

Introducing Claire Morrish

Matthew 13:31-35

Claire Morrish

So here I am, your newly deaconed curate of this parish. It is really exciting to be here. And I'm going to share something of my testimony. Now God has been faithful to me for all of my 53 years. I've decided to focus on the beginning and how I came to meet Jesus because we've got a few years and I can helpfully explain the rest of it as we go along.

So, my testimony is not one of a dramatic happening. I don't have a past life as a drug dealer or anything like that. I haven't been a really lost sheep. My story is more of a gentle unfolding. A slow realisation of who I am, who I really belong to and why I am here. And hence the readings I chose this evening were parables of slow development. A mustard seed takes decades to become a tree, and it would take quite a while to work yeast through 30 kilograms of dough. It would take that time to rise and perhaps also be knocked back before it was ready to be baked as a loaf. So, these slow organic processes have been my experience, my testimony of the kingdom of God unfolding in my life.

I was born in Yorkshire and I was baptised as a baby in Knaresborough. I belonged to God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit from the very beginning. Because that was important to my family. I have never known a time when God wasn't part of my life. My family went to church and I was surrounded by lives of faith. We lived in Knaresborough until I was five when we moved to Leeds. I was a bit upset about that because we lived near the school and it had this big climbing frame and I couldn't go on it until I started school. And then we moved house and the new school had no climbing frame. But anyway, we moved to Leeds.

Now, my earliest memories of feeling close to God are those of awe and wonder at the natural world. Particularly sitting by the pond that I built with my dad and watching frog spawn become tadpoles and then little froglets. And dragonfly larvae becoming dragonfly. And I marvelled at the vast array of plants and flowers in the garden. And then there was the utter amazement when Dad bought me a microscope, and I looked at pond water through a microscope. Wow! It contains so many mysteries. God has so many mysteries for us. God clearly loves variety. He is capable of amazing transformations. There are so many, many miracles in a garden, and so many more we can only see with a microscope. What an awesome creator God we have! I was sprouting a knowledge and awareness of God the Father, like a tiny little tree seedling. Seedlings, even when stepped on, can spring right back up again. What resilience! And so, it has been with my faith in my Father, the Creator God. If I'm feeling a bit squashed and I take time to admire some aspect of his creation or spend some time in the garden, my faith springs up again.

I went to St Matthew's Middle School in Leeds, Chapel Allerton, aged 8 to 12, which was next door to the church which we attended as a family. Growing up, I was often the only girl at cub events, because in those days, cubs was for boys only. God must have known that I needed some preparation for being a mother of three boys.

And it was at St Matthew's School that I really became aware of Jesus and his teaching. I remember vividly the assemblies given by the Reverend Adrian Botwright (that's quite a name. I don't know where he is now. He was rector of Skipton at one time). He was brilliant. He was the curate at the time that he came to school to deliver the assemblies. And in the words of the Philippians passage that we had read, he was a person who began to show me that the Lord is near. I loved singing the hymns there played by Miss Stankley on the piano - she was great. She taught me to sing. We had an organ in the church, and she explained that the organ was loud so that you would compete with the organ and sing loudly to God.

There was something of a production line at that school towards confirmation and most people at the end of the school got confirmed, but I didn't want to do that. I had a really good head knowledge of Jesus, but I had absolutely no conviction in my heart or sense of a relationship with him that I felt ready to confirm in any way.

Another key relationship for me at that time of my growing faith was that with my maternal grandma, who I called Nan. Now Nan was widowed when I was five years old and she found much comfort in attending her local church in Leicester. She would visit Leeds often and bring me books about Jesus and we would talk together about God. Now I didn't realise until I was very much older, but she really only came to faith after grandpa died. Her friends took her to church and she later said that our conversations were really important to her faith journey too. We had been making the Lord near for each other. She later had a fantastic ministry of prayer for me and my family. She died a few years ago, but I am sure that she is in a cloud of witnesses cheering me on right now.

Now, I don't know what you make of the parable of the yeast, but at my flourish group, that's an after-school group that I run at Coombe Down Primary School, we did a God-ly play session on that parable. And at the end of a session, you ask 'I wonder' questions. And I asked 'I wonder where do you see God in this story?' and 'I wonder what you've learned about God from this story.' Many saw God as the woman mixing the dough and some saw the yeast as the Holy Spirit and one of them said the yeast is the Holy Spirit as it works its way into all of your life you are changed forever. So, if the yeast is the Holy Spirit, my yeast moment happened in Ripon cathedral.

