

OF SHOES - AND SHIPS - AND SEALING WAX....

There is a saying from 'way back that goes, "If you're not a raving liberal in your early twenties you have no heart, but if you're not a staunch conservative by the time you reach your thirties, you have no brains!"

To this I would add:

"If you're not wondering what it's all about, and why you're here on Planet Earth by the time you reach your fifties, you have no soul."

So it was with me. Not that I was a raving liberal to start with. I was brought up far too British for that, dear, and I was/am a *boring engineer* – the art students' italics – to boot. But I was "conservative" by the time I reached my thirties, and I certainly fell into that fifties hole of wondering what the hell it was all about. Particularly after, at the age of 50, I was retrenched from the job that had not only got us back to Cape Town but which was – I thought – really "exciting and right up my street" and would be so for the next 10 years. Sheesh.

Then in April and May 1997 came Alpha. Boing. Suddenly there was a glimmer of meaning, suddenly all those things that had seemed so important – job, status in same, house, smart car....etc – weren't.

I was very fortunate to have been sent to a private church school, St Andrew's College in Grahamstown, where it was Chapel twice a week and twice on Sundays. While I didn't exactly hate it, I can't honestly say that I dug it either. But the most important – and sad - thing about this four year experience was that what came over to me about Christianity was that it was a lot of dogma, wrapped up in rituals which I perceived to be – yes – totally irrelevant to me and my life. Yet the School Chaplain was a wonderful man, "Horsey" Harker who did his very best to bring year after year of horrible little heathens to God. I dare say he had his successes, but regrettably I was not one of them. I had been brought up proper in the English tradition, I thought, I kept the Ten Commandments in the sense that, like my parents, I lived a decent life by Christian principles, so what did I need "Religion" for, I thought?

Enter Saturday 10th May, 1997 on Alpha 6 at Volmoed. When, like a bolt from the blue, the realisation dawned that Christianity isn't about religion and dogma and ritual. *It is about a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.* An utterly life changing insight.

I shall say that name again: "Jesus Christ". Two words that used to stick in my throat, which I was embarrassed to say out loud – unless I smacked my thumb with a hammer. But which, over the past two-and-a-half years, have become two of the sweetest words on my tongue. And I thank dear old "Horsey" for that foundation so thanklessly laid, and God for the influences that resulted in my attending Alpha 6.

So what is the point of this article? There are several, and I do hope you have got the first one, dear reader!

During Alpha 6 – after 10th May - I developed an inexplicable thirst to read the Bible. I say "inexplicable" because previously I hadn't even owned a Bible and as for reading it – you must be joking! It was like chewing straw. But God is forgiving and immensely loving and I have come to realise that if you ask Him for help, show a bit of interest even, He will jump in and help all He can – in rugby parlance He will make a surging break if we give Him even half a gap.

So over the past two-and-a-half years I have tried to read the Bible regularly and to introduce a daily "quiet time" into my life's schedule. Sometimes successfully, often less so. And this has led me to two further conclusions:

1. The Bible is unquestionably the Word of God, and to develop a relationship with Him one has to read and ponder His Word – we can't do all the talking!
2. Once you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Brother and Saviour, once you have started to develop a relationship with Him – and it doesn't take long to start experiencing the joy and fulfilment of that relationship – then the sky is the limit!

The other day I was contemplating my navel, so to speak, when it struck me that at the age of 55 my life expectancy of around 30 more years (on a good day) is pretty much the same length as my working life to date. And then I thought of all that I had learned and all the joys I had experienced in that first 30 years when I wasn't even aware of Jesus as my Buddy. And then suddenly it smacked me right between the eyes: just THINK of what lies ahead with Jesus by my side! Hooo-ey! The mind positively boggles. Who says we can't "have our lives over" with all that we have learned from this life? What a wonderful prospect!

The first thing happening is that I am sailing the Cape to Rio Race as crew on a Farr 38 called “Viking II” - and I have done a skipper’s course, so by the time I get back from Rio I will have more than enough sea miles to qualify for an Oceanmaster’s skipper’s ticket – another string to my bow.

There will be five of us on board: Geoff Apsey, our skipper and the owner of Viking who has sailed to Rio twice before in her, Keith Mattison who is our official navigator (and also a musician of note), two foredeck hands in the shape of Barnaby Steynor and Martin Gillmor, and moi. My responsibilities include looking after the team finances, organising the supplies for the trip, first aid, watch keeping and part time navigation – ie, general factotum!.

The race starts at 15h00 on Saturday 8th January and we expect to reach Rio, some 3 500 sea miles or 6 300 kilometres away, in 20 to 23 days.

The prize giving is on 4th February, and on 3rd my wife will be flying to Rio to join me for two weeks of cruising in the Il Grande group of islands 80 sea miles (145 kilometres) south of Rio. She will be flying home on 20th February after which Geoff, Keith and I will sail Viking II back, expecting to arrive in Cape Town towards the end of March.

What a start to the rest of my life! And what an opportunity to ponder His Word – weather permitting! - as I do my night watch from 11 o’clock each evening till 3 o’clock the next morning.

And here I would like to ask a favour of you, dear reader; we would really appreciate your prayers for the race, and back. For fair weather and following winds, and for harmony on board. Not just for Viking II but for the whole fleet of some 80 yachts.

So what *actually* was the point of this rambling article? There are three of them (said the Irishman):

1. Do Alpha; it will transform your life. And don’t wait till you’re 50-something like me; think of all the years you will have wasted!
2. The Bible *IS* the Word of God. Read it. He talks to us through it, when we listen for Him in our quiet times.
3. Just *think* of the joy and fulfilment that lies ahead of each of us with Jesus, our Saviour and Buddy, by our side for eternity, loving and serving Him, starting right now. Man oh man. What a prospect.

God bless you all, and I look forward to seeing you on my return.