

# For as long as I can remember ...



It is sometimes said that there are people who carry within them something that is not quite definable or tangible but is desirable, something that has the effect of drawing others to them. It would be a matter of great joy to be able to say that this could be said of

everyone who would call themselves a Christian; that they have this inner something that others recognise in some way. Sadly, we cannot say that. There are many people associated with all sorts of churches for whom this just isn't true at all and we could reasonably question the extent to which they

are in fact Christian people. That includes some who put on the finest purple robes and others who wear the clerical collar to distinguish themselves as being clergy. Involvement with a church does not define a Christian. Having that 'something about them' value is a much greater indication of who and what a person is.

In meeting Lynn Firth we are quickly comforted to be in the presence of someone who has precisely that quality, and we are at ease. As we get to know Lynn we discover a woman of great peace who has endured substantial and painful losses within her adult life, both of the expected and tragically unexpected variety, but who retains that 'something else'.

"I have, for as long as I can remember always known that Jesus was in my life. At the age of three I wanted to go to church with my grandmother. She didn't want to take me. She didn't want a naughty child disrupting the service, so she got a friend to take me. I used to go to the Co-op church in Swindon. It was the Co-op Society and the staff used to hold a meeting above the shop every Sunday."

Lynn's parents had no inclination of a spiritual kind. The child was simply not following in her parent's footsteps. Her grandmother attended an Anglican high church, wherein today we may find many who practise the form of religion, but she had no inclination to take her granddaughter along with her, perhaps recognising that this would not be a suitable environment in which to introduce a small child. We wonder how does a child of three years come to a position of wanting to be taken to church, and perhaps an even greater question would be how does the adult remember these things?

"It was so wonderful. I was just in awe of going to this church and hearing about Jesus." Lynn recalls that she spent time with her grandmother but not as much as we could perhaps assume. She did however spend more time with her grandfather, a Methodist believer who had spoken with her about Jesus, and who had purchased for her a bible. "I've still got that bible. It's falling apart, there's not much left of it, but I've still got that." This was a precious gift indeed to a child

whom to some extent was following the lead of her grandparents rather than that of her parents.

It is common for a young child to express a desire to do a particular thing or go to a particular place. They are taken, and perhaps they go again, but sooner rather than later, the novelty wears away and all is duly forgotten about. Not so for Lynn. The friend of Lynn's grandmother continued to take the child to church with her on Sundays, and the child continued to go until this dutiful woman stopped taking her, for reasons that are not known. By this time, Lynn was of an age where she was able to attend church with friends, and went with them to another fellowship. "I always seemed to be able to go to church."

"When I was about nine, I went to the Bethesda church in Swindon, and at Sunday school we were all asked why we believe or what was Jesus, and I just remember thinking 'I know who Jesus is, I know he is in my life, I know I love him, and I know he forgives me if I do things wrong'. The following week I dragged all my siblings along to save their souls." Lynn chuckles at the memory of taking them along in the hope that they would see that which she could see.

"After that, it just grew, and it's still growing. I don't think we ever know or understand fully what it is to have the Lord completely in our lives. It just grows and grows." It did not grow in Lynn's younger brothers or sisters, but at the age of nine this nigh on veteran churchgoer had crossed an indefinable line and had become a Christian. She has remained as one ever since.

There is a question that we can offer to anyone who declares a particular faith or a particular belief, whatever it might be. We can ask them how they know it to be actually true. In our day and age we continue to witness a major growth in the belief that all around us, including us, has evolved without and input or contribution from an external creative force. In fact, the view is often expressed that people with intelligence no longer accept the likelihood that there is or may be a creative being. It is startling to see so many people accepting such a statement as that without question, when it is simply not factually

correct. There are indeed a great number of highly intelligent academics and members of the scientific community who conclude through logical deduction that there has to be a creative force behind all of this. Upon asking a believer in the theory of evolution to relate the reason for their belief, we so often hear nothing by way of a real answer. "Because they found fossils and know how old they are, millions of years old," can be a favoured response, but surely that only proves that someone has indeed found some old bones or an impression left in a rock, and this find has been subjected to a carbon dating system that assesses it in a certain manner. In a manner which is itself built upon assumptions not proven to be scientifically correct. Let us be careful that we do not so easily and thoughtlessly follow the crowd.