Now, having refused to be to be part of the confirmation conveyor belt at middle school, I went on to Allerton High School in Leeds which is a non-faith community comprehensive. It's an academy now. But I missed the spirituality and the Christian distinctiveness that I'd had at middle school. And once I realised what I was missing, I wanted to know more, and I found myself in church much more. And I joined a confirmation class. It was a group of teenagers and young adults, and we went on a weekend retreat to Ripon Cathedral. And there was much talk of the Holy Spirit. And I found myself one evening in a little undercroft chapel that we'd been given access to with a youth leader, praying a really simple prayer. It went something like this,

'God, if you're real, and if the Holy Spirit is a real thing, I really need to know, could you show me, please, that you are real?'

Wow, careful with that prayer! There was an overwhelming experience of the presence of God in the next few moments. I can only describe it as like a whoosh of colour and emotion. And, you know, there was like, I was just so sure that the Holy Spirit was there in that moment. It was amazing. And I sort of looked across at the youth leader and both of us were in tears. But the overwhelming feeling was one of joy. And I left that little chapel changed forever. There was yeast in my dough and I would never be a pile of flour again. I was confirmed at the age of 14 and I started a Christian union in my high school with a group of friends that I'm still friends with. But I think I was probably quite annoying with my newfound faith and my new relationship with Jesus - I kind of didn't shut up about it.

I went off to study biochemistry at Oxford University, so that little child in me that had sat awestruck at the side of the pond continued to be intrigued by just how beautiful God had made his world, particularly on the molecular scale. I thoroughly enjoyed learning how to sequence DNA (which took me three days by the way, and now there's a machine that does it instantly). I loved to discover the shape of complex proteins and to understand how a leaf cell harnesses sunlight into energy. I made some fantastic friends through the college chapel and the Christian union and I developed the discipline of being in a prayer triplet and studying the bible in small groups. And these things all brought the Lord near to me. And I really learned the power of prayer at Uni, and the power of people praying with you and for you. While I was at university, the Church of England ordained its first women as well.

However, Uni also involved some painful stretching of my dough. I was awfully homesick. My grandad died at the end of my first year, in the same week that I caught salmonella from some dodgy batter in the canteen. It wasn't an easy time, but it was very much a time of formation. However, my biggest knockback of my dough came in Bath. My move to Bath after my degree involved marriage to a childhood sweetheart, a PGCE course at Bath University and the beginning of my teaching career at Chew Valley School.

But after less than two years of marriage, my husband left me for another woman. A woman I had counted as a friend, and that all happened within a church community and family. That was a big knockback. I fell into a very deep depression, but thankfully we had no children, and although he had walked out on me, God did not walk out on me. In fact, in many ways, through that dark valley, I became really close to Jesus. He shepherded me with great care and there's much more detail and many more stories about that bit, but I'm parking them for future.

Now I met John at St. Philip and St. James' drama group in Odd Down where I was playing the part of a witch (which was good therapy). He was moving the scenery. And the last 24 years of married family life, and the not so straightforward arrival of our three sons, have also been stretching in many ways. But our God, the God of second chances, the God of forgiveness, has moulded me and given me a spacious place to grow and bear fruit.

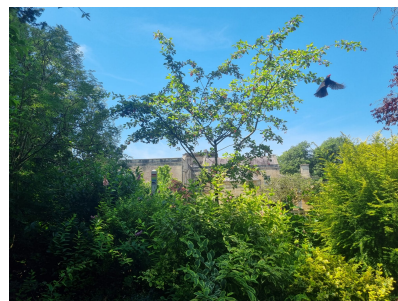
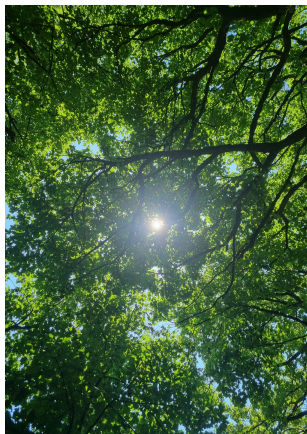
There is much I could say about how God called me to ordained ministry to be standing here right now, but that is for another time. But just to say, it was a slow process. In fact, there were 12 years between my first conversation with the Vocations Advisor and my ordination. Just when I thought my dough was ready to bake during my time at Sarum College studying theology as an ordinand, I had another knockback moment - a breast cancer diagnosis. I discovered that I needed surgical formation, as well as theological formation.

