

# STEPPING INTO GRACE

moving beyond ambition  
to contemplative mission

Paul Bradbury



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## Foreword

Pioneer ministry is a sufficiently recent 'rediscovery' in the Church of England that not much has been written reflecting on the experience of actual practitioners. Most of what has been written focuses on the practices or praxis of pioneering. Little has been written about the inner transformation of the practitioner. What does God do within the pioneer to fit him or her for the praxis? What is the spirituality of pioneer ministry?

In *Stepping into Grace* Paul Bradbury corrects this imbalance. Paul is an experienced and able pioneer, reflecting on seven years of ministry in Poole, and interacting with the story of the Old Testament's most unwilling pioneer, the prophet Jonah.

Not everyone is a pioneer, but many Christian leaders embarking on new work in uncharted territory experience similar challenges, walk a similar path and will benefit from Paul's helpful reflections.

There is a spiritual journey that pioneers, and many other disciples, must make, and which they can only make in context. Jesus' disciples learned discipleship when on mission with him, not just in their brief times of retreat with him. They learned through painful mistakes, and (eventually) even through moments of self-deception, just as much as they learned through the times of fruitful ministry and revelation.

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*Stepping into Grace* is a mature reflection on the Holy Spirit's pioneer formation. Transformation for pioneer ministry involves battling the temptations of culture—to do things society's way, the Church's pressure for quick measurable results—and of ministry—finding our identity in experience or status rather than in God. It involves a vulnerability that is the unavoidable condition when starting a new work from nothing. Above all, it requires a mature praxis of discernment, which can only be learned by experience. Discernment is the ability to recognise works of God in which we are to participate. Paul describes his discovery that mature discernment requires a contemplative life and the spiritual disciplines which form it. Who we are, and who we are becoming, is more important than what we know and what we can do. Join him as he shares the journey, which he and his community have made, into such a life.

+Graham Cray

# Introduction

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One of the most terrifying and yet exciting things in the world is a blank sheet of paper. On some uncertain date in Israel's history a prophet to the king of the Northern Kingdom was given a call to start afresh, start again. Jonah was handed a blank sheet of paper, he was invited to take a journey without maps. His first response was more terror than excitement. His story is a story for anyone called to journey into the unknown with little more than an unshakable sense that they are following the call of God.

Without maps we look for stories, stories that chime with our own developing story, stories that speak into our uncertainty and tell us we are not alone. Jonah has become such a story for me. It is a story that continues to speak from its ancient near-Eastern world into the experiences and challenges of our own. In particular I have found its voice resonating around my experience and vocation in the context of three overlapping worlds.

Firstly, there is the world of the Church. We are in a time when traditional churches face ongoing and threatening decline. There is much anxiety around, as there was in the time of Jonah. Then the once great kingdom of Israel was divided and threatened from every side by vast powers. Before Jonah was called to Nineveh, he sought to speak the voice of God to Jeroboam II, a king whose strategy seemed based on a campaign of restoration, of returning Israel to its former glory, its territory to previous boundaries. In my own tradition, the Church of England, there is considerable anxiety around how we can maintain a system of ministry and pastoral provision that has proved pretty effective for centuries but which is showing significant signs of unsustainability. This system is beginning to put huge pressure on its leaders to provide the same service with less resources. It is urging growth not simply out of a missional imperative but also out of an anxiety about the future. What does this downward pressure from the institution do to the sense of vocation that brought people into ministry in the first place? What if faithfulness to God's call in a particular place and particular time means managing decline, or even death? Will that be honoured, accepted, appreciated? Or what if that same faithfulness

means a period of hard, apparently fruitless, labour which prepares the ground for another to sow and perhaps harvest? And what of new ground, on the edge of the current structures? Can those with a passionately held call to be apostles within the Church be given the time, space and resources to experiment, play and sometimes fail, in order to explore what new expressions of discipleship and worship might look like for a new era?

