

Forgiveness

PART THREE

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

After his dramatic conversion in 1983, Scott continued to pursue his successful career in education. Then, in 2004, Scott left his well-paid job as an LEA Adviser and Ofsted Inspector. He had become tired of the politics and stress involved in such a high profile role. He asked God to provide him with a modest income on which to live and to use him to help people in some way. To his astonishment he was led to a part-time position as a Chaplain in a large FE college. In this final extract we join him in his first few weeks on the job. It is February 2005 ...

Sometimes I forgot the effect my physical presence had on people – at six foot four I had always been taller than most; at 19 stone I was now also larger than most. I was reminded of my size during an initial visit to one of the college sites. The college was one of the largest in the country and had campuses scattered across Greater Manchester, this one was in a large council housing estate to the south of the city with a bad reputation. The site I was visiting taught skills for the construction industry, it was not a place noted for theological debate. The site manager introduced me to some of the students doing bricklaying outside in the pouring rain.

'Okay lads, this is Scott Fellows, the new Chaplain.' One of the lads looked up briefly, a raindrop dripped off the end of his nose. 'What's a Chaplain?' This was my big chance. I explained carefully. 'Well it's a kind of vicar. I'm here to support you with any problems.' The lad sized me

up: 'Look mate, if you say there's a God I'm not going to f***ing argue, alright?' The others burst out laughing. I laughed along because I didn't want to seem strait-laced, but this wasn't quite the deferential attitude to Mr Chips that I'd imagined. The site manager intervened: 'Alright Darren, I'm sure the Chaplain doesn't need the benefit of your sparkling wit this morning.' I waved a hand dismissively. 'Hadn't I been here before with another sharp-tongued young man in a school a few years ago? Why were they always called Darren?'

The music was Country alright but all the lyrics were about Jesus

My first week had mainly consisted of visits like this. Since the college was so vast it was going to take a long time to show my face on every site. Most of the staff welcomed me warmly, regardless of their own beliefs. They seemed to accept the importance of a chaplaincy in a large institution like this, for students and staff alike. One or two members of staff had been keen to share their religious experiences with me, no matter how brief or how cursory they had been. On one of the creative arts sites I met Nigel, an extremely cheerful lecturer who was only too keen to engage me in conversation.

'So, you're the new Chaplain? Welcome! It's always a bit awkward coming to a new place, meeting new people isn't it?' I made to reply but Nigel was just easing into second gear. 'Yes, it were a bit like that for me and the wife the first time we

went to a church do. The neighbours had been nagging us for years, very keen church goers are Maggie and Stuart. We'd never fancied it, but there was this concert on, Country and Western it were and I like Country and Western – the wife's not so keen, but I love it me. Anyway it were on at church and Stuart invited us, so I thought, "Why not?" It were only a few quid for teachers. Now, to be fair, Stuart did tell us that it were a Christian band but I thought, "Well, if it's Country and Western it can't all be crap, can it?"'

Nigel drew breath. He looked at me cautiously. 'No offence,' he said. 'None taken,' I replied. He continued: 'Well let me tell you, it were a very strange affair. The music was Country alright but *all* the lyrics were about Jesus. It were good to see how much people were enjoying the show,' he paused briefly, as he recalled the experience. '*We* weren't, mind. I were hoping for a bit of Shania, but it were all happy and clappy all night with no let up. I suppose you must go to this kind of over-the-top thing a lot.' There was another pause. 'No offence,' he said. 'None taken,' I replied.

College campuses were located in many of the poorest areas of Manchester, with all the personal and social problems that tend to accompany life on the breadline. Not surprisingly, I was busy; I was *very* busy. Driving around Manchester from site to site, from student to student, I needed more hours than there were in the day.

In the midst of all this I was constantly aware of God guiding me. It was just as well, without it I would have been lost on many occasions. God also had the grace to bring touches of desperately needed

humour into any situation, as I discovered during my second conversation with Ahmed.

Ahmed was a 28 year old suffering from Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism, which, amongst other things, means the sufferer has little idea about social skills. This had been a torment to Ahmed for many years. For example, he couldn't tell whether people were joking or not in conversation as he couldn't decode ironic vocabulary or intonation. He had no idea how to begin or join a conversation and he didn't know how to make small talk. The result was that Ahmed had spent years socially isolated, he was particularly upset that this meant he couldn't get a girlfriend. I really wanted to help Ahmed. I had read that role play sometimes helped sufferers learn social skills. I decided it was worth a try.

Our second meeting did not have an ideal venue. The usual room I used was busy and so I booked a larger room which could be partitioned into two smaller ones, each having its own entrance. The receptionist had nothing in her book for either half of the room and so I booked just one half as it was more intimate. Ahmed liked the idea of role play, and, with the help of a few prompts I had written out for him, was soon into the swing of a first girl-boy meeting in an imaginary college canteen. I played the shy girl. Ahmed, imaginary food tray in hand, walked towards the seated girl. He had the first line ...