So, it has been a stretching time. But throughout all of these things the Philippians 4 passage has been central.

Philippians 4:6

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Prayer is powerful and this image illustrates for me three ways in which it's powerful.



The first picture on the left (with the sun in the middle, the canopy of trees) - if others are praying for you in difficult times, then you have that canopy of their leaves of prayer sheltering you from the heat. I really feel that very strongly, and I feel it's really important that that you have some friends who you really trust, who you can be completely open with and who can pray for you. Because there are times when it's hard to pray for yourself. Emma said in the morning service that you lot are brilliant at this, so I'm in a safe place. Thank you for the prayers that have already been said, and for the ones that are to come. And I will also be praying for all of you, so together we form that canopy of prayer over each other.

The middle picture - prayer I think can sustain you in your most ruined moments. It's a picture of an evergreen tree growing in a bombed-out church in Southampton that we visited on a trip with my ordination group. I was just really struck by it standing so beautifully. I don't know how it was getting rain or where its soil was, but it was there, and it was evergreen. And prayer is like that - even in your most ruined moments when you feel flattened, prayer can sustain you.

The last picture is of a cherry tree on retreat in Ammerdown, my ordination retreat. And I was sat by the tree praying for quite a long time and birds kept coming. I really struggled to capture one in a photograph, but I did on that last one. I think prayer produces fruitfulness.

Jesus said:

Matthew 13:31-32

³¹ “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

I love that because the birds then go away and they pip out the seeds and you start another tree so it's just such a beautiful picture. So prayer produces fruitfulness, so the birds can come and find shelter and nourishment.

There has been a great deal to rejoice about in my journey, but there have also been many anxious thoughts, and they have had to be brought to Jesus repeatedly. And repeatedly he has given me the peace that passes all understanding that is mentioned in that Philippians passage.

Now the final story about prayer and trees that I wanted to tell you today also shows something of God's sense of humour. I came here in May for a chat with Tom after a follow-up check-up visit to the hospital. All was well but I was early for my chat with Tom and so I took a prayer walk around the church looking for somewhere to sit. I couldn't find anywhere to sit so I sat at the base of a large evergreen tree, and I prayed. My main prayer was that God might give me roots in this place, a sense of belonging to all of you. Then I tried to get up, and I couldn't get up because I had sat in some tree resin that was exuding from the base of the tree and I had a really sticky bottom. And for one brief moment I thought God had literally given me roots. It also meant that I turned up at Tom's house and we had to sit in his garden because I dare not sit on his beautiful furniture with my sticky bottom.

So, to summarise, my testimony is one of being planted in a home where I have always known about and felt that I belonged as part of God's family. An early sense of awe and wonder at creation drew me to want to know more about my creator and his created world, and so I went to study science. School, especially a church middle school, is where I met Jesus, but it took an encounter with the Holy Spirit on a youth retreat to really set my heart on fire for Jesus. Many praying friends and relations have seen me through some difficult seasons, and they continue to sustain me in the stretching and the surprising things of life.

So this week I want you to ponder these parables to see how they resonate in your lives. Which bits stick for you? How has God grown in your life? What yeast moments have there been? Moments when the Holy Spirit has been added or maybe been needed and moved into a new part of your life. How has the prayer of others and praying for others sustained you and sustained others in stretching seasons?

And I think it's really important we remember those things because that's a really important part of our testimony. I don't know about you, but I'm quickly forget answers to prayer and move on to the next sort of thing we must not forget they're really important. Based on the Philippians passage, who has made the Lord seem near for you? Because the Lord is near, but sometimes it takes others to point him out. And sometimes we have to point him out to others. So, who has made the Lord near for you, and what keeps you rejoicing and offering prayers of thanksgiving even in anxious times? Do you need a moment in the garden to look for some mini miracles or is there something else that reminds you of God's faithfulness to you?



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