Secondly, there is the world of postmodern, post-Christian Britain. Culturally we have been through a huge shift in the past century, a process of change that accelerated after World War II and continues unabated. In that process of change the Bible, the Church and the moral and spiritual values they guarded and nurtured have been increasingly exiled and relativised. Within this cultural and moral transition, and most significant for what I want to explore, is a shift away from a sense of life as vocation to one of life as utility. We are all infected with a sense that our worth is determined most significantly by our usefulness, what we can achieve, what we can produce. The undermining in our wider culture of a sense of our origins as created in the image of God, and of our purpose as partners in God's ongoing work of creation, has stunted the vocational journey and rendered it nothing more than a race for greater success, greater influence, greater fame or greater reward. It is in this context that the Christian Church has something hugely important, something of immense good news, to say about what it means to be human. The Christian vocational journey of death and resurrection, of dying in order to really live, insists on a deeper inner journey that trumps and ultimately ennobles the competition and ambition, the ladders and races, that characterise much of the modern working world. But to communicate it most profoundly the Church needs, primarily, not only to teach it but to embody it. Jonah is a story of one man's journey towards a true understanding of vocation. It is a story of the providence of God in shaping that transition. It is a story for all time, but perhaps a particularly potent story for our time.

Thirdly, there is my personal world as a pioneer minister. In 2008 my wife Emily and I accepted the invitation to come to Poole in Dorset and

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take on the challenge of creating new ways of engaging and discipling people with little or no connection with traditional forms of church. We too were given a blank sheet of paper. We too were invited to make a journey into the unknown and to make our own maps. It was my first responsibility within the Church of England and I took it on confidently and with great hope and enthusiasm. It has stretched me, broken me, challenged me, exasperated me and caused me great wonder and excitement in equal measure. It has taken me to places in myself which I could never have anticipated, places into which the book of Jonah, with its story of a vocation stripped, brought to the point of death and then resurrected, began to speak most profoundly. The fact that such a vocational journey has a rich tradition in both the Bible and the history of the Church suggests we are on holy ground and a holy journey. Yet in a church culture of anxiety, where stories of rapid and sensational success can be seized on as motifs for the salvation of the whole Church, this way of descendent, humbling, sacrificial vocation can sound like defeat. Jonah, a book not so much about what Jonah says, or what Jonah does, as what Jonah becomes (and therefore what we might become), is surely an important corrective to this utilitarian virus which has the potential to do huge damage to church leaders. The message of Jonah is that God is more interested in us becoming the people we are created to be than in us doing great things. That does not mean that he cannot do great things through us, nor that doing great things and us becoming who we are are disconnected. The wonder of Jonah is that God does do great things and Jonah is on the road to becoming someone he wasn't at the beginning. And all this takes place through God's mysterious providence and grace, not in a way that can be prescribed or controlled.

For me, at my stage of life and stage of leadership and ministry, this has been a profound message. Furthermore, it isn't a message I have heard elsewhere. There are voices along these lines within the Church and its literature but they are few. I thank God for Eugene Peterson, who has done so much to articulate a holistic and humanising vocational spirituality. He is one giant on whose shoulders I humbly seek to stand. But generally it feels as though church leaders are asked to march to



strong tunes, the beat of a strident drum, in the cause of church growth and renewal. Some are weary of this. Some have peeled off and gone elsewhere, perhaps never to return.

There is a vocational and spiritual trajectory which is biblical, humanising and consistent with God's plan of salvation for all creation. It is the way of the cross. A way which descends deeply before it ascends. It is the way of the storm, the shipwreck, the belly of the whale, darkness and disappointment. A way which leads us into grace—not utility, or ambition or a need to succeed—but grace. Furthermore, this way leads us into grace not as a status but as a flow. Grace is not the end of the road. It is simply a new beginning. The way of the cross starts to shape our vocation anew as a new road begins to unfurl beneath our feet and we are liberated enough to take it. If we are not travelling the way of the cross, if we do not recognise its paradox, its anguish and yet its invitation into the boundless world of grace, we may want to ask what vocational journey we are on instead, and to what end it might lead us. We need to hear the truth of this vocational journey at this time and in this place of immense anxiety, challenge and transition and the perfectly formed book of Jonah seems to me a wondrous distillation of its mysterious truths.

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# Entering the darkness

In most parts of the world, unlike us, people know that a day starts at nightfall. Before there can be any sunrise you must pass through the dark. Before you can be anything you must become nothing.

