

'... to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:35)

Undivided



FROM THE
EDITOR ...

JESUS FELLOWSHIP/
MODERN JESUS ARMY

**CELIBACY
INSPIRATIONAL
NEWSLETTER**

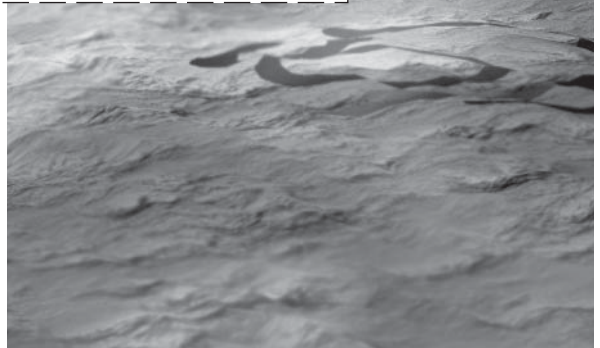
OCT 2008 NO.27

Jesus the revolutionary

It never ceases to amaze me that Jesus was a total revolutionary. He spoke to the 'wrong' people (women, prostitutes, sinners, lepers and children) in the wrong places (houses of tax collectors, boats, tops of mountains) on the wrong day (the Sabbath). He broke religious rules to build relationships and challenged all that was conventional, dead and sterile in current religion. He had no fear of Jewish authorities, denouncing their hypocrisy in the strongest language. But he turned the world upside down in 3 years and has been the most talked about person in history ever since.

And He was the celibate son of God. Focussed, undistracted and clear sighted, nothing was allowed to prevent Him accomplishing His mission of establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Neither well meaning friends nor hardened religious enemies could stop the passionate, single hearted Jesus in bringing in the greatest revolution of all time.

Huw Lewis



Celibate pioneers: Fuelled by a passion for Jesus and a love for the poor, the celibate Anglican order of 'All Saints Sisters of the Poor' was founded in 1851.

Walking along the colourful and multicultural Cowley Road, a long line of terraced houses dating back from Oxford's rapid nineteenth century industrial expansion, one turns through a little arched gate into a walled and gardened haven which houses the mother house of the Anglican community known as 'All Saint Sisters of the Poor'. Within the grounds lie a large Edwardian chapel, the community's living quarters and various projects the sisters have pioneered: St John's Home for the elderly; Helen House, a children's hospice, (the first in the world) where children are cared for with terminal illnesses and support is given for their families; Douglas House, a hospice for the 16-40 age group; a conference centre and guest rooms. Over the road is the Steppin' Stone Centre, a drop-in centre for homeless and unemployed people.

The order 'All Saints Sisters of the Poor' was founded in London in 1851. The first vicar of All Saints Church in Margaret Street, London, William Upton Richards, was painfully aware of the

desperate needs of the poor in his parish, and together with Harriet Brownlow Byron, a single woman from his congregation, developed and pioneered a vision for a local community of Christian celibate women to devote themselves to meeting those needs. In 1856, after a brief spell in a smaller house in Mortimer Street, Harriet and the sisters moved into three five story houses in Margaret Street, along with the poor or disabled adults and orphans they were caring for. Besides attending

to the needs of the poor in their own home, the sisters travelled around the neighbourhood, nursing the sick, looking after the dying and preparing the dead for burial. A mortuary for the poor was created within the basement of the house in Margaret Street and vital medicines and medical aid were issued from an in-house dispensary. A room on the top floor was used for performing necessary operations. Some of the sisters also worked for a time as nurses at University College Hospital. In time the sisters pioneered other projects outside the area e.g. a school in Edinburgh, a convalescent hospital in Eastbourne and other similar projects in Bradford, Wolverhampton, Leeds and Liverpool. In 1872 some of the sisters went to found a community in the States and this still exists today. Others went to India and South Africa.

Today all the UK branch of the All Saints sisters live in Oxford and in March this year I had the privilege of spending several hours talking with most of the ten sisters that live there and attended both 'Vespers' in the chapel and their evening community meal. During this time I had a chance to hear (and often laugh along with) some of their reflections and stories. Below are the comments of three of the sisters, Jean Margaret, Helen and Ann, all who have spent the majority of their lives living as celibates within the community.

