the stated aim of a school and the expectation of the parents in modern secular society. I don't think any of the spats have been dealt with in quite this way.

My thanks are due to James and James and my wife Jane for advice and comments, and to Jeff for putting it all together.

**I have provided a review of Who Moved the Stone elsewhere in this magazine.*

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