JOHN V. TAYLOR<sup>31</sup>

Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

JONAH 1:17

So, at last, we come to the book of Jonah's most famous moment and its most popular character, the whale. Jonah owes much of his popularity to this one episode, which has inspired art, literature and debate for centuries. That he was swallowed, according to the Hebrew, by a 'huge fish' and not necessarily a whale has not dissuaded anyone, not least the illustrators of children's Bibles, from making the very most of the potential offered by this extraordinary twist in the tale. The drawback of all this attention on the task of imagining Jonah in the belly of a huge fish is that it has made comic and slightly frivolous what is the darkest moment of the story. Perhaps this is not surprising though. We want to skip the darkness and hard graft of Jonah's poetic prayer and hurry on to another schoolboy image, Jonah lying in a pool of whale vomit (snigger!) (Jonah 2:10), and then crack on with the story.

There may be some justification for sidelining Jonah's psalm. Since the text would be just as complete without it, it has been argued that the psalm was added at a later date. That may be, and it is not my task to argue one way or the other. What is interesting for the purposes of exploring vocation and spirituality in this great story is our tendency, in the actual reading of the story, to hurry on in our hope of resolution. The author invites us to pause at length and examine with Jonah something of the emotion of his predicament at the most painful part of his journey. Meanwhile we find ourselves hardly having graduated from the cartoon-condensed versions of the Bible in our minds and

anxious to find out what happens next.

But surely this is precisely the point. It is here at the dark heart of the story that we are invited to sit with Jonah and, in contrast to the rest of the book, listen to the heart and soul of Jonah poured out in resplendent poetry. It is precisely these episodes in our own lives and experience that we are habitually hopeless at living with: the dark, difficult, doubting, painful and problematic bits. Part of the purpose of the poetry of chapter 2 is to stall us and urge us to listen and reflect, but in a very different way. The momentum of the story can wait. Nineveh can wait. The story's resolution can wait. All our own agendas, dreams, targets, aims and objectives can wait. When we wait with Jonah in the belly of the whale we are doing something vital, something that in our hurried, activist and utilitarian culture is a deeply countercultural act. We are embracing darkness. We are giving darkness time and space to tell its truths and do its work. We are putting our driven selves on hold for a moment and allowing our doubtful, insufficient selves to catch up with us long enough to teach us. This is a work of God—after all, it is very clear that it is God who provides, or appoints, this huge fish. Yet it is our opportunity to see this dark time for what it is and resist the many temptations to bypass or shortcut, hurrying on as ever to tasks and timetables, prose and purpose.

## The work of spiritual formation

When I trained for ordination, a weekly aspect of our training was something we called 'MFG'—ministerial formation groups. These groups were an opportunity for reflection on our personal and spiritual life in a way that began to look ahead to future challenges. Much of this was done with reference to certain forms of spiritual practice: Bible reading, prayer and spiritual direction, for example. MFG were appreciated but not particularly loved by many of us, including myself. When there was a choice between an essay deadline and a task set for the MFG, the essay invariably won. The essay had a much clearer outcome; it was marked and counted towards a final result. The MFG task entered a

more ambiguous realm of cause and effect. It also required more than just intellect—it required honesty and a vulnerability towards ourselves.

But in the task of MFG, and the reflections on spirituality and ministry that it asked of us, we were laying the ground for the continued work of spiritual formation. We were being gently reminded that spiritual formation was a work that did not take place simply by itself. The very inclusion in a busy timetable of such a group, week by week, reminded us that unless some kind of accountable format for spiritual growth is attended to, the task of ministry becomes irrelevant.

When we agree to a regular form of action, whether in the spiritual life (for example daily prayer or regular worship) or physical life (a training regime), we are committing ourselves to a form of limitation. There are a great many things we could be doing in those moments when we are praying, or working out, a great many things we would *rather* be doing. But we have chosen this path and we know that unless we commit to it for a sustained period the benefits we expect to get from it will not be forthcoming. In the spiritual life these forms are designed to root our active lives in God. They provide a foundation upon which daily routines, family life and the challenges of work can be grounded and given vitality and perspective.

What we were also doing in those MFG was anticipating that the challenges of a new form, a new container, in our lives—that of ordained ministry—might require a reassessment of the extent to which our current spiritual practices were able to sustain us in the future. If we had never had a spiritual director before, we were encouraged to consider having one. If we had never taken an annual retreat, this was also recommended. A new context suggested there might be a call for new forms. New practices for a new dispensation.