Jean Margaret joked that the first time she was invited to visit the community in Margaret Street she said 'no thanks!' and ran down the street. As a young woman she loved the theatre

but inwardly felt the call to a celibate community lifestyle. 'Can I give it up for God?' she asked herself. Besides this, her mother desperately wanted her to get married and have children. At 23 she made a painful choice and went to test her vocation and has been with the sisters ever since. Yet, for Jean, the rewards of her sacrifice are many. She quoted Jesus' words: "No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for Me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10: 29, 30) In this she was particularly making reference to all the sick and unwanted children, as a celibate, she has looked after over the years. "I chose this lifestyle of celibacy," she said, "because I wanted to offer the best" and added modestly that she doesn't always succeed in that but this her aim!

Ann recalled her call to celibacy and the community: "There were Catholic nuns in the village where I grew up. They were so good to some members of my family when they fell on hard times and they cared for one of the children when they were orphaned." She added with a smile, "They were good to me too!" Speaking of the celibate lifestyle, Ann explained, "For us there is no one else! As celibates we are totally thrown on God!"

Helen explained her choice for celibacy is these words: "God is the significant other. For the married person the spouse is the significant other; for the celibate, God is the significant other - as we pursue our quest for a relationship with Him." Helen spoke of how celibates without heart friends can be cold and unresponsive. "Celibacy within us can become as ice," she explained. "It is important to develop deep friendships with individuals and yet always ensure these are open to the community."

In recent years the All Saints Sisters have revised their way of life to fit a modern age. This has taken honesty, courage and a willingness to be open to God's present word. However, the vision of the founders still shines through the revised 'Rule of Life' and the current practice of the sisters.

This is well expressed on their website: 'As All Saints Sisters of the Poor, we believe that we are called to be alongside the homeless and unemployed, the sick, the dying and the bereaved, the old, the lonely, those in prison — any who welcome the friendship we offer as companions journeying together. We believe that as we walk together Christ journeys with us, sometimes unnamed, unrecognised, but always present. The tradition of religious life is as vital and dynamic as Christ himself! Its very roots are in relationship with the living God, corporately and individually through all our living and our loving, through our activity and our passivity, working through the inevitable conflicts with one another to forgiveness and the appreciation of each other's differing gifts. We want to be open to change, living in joyful expectancy, waiting on God's word, travelling light, ready to go where God may lead.'



Chris Gilbert (25) made a lifelong vow to remain celibate in December 2007 along with two other young men from the Jesus Fellowship church household, New Creation Farm.

When Chris's parents, Colin and Sue, broke the news to him that they were leaving their Kentish home and moving to 'Living Stones', a Jesus Fellowship community house in Northamptonshire, Chris was not pleased – to put it mildly. "I hated leaving my friends and the thought of moving up," he said. Fortunately, Chris's misgivings were slowly transformed as he began to enjoy his new, and now hugely extended, lively church family. During his boyhood years in Christian community he experienced what he describes as "real touches of God. For example, when I was thirteen, I felt such a need of simplicity one day that I went and threw three quarters of the contents of my room away!"

Chris was baptised when he was 16 but before long his desire for God began to weaken and the appeal of finding another life outside the church took its place. "At 18 I left, got a job and my own place and fell into taking drugs and heavy drinking. I'm an all-or-nothing person so I didn't come around to the church."

After returning at 19, Chris opted to do a 'year of singleness' (a year set aside by single people in the Jesus Fellowship to concentrate on finding God's ways for their lives

'TOTALLY COMMITTED TO GOD'

without the distraction of seeking or having a partner.) In the seventh month of this year Chris got involved with a girl and moved out again.

"While I was away God kept on at me! I held off as long as I could but I began to feel desperate to know God again. When I went to Leon's funeral, a young man I knew from the church that died very suddenly and tragically, I knew where I was supposed to be – with God's people."