Ahmed: Do you mind if I sit here?

Girl: Okay.

Ahmed: I haven't seen you before, what course are you doing?

Girl: Fashion.

Ahmed: That's interesting, do you want to be a clothes designer?

Girl: Maybe.

(The conversation continued in this vein for a while, eventually culminating in Ahmed inviting the girl to take a walk with him.)

He had no money for fags and couldn't afford to go out for a drink with his mates. I listened with as much sympathy as I could muster

Ahmed: It's nice out, would you like to go for a walk?

Girl: Where do you want to go?

Ahmed: It doesn't matter, it'll just be a chance to talk and get to know each other better. Don't worry I'm not going to hit on you!

(I had put that bit in after I'd heard somebody say it in *Big Brother*. I thought it would make it more trendy.)

I stood up and signalled to Ahmed that he should stand and lead the girl outside. In his excitement, Ahmed decided to exit not through the door into the corridor outside but by pulling back the partition

*The lad sized me up: 'Look mate, if you say there's a God I'm not going to f***ing argue, alright?'*

between the two halves of the room. To my horror, sitting before us were four senior managers who, seeing that half of the room empty, had decided to use it on the spur of the moment to quietly read some job applications and do some short-listing. The look on their faces told me that they'd heard everything, furthermore they were now confronted with the sight of male student and male college Chaplain arm in arm on their first date.

One of the managers broke the silence: 'Well Scott, I hope the two of you will be very happy together.' Ahmed, as usual, didn't pick up on the irony in the remark, he yanked his arm away from mine as if I were on fire: 'Oh no, no ... please, we are only practising now ... but it will be very real later on, I'm sure.' He gave me a sickly look. I managed to shut Ahmed up while I still had a job. Ahmed couldn't have cared less. For a few precious moments he had felt as if he belonged, even if it had been to a terribly misguided rookie Chaplain.

Later that week I got a phone call from one of the lecturers. He was concerned that one of his students, a 17 year old

African named Joseph, was lonely and isolated. He was an asylum seeker with no relatives in the UK and the lecturer wondered how he was passing his evenings and weekends. Would I have a word? Joseph turned out to be a delight. At our first meeting, he smiled a great deal and spoke good English. It was obvious that he came from an educated background. He was polite and very respectful. I decided to go straight to the heart of the matter. I waited for the right moment and broached the subject of family, I phrased the question carefully: 'So Joseph, do you have any brothers or sisters?'

The answer came with the force of a punch to the guts. 'All shot.' I gathered myself quickly, it was important to be calm at this stage. I repeated Joseph's answer as a question. 'All shot?'

'My father is in the government. One night the rebels came looking for him but he was not there. They were angry so they shot my brothers and sisters.'

'How many, Joseph?'

'Three sisters and four brothers.'

'Why didn't they shoot you?'

'I am the eldest, they said that I must go to tell my father to come or they would kill my mother.'

'What happened?'

'I went to my father and he took some soldiers and came to our house at night. I waited outside, there was a lot of shooting, the rebels were all killed. When I went in to find my mother, she was on the kitchen floor, they had cut her throat.'

The simplicity of Joseph's account seemed somehow to make it even more horrific. He sat opposite me, his legs crossed, relaxed. He looked at me with a steady gaze. I wondered what was going on inside this young man's mind, externally he was ice cool. Was it possible that he could be so emotionless inside? I decided to probe very gently.

'How do you feel now, Joseph?'

'I'm okay, thank you.'

The simplicity of Joseph's account seemed somehow to make it even more horrific. He sat opposite me, his legs crossed, relaxed. He looked at me with a steady gaze

'Where is your father now?'

'I don't know sir.'

'When did this happen?'

'Two months ago.'

'How do you feel about what happened?'

(This was a very risky, direct question but I sensed that there was a wall around this boy; I wanted to find a way in.)

'I pray to God to protect my father.'

(Joseph had sidestepped the feelings question, but he had offered me something to work with.)

'You believe in God, Joseph?'

'Yes, all my family are Christians.'

I wondered at Joseph's continuing faith in the face of what had happened to him. I couldn't be sure that my own faith would hold up in those circumstances.

We prayed together. Afterwards I referred Joseph to a church near where he lived. I knew the minister well. I hoped Joseph might find a sense of belonging there. He needed all the help he could get.

By stark contrast my next appointment was with another 17 year old who told me that if there were any more delays in sorting out his educational maintenance grant he might kill himself as he was so fed up. He had no money for fags and couldn't afford to go out for a drink with

his mates. I listened with as much sympathy as I could muster.

As the first few weeks rushed by I realised that God had given me exactly what I asked for: a part-time job which would bring enough money in to help support my family and which would give me the chance to make a real difference. Whether I was any good at it or not would be for others to tell. All I knew was that it felt like a new beginning, and an old sinner like me wasn't going to complain about that. It turned out that God was also a God of surprises, just a few months before it would never have occurred to me that a whole new chapter of my life was about to be written ...

■ Scott Fellows

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