Jonah's psalm does not at first glance seem to flow from anything other than his immediate situation. The specifics of his descent into the stomach of the whale are all there: the deep, the seas, the currents, waves and breakers, engulfing waters, seaweed. More poetically, the

confines of the great fish's insides are described as 'deep in the realm of the dead' and the world beneath the waves as 'the roots of the mountains'. Yet as we read this psalm we feel there are parts we have read before, parts that feel like echoes from another place. There is an uncanny familiarity about the language. Words and phrases used to describe Jonah's unique experience and to voice his unique prayer seem drawn from some common well of vocabulary we have also had access to.

This source is, of course, the psalms. Almost every verse contains vocabulary duplicated from the psalter. Many verses are virtual word-for-word transcripts. Jonah's prayer is a brilliant mash-up of well-worn phrases from the prayer and worship book of Israel. But before we cry plagiarism, or before we ask why Jonah could not pray with a bit more spontaneity, a bit more soul, a bit more authenticity, we must remember the vital importance of forms.

Jonah prays with the vocabulary of the psalms because he is steeped in them. These prayers and songs of worship have been the diet of his spiritual life. They have entered his mind and his heart, his very bloodstream, to the extent that they form the basis for the way in which, even under duress, he connects with his God. The psalms have formed his spirituality, his prayer life. We should not be critical of the way this crisis prayer forms on the lips of Jonah; it is precisely the work of liturgical forms to embed the truths of God's nature and a way of articulating them deep into our hearts and minds. In this way forms train us, much in the same way that repeated action trains the fingers of the pianist, or the accuracy of the rugby goal kicker. Dedication to and perseverance with these forms result in spiritual reflexes under pressure. These reflexes can be the fruit of a long-term commitment to the liturgical forms. In the darkness and hopelessness of Jonah's situation, when panic is the reaction you might expect, Jonah is able to draw on a deep reservoir of prayerfulness, connected with the faithfulness of God over generations.

## Losing the form book

A closer look at Jonah's psalm, however, begins to reveal that something new is happening. Studies of the form of the psalms themselves have enabled us to identify categories of psalms. The psalms can be divided into two essential forms: praise and lament.<sup>32</sup> Thus, written into Israel's corporate worship were forms that gave vocabulary, metre and structure to the spectrum of circumstance and emotion common to life. The fact that lament—the outpouring of pain, anger and complaint to God—is as prevalent in the psalms as praise comes as something of a shock to many in the modern Western Church. But there it is. Israel did not hide darkness and difficulty from public worship but made as much provision for it as it did for the brightness of praise and thanksgiving. Nothing is left at the door of the temple, or omitted from the content of personal prayer. Life in all its wonder and woe, and God in all his majesty and mystery, are celebrated in the psalms.

This categorisation can be taken a step further to distinguish three forms: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation and psalms of reorientation. Where life for the people of God was settled, reliable and prosperous, psalms of orientation expressed gratefulness to God. Where life was confusing, painful, vulnerable and anxious, psalms of disorientation voiced the raw emotion but also the faithfulness of God's people. But where life seemed to come into a new season of peace, a new phase which brought healing or resolution out of a time of hurt and confusion, psalms of reorientation became part of the testimony of the psalter.<sup>33</sup> This last category, a developed aspect of the category of praise, is characterised by expressions of wonder, surprise and awe at the unexpected establishment of a new state of well-being. It is not a return to an old comfort, or familiar sense of coherence, but rather the discovery of a new kind of peace, often just when all sense of this possibility had been lost.

So, here's the punchline. The psalm of Jonah, from the belly of the whale—when he has reached the absolute rock bottom of his journey, when he is as far from God and from his old comforts as he could

possibly imagine, when he is a picture of rejection, alienation and failure—is a psalm of *reorientation*. We might have expected a psalm of lament, of disorientation, but instead we get a psalm that falls into the tradition of psalms written when God has miraculously broken in to bring new hope and new life into a situation.

In his psalm, Jonah describes his descent into the belly of the huge fish, concluding his account by saying, the ‘earth beneath barred me in forever’ (Jonah 2:6b). This is the end of his great descent that began the moment he left for Joppa. Now God breaks in: ‘But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit’ (2:6c). This is the turning point, the moment of surprising intervention, the axis around which the story tilts, God’s intervention at the point at which Jonah has come to the end of his own resources and given up hope (or perhaps even the desire) of ever returning to the old dispensation.