Chris moved back into community, this time to the Jesus Fellowship community house 'New Creation Farm' and shortly after to their daughter household, 'House of Miracles' on the Blackthorn estate in Northampton's eastern district.

In 2006, the day before his 24th birthday and after some prayer and discussion, he decided to test out a call to celibacy by trying it out for a year (this is known in the Jesus Fellowship as a 'probationary' year.) It was not long after, while in a gathering for leaders in training that Chris prayed with passion, "God, whatever Your will is, I want to be in it!" 'BE A CELIBATE!' were the words Chris felt God speak immediately into his heart, as clear as crystal. Meanwhile leaders in the church recommended he complete his probationary year.

Later that year, after driving home late one evening with his friend, Danny, Chris sat on his own in the darkness and asked himself, "Do I want a wife? No! Do I want kids? No! I want celibacy." Chris prayed on: "If this is what You want, God, then from this point on, I'll start living my life as a full celibate. Then," he said, "I felt waves of Holy Spirit power rushing up and down my body. I was really

excited about it all!"

In December 2007, Chris with two close friends, made their life-long celibate vows before the gathered church.

"I've always had great respect for celibacy," said Chris. "Marriage has never felt the natural option. The idea of being totally committed to God has always attracted and excited me much more than normal family life. I never felt I would get married – even when I had a girlfriend. She always told me that I'd come back to the church and become a celibate!"

Chris added that living in community with celibates as he was growing up gave him a great respect for the gift of celibacy. Speaking of the gift Chris says, "Celibacy gives you time and capacity. I am totally available to serve and give to people. At 'House of Miracles' people from the estate come round at all hours, knocking on the door, as they know we'll help them. These people are part of our everyday life; they are on our door step. We often try to meet their practical needs such as helping them move house and making up food parcels. I am involved with looking after a group of young lads from the area roundabout."

Chris's final comments were: "We can't be anything other than what we are, before or after becoming celibate. We are all human. I always think, 'enjoy your humanity and let God work through it.' Our personality does not change after becoming celibate! We need to embrace what we are and through it help others! Yes, there are trials and testings but I'm very glad I'm a celibate. I am looking forward to the future to see the gift develop more!"



QUOTE

"One of the joys of celibacy is the opportunity to express love and friendship over a greater range of relationships, rather than focussing on a partner and children – perhaps like the difference between wide angle and zoom lens photography. Celibate people can be open to receive love from a wider range of sources – to be celibate is not to be unloved."

Celebrating Celibacy (Grove Books 2007) - Stephanie Couvela

"The celibate person has chosen the single life as the best option for the fulfilment of a personal calling."

Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective (1990) - S.Grenz

"Is singleness a gift or a handicap? If it is a gift, then the church needs to rejoice in this feature of life, given by God somehow to build up the body of Christ. If singleness is a handicap, because it does not allow the individual to enter the deepest possible relationship with one other person, then that raises interesting questions about Jesus."

Singled Out or One in the Body? (Grove Books 2001) - Lakshmi Deshpande

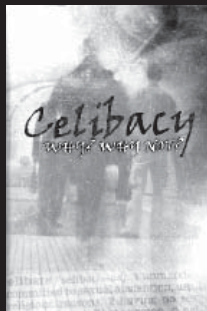
FEEDBACK

We are always pleased to hear from any who read 'Undivided' and will always try to answer any questions directed to the Editor. Address correspondence to: The Editor, Undivided, Jesus Fellowship Central Offices, Nether Heyford, Northants NN7 3LB or email: huw.lewis@jesus.org.uk



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Have a look



The video, 'Why? Why Not?' Six men and women speak about what it means for them to have chosen to be celibate for God and the path that led them to make that decision.

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Seven Silver Rings



NEW SEVEN SILVER RINGS OUT NOW!

An updated and enlarged Seven Silver Rings has been published. This includes new chapters on the history and biblical background to Celibacy as well as answering some of those frequently asked questions about living single for Jesus. Comprehensive and challenging, it sets out to show how a radical lifestyle of undivided love for Jesus and His church

is possible in the 21st century. This voluntary choice is far removed from the institutional forms of celibacy.