Once again the form of the psalm points us to this conclusion. For verse 6 is the hinge point in the psalm when it is laid out in the classic symmetrical form. This verse tells us about the theme and focus of this psalm more than any other. All previous verses point towards it and all the subsequent verses result from it. Furthermore, it is at this climactic moment that Jonah’s psalm breaks form and goes beyond the inherited language and vocabulary I’ve described:

*The deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.  
To the roots of the mountains I sank down;  
the earth beneath barred me in forever.*

JONAH 2:5B–6B

These lines are pure, 100 per cent Jonah! They come directly before the great declaration of God’s intervention (v. 6c), which is a quotation from another great psalm of praise (Psalm 103). Just at the point where Jonah’s psalm tells us that a new orientation has been reached, Jonah discovers his own voice. The forms of his life up to that point have served him well; they have enabled him to pray, even in the most



hopeless of situations. But as God brings new, unexpected, miraculous life, by his grace, Jonah finds himself able to discover his own language and vocabulary for this new experience.

## The gift of darkness

The forms of spiritual discipline that support us and train us, root us in God for the present and sustain us into the future, are a voluntary limitation. They are a deliberate curtailing of our natural wants and desires, a calculated freedom *from* certain activities in order to train our freedom *for* God and his ways. Spiritual disciplines are never easy, in the same way that any kind of training is never easy. Our strong will to resort to doing something easier, faster, more comforting, more relaxing is deliberately overcome in order to commit to a higher ideal. Spiritual disciplines are ‘voluntary disaster’.<sup>34</sup> For in a small way it feels like disaster. For the ego, that selfish, driven, assertive nature inside each of us, it is most definitely disaster, a moral defeat in a battle to keep control of us.

The reflections we were timetabled to engage in as we prepared for ordained ministry were a means of asking the question, ‘Which forms of “voluntary disaster” will you commit to to sustain you in this next challenge?’ ‘How will you structure your more hidden spiritual disciplines so that your visible activity can be fruitful and sustainable?’

Yet there are transitions in the Christian life and in the journey of our vocation which take us beyond ‘voluntary disaster’. There are transformations that God would have us make that by their very nature need somehow to short-circuit the will and the intellect in order to be successful. They require circumstances and limitations that are involuntary so that, out of his gracious love for us, God can bring about painful and disorientating change in ways that we would otherwise avoid. And one of the key circumstances, or limitations, that God uses to do this within is that of darkness.

The story is very clear that ‘the Lord provided a huge fish’ (Jonah 1:17). There is no denying from Jonah’s description what a horrific and traumatic experience it was for Jonah to be engulfed by this provision. Yet, as we have seen, something new and extraordinary takes place within Jonah in the belly of the huge fish. A new voice, a liberation from old forms, a new commitment (2:9), perhaps, even a new perspective. All this takes place within the confined space of the belly of a whale! Debates about whether such a whale really existed and whether any human being, let alone Jonah, could really survive three days in the stomach of one, and not only survive but pick himself up and carry on apparently unharmed, are irrelevant to the meaning of the story. What is central to the story, a story designed to teach us, is that the work God needed to do in Jonah (and so in us) *can only* take place in these sorts of places: dark, isolated, disorientating, hopeless, restricted and beyond the reach of our intellect or activity. These are places we would never choose ourselves. Even if we felt God was leading us there, we would most likely not step in that direction. No, we must, as it were, be blindfolded and led. Psychiatrist and author Gerald May said: ‘To guide us toward the love that we most desire, we must be taken where we could not and would not go on our own.’<sup>35</sup>

Darkness is the word that best describes the form of limitation we are exploring. But it is not simple darkness in the sense in which we often use the word, as a time of great pain, or loss or trauma, something essentially negative and even evil. It could be every one of those things, but the deeper understanding of God’s darkness, the ‘dark night of the soul’ as it is often called, is something more subtle than that. The word used by two of the greatest writers on this subject, St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila, writing in their native Spanish, is *oscura*. *Oscura* simply means ‘obscure’ and highlights the essential experiences of confusion and uncertainty that are the nature of the ‘dark night of the soul’. These two writers use a different word, *tinieblas*, when referring to the darkness of evil. The distinctions between the experiences denoted by these words may be hard to identify. The difference lies in the potential ability of *oscura* to address the effects of the kind of darkness that *tinieblas* seeks to describe. Gerald May said:

In *oscuras* things are hidden; in *tinieblas* one is blind. In fact, it is the very blindness of *tinieblas*, our slavery to attachment and delusion, that the dark night of the soul is working to heal.<sup>36</sup>

The darkness of the belly of the whale in the depths of the sea is a darkness used by God to bring about personal transformation in Jonah. This kind of darkness by its very nature, in any place or time or context, can harbour all those experiences of alienation, confusion and uncertainty. Darkness cuts off our dependence on the senses which work collectively under conditions of light to help us navigate the world. As a result, darkness probes at our confidence in the intellect and the mind. Darkness makes us vulnerable, helpless, searching for new dependencies, longing for a way out. No wonder we avoid darkness and demonise it as something essentially negative. We employ various and creative means to dispel darkness from our lives. We use what author and priest Barbara Brown Taylor calls ‘artificial lights’;<sup>37</sup> the distractions of our shallow age—consumerism, alcohol, drugs, sex and the media—to illuminate us briefly. But all the time there is a tugging sense that all these lights, all these desires, are only substitutes for something more real and more profound.

Even lights that have proved faithful and helpful for us in our spiritual growth become tired and unhelpful. The forms of our own spiritual tradition are there to open us to the source of this fundamental light. But for some of us, even they become an idol rather than an icon, something that blinds or blocks the light rather than enables us to really see. What seems to be characteristic of the sort of darkness we are exploring, the darkness used by God, is that old forms no longer seem sufficient to accommodate the new thing that is being birthed in the darkness. We are invited to explore beyond the limitations of what has sustained us to this point, to let go and free ourselves to receive what God would give us in the darkness. And it is only the blindsided confusion of darkness that will free us from our own structures and dependencies enough to open us up to the new thing God wants to do.

The storm of my own experience, which I described in the last chapter,

was the beginning of a descending darkness into which I travelled. I experienced this deepening darkness in a number of ways. I began to lose conviction in certain forms that had served me and the Church well over many years. Partly, this was due to a sense that they were not 'working', but more profoundly there was a sense in which I felt there was something yet to be discovered. I had put significant trust in certain techniques of Bible study, prayer and mission and these had not met my high ambitions for success. I had also invested heavily in prayer, believing, as I still do, that mission without prayer is simply active endeavour. In particular, my sense that I needed to intercede for what we were doing was turning into a responsibility that lay heavily on me. From time to time I would find a new conviction or a new source of inspiration and commit myself anew to patterns and lists to ensure that nothing went 'unprayed' for. But gradually I was sinking under the weight of an impossible task and an unrealistic spiritual theology. The enterprise illusion, which suggests the more we work, the more we plan and scheme and employ clever programmes, the more we will see God at work, had entered my personal spirituality. But did a God of grace really need me to pray harder and harder to enable his will to be done? Was this ministry to which I felt called dependent on my prayerful activity and that of those under my leadership? Was I really that indispensable?

I am still working through this transformation even now but I know that things have begun to change. I reached a place of darkness and claustrophobia in prayer that brought about a willingness to be open to whatever God would lead me into. I began to discover the prayer of silence and contemplation, the prayer of the heart, and I sensed a freedom to pursue this as the foundation for my own spirituality. I could say much more about this and the effects it is having in me and the communities I lead, but that is for later. For now the key point is the role of darkness, a bewildering experience of confusion and uncertainty that took me to a place that my own will or intellect could not have taken me. Indeed, some of the literature I found myself reading over this time was literature I had read before and, ironically, found completely obscure. For me it was the work of God in the darkness of this time that

suddenly brought this same writing into a new light and offered me illumination when I needed it.

## Darkness and ministry

For leaders in ministry it is hardly any wonder that we find ourselves avoiding darkness when it often feels as if we are required to be light for everyone else. I am increasingly convinced that Jonah was a leading light in the corridors of power at the time of Jeroboam II. His descent is a salutary tale for those wrestling with the dilemmas of professional ministry, where personal spirituality and public responsibility become uncomfortably connected. How do we lead worship, inspire others and act as a model for others when we sense a gathering darkness in our own spiritual lives? How much of the vicar or pastor's authenticity and vulnerability can a community cope with before they start looking for someone a bit more reliable, a little more 'positive'?

It is all too easy for ministers in a position of leadership to collude with communities and congregations in the art of darkness avoidance. The loss of the psalms of lament from public worship may have much to do with this. It is as though we have forgotten how to speak the language of darkness and vulnerability and evolved structures that ensure we don't relearn how to do this.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, the experience of public ministry can so easily dull our senses to the growing darkness inside us. Leadership and ministry are fertile ground for the ego. The noble call to humble service with which we may have entered ministry is challenged on a regular basis by the sweet experience of being someone, doing good and being needed. Our institutions and traditions bring us, unwittingly sometimes, into contexts that confer status, even if in a relatively small universe. They also project expectation, generally unrealistic, on lead individuals. These expectations can cripple. But not before they have inflated our ego, which whispers that perhaps, truly, it is 'for this moment that I came'. As Rowan Williams says in reflecting on the wisdom of the desert

monasteries for modern-day ministry: 'Monastic witness is not going to be easily compatible with a life in which it is easy to be ensnared in the fantasies of others and caught up in an illusory position of dignity.'<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps most insidious of all in diminishing our awareness of the state of our own inner life is the cult of busyness. Busyness has been exalted to the point of being fashionable in our own culture. We are nobody unless we are simply too busy even to say how we are. There is a relentlessness and a busyness to the story of Jonah which is intoxicating and entertaining. A vast adventure is packed into just 48 verses. It is the Minor Prophets on Twitter. That is, except for those eight verses of poetry at the very heart of the book which bring about a deliberate and profound pause. As we noted, the central axis of this poetical reflection contains the key moment of revelation within it. But more than that, this same verse is the very centre of the whole narrative. Jonah 2:6c is almost the very middle of the book, being the end of verse 23 of the 48-verse book. The moment when Jonah declares, 'But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit,' is the moment when the story turns and heads in a different direction. Descent has turned to ascent, death into resurrection. And it took poetry to do it! Patient, reflective metaphor instead of hurried prose. The lesson is clear. Only when we slow down, only when we rest from all our self-important busyness, only when we cease from our driven agendas, can we cultivate an awareness that makes possible the transforming work of God.

Busyness was certainly one of the factors blinding me to my journey into darkness. Busyness was also a convenient way of ignoring the sense that all was not well within me. As long as I kept busy I could feel justified both to myself and to others. On the other hand, as I reflect on my experience of pioneer ministry over the past seven years, I realise that a great deal of its very nature has the ingredients of 'dark night'. The nature of pioneering is to venture into the unknown, to go off the map, to leave old structures and forms behind. We are choosing a road that leads to disorientation, confusion and uncertainty. Mature pioneers will resist the temptation to hastily employ generic forms,

structures and programmes that have been successful elsewhere. What is required is a willingness to listen deeply and trust that the right forms will emerge in this new context.

The 20th-century Catholic missionary Vincent Donovan told the remarkable story of his pioneering work among the Maasai people of Tanzania. With extraordinary courage he chose to ignore the traditional methods and forms of mission of the time. With incredible faith and determination he went beyond the safety and control of the mission compound, where health and educational establishments were used to try to bring the gospel to nomadic tribespeople. He recognised that the very nature of mission was ‘a process leading to that new place where none of us has ever gone before’.<sup>40</sup> As he began his work, he summarised his approach to his bishop in a letter announcing his intentions: ‘I have no theory, no plan, no strategy, no gimmick—no idea of what will come. I feel rather naked. I will begin as soon as possible.’<sup>41</sup>

Naked vulnerability, not knowing where you are going, being without strategy or plan, these are the realities of pioneer ministry. It is an *oscura* experience, a deep experience of obscurity and dark night, that is intrinsic to the call of the pioneer minister. And commitment to that ‘not knowing’, to that waiting in the darkness for God, is the discipline that enables God to do a new thing, both in the midst of those we are ministering to, and also in us. Once again our vocation is not simply about what can happen by God’s grace out there among a people or a community. It is just as importantly about what can happen in us, the transformation that takes place through our wrestling in the darkness.

Of course, this is not purely the experience of pioneer ministry. It is the reality of mission. One of the rediscoveries that has been so important to the pioneering mission movement of recent years is the theological concept of the *missio Dei*—that God by his very nature is a missionary God. He is always on the move, always venturing on, always leading his people with him, into new places, new challenges and new revelations of who he is. That ‘the Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning’<sup>42</sup> is not a pragmatic reality, but a theological one. For to be the

Church is to journey with God as the people of God, to be a community that follows Jesus, follows the Spirit that he sent. Since the nature of the Trinity is missional then we are simply not the Church if we are not missional. And it is in the very nature of mission to constantly take us as a missionary Church beyond our traditional practices, our methods and our strategies and into the realm of the unknown, where the Spirit of God is doing a new thing.

I believe very firmly that God is doing a new thing in the Church of the Western world. The missional movement that I am a small part of did not come about by committee or Synodic decree. It came about by individuals responding to a call of God to venture out, in many cases free from the trappings of assumed missional methods, and follow the Spirit into communities disconnected from the Church. I believe this is a sign of the new thing God is doing in a Church that is collectively experiencing something of a dark night of the soul. A Church that is struggling to live in a culture where old forms no longer hold the power they once did. A Church that is increasingly uncertain of its voice and disorientated in a culture that it is no longer central too. A Church that is working hard to carry out its traditional ministries better and smarter, while at the same time privately asking itself whether they are really fit for purpose. A Church that looks at the future and might well admit that it doesn't know how it can sustain its existence. It does indeed feel like darkness. But as those who have journeyed with darkness and explored its mysteries tell us, darkness is the necessary means of changing us where we would not otherwise be willing to change.

## Learning to embrace the darkness

Personally and collectively, then, we must learn to embrace darkness. We will always fear it, but we do not need to avoid it. Gradually we can learn to lean into it, to wrestle with it, unwilling to let it go until it has bestowed on us its surprising blessing, like Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32:22–31. We need to be willing to recognise that as much as God is a God of light, God also dwells in darkness. On Mount Sinai, at



the establishment of the covenant of the law, God comes to Moses ‘in a dense cloud’ (Exodus 19:9). The Hebrew word to describe this darkness is *araphel*, a word unique to the description of the kind of darkness in which God chooses to reveal himself, while at the same time remaining hidden. On the mount of transfiguration Jesus becomes transfigured by an overwhelming light, before all those present are enveloped by ‘a bright cloud’ from which they hear the voice of God reiterating the truth of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God (Matthew 17:5). It is not darkness or light so much as obscurity and fear that epitomise these experiences of acute revelation.

Fundamentally these are experiences of vulnerability, experiences which are a gift to us to prise us out of our fortresses of comfort and control. Recently, research has begun to explore why some people seem more resilient to failure, shame and humiliation. These people seem to have a deeper capacity for self-belief, a foundational sense that they are ‘enough’ and that nothing they do or do not do will shake that. These ‘wholehearted’ people share a number of fundamental ideals, but perhaps the most significant of these is a high value for vulnerability. Author Brené Brown has said:

The Wholehearted identify vulnerability as the catalyst for courage, compassion and connection... They attribute everything—from their professional success to their marriages to their proudest parenting moments—to their ability to be vulnerable.<sup>43</sup>

Embracing darkness means embracing vulnerability. Each time we resist the temptation to suppress feelings of vulnerability we are taking a step of courage to be open to how that vulnerability, in the hands of God, might be shaped to teach us and how it may be shaped to change us. Moments like that occur every day. However, sometimes periods of this experience of vulnerability and disorientation seem to consume us. These times of darkness, uncertainty and confusion, where the old maps no longer make sense and it feels as if all we can do is sit and wait in the gloom, still have their hope within them. They are involuntary

crises stewarded by God to bring the change we could never have wrought by ourselves.

I am slowly learning to let the darkness come, to lean into it, wrestle with and trust it for the gift I firmly believe it to be. It is never comfortable and I do not think it will ever really become so. The dark night is not something we go through once and then think, 'Good! Now that's over with I can get on and enjoy my life.' The dark night is a continual process of transformation, of varying intensity, throughout our lives. Much of the time when we thought life was easy we were simply not open to or aware of the darkness knocking at our door. Now we are finding it harder to escape from. So we must learn to embrace it, value it and discover the gift within it.