Upon considering how she herself knows that what she believes is the truth, Lynn's response is entirely valid. "I know in my heart. I know that Jesus loves what he created, what God created. I know that there is no doubt that he is there and that he loves me, as much as that is hard to believe. I know that through what has happened in my life, that he is there." Here we have not a reply that is the result of empirical testing. We cannot ask Lynn to be able to prove beyond all and any reasonable doubt that God exists and that she is connected to Him, but equally we cannot easily discount the value of her experience. To be able to say 'I know in my heart' implies a depth of contact and understanding that goes beyond any simple act of cognition. There is something spiritual going on here, and that is especially evident when you are in the presence of Lynn. As human beings we may not understand it, but as intelligent beings we ought not to discount it.

The 'I know' expressed by Lynn today is very different to that expressed by the nine year old Sunday school child in Swindon so many years ago. "Whatever happens to me in my life, I know that the Lord is there. I'm saved from having to go through my life without Him. There's no way, with what has happened in my life, that I would have done it without having the Lord there. I know He has been there. He has always been there with me. When you're feeling totally lost, who do you reach out to? If you don't believe, just pray. That's where it all starts. You need to reach out. Once you have started to reach out,

He does answer.” Lynn hints of times in which she has found strength, comfort, and the will to go on from only one source.

Lynn is perhaps unusual in that she cannot really reflect upon a time when she had no belief. Most of us can do that to some extent, ranging from those who have always had and still have no belief (in so far as it is possible to ‘have’ a nothing) to those who have been transformed in their lives but can well remember how it was before. “I can’t even imagine that,” Lynn tells us. “Its something I can’t even take on board. What that would be like? Except it would be really empty. I would be incomplete.” Lynn’s faith is worth much more than anything and everything that she sees in the possession of others. “My sister is married to a millionaire and I don’t envy her one little bit. I see her with all her material things, with all the cruises and everything she’s got, and I don’t think she’s happy. She wants more and more. She’s not satisfied with what she’s got.” This is quite a statement from a woman living in a mobile home, albeit a beautifully located one. Would Lynn swap her faith for the type of riches esteemed by human beings? Not a chance!

So what is it that gives that faith such value to her? “The peace that you get from it,” she tells us. Lynn comes across as a peace-filled person, and that is maybe not quite the same thing as a peaceful person. “For me, it’s having an inner feeling,” she continues. “When everything around you is just buzzing and coming at you, simple things like the noise in town, if you can just step back.” Like a place of refuge. “It’s somewhere to go when you’re hurting, when you have problems. Being able to sit, just in that moment, in that stillness. Letting that stillness become you. It just sorts things out.” Lynn’s place of refuge is accessible to her at any time. “Come and sit,” she invites, “let the peace come over you, let your mind go, and be still.” Is this not a thing so valuable that we might sell all that we have in order to purchase it, if indeed it could be purchased?

Lynn describes a relationship with Christ that goes far beyond the mental act of believing that He is. She describes a connection that has an almost childlike aspect to it. “My best friend, my father, my comforter, but also in my faith I know that believing in Christ isn’t a

talisman. It's not a protector to keep you from anything hurting you or harming you, but it's having the Lord there to call on and to be with you through every aspect of your life. When you're happy, sad, when you're in need. In the good times He's there and walking beside you. In the bad times He does carry you." This lady is very much aware of the reality that her faith and belief in God does not come with a guarantee that all will always be well.

She tells of a life that was ticking along nicely until the year 2006. "I had two sons, I had a nice house, and I had a lovely husband. Everything was going along fine, and then Roger, my husband, had to go in (to hospital) and have a heart valve replacement. That was done in January 2006, and although the operation went smoothly, he wasn't well afterwards. We didn't know if his body was rejecting the new valve or anything worse, but he didn't really recover fully." Lynn and Roger were both Christian believers and ran a business at the time. "In April he woke up one morning and his breathing wasn't brilliant. We went to the doctor and from there we were sent straight to the hospital in Cheltenham. They did some tests, and found out that he had caught pneumonia. The hospital gave him antibiotics but he became a lot worse and he was transferred to a special unit. They tried to boost the breathing with a liquid oxygen mask, but that didn't work. He was put into an induced coma and we learned that he had double pneumonia. His lungs began to solidify. They brought him round from the coma and did a tracheotomy but he still wasn't really breathing. Then they put him back into the coma. They put him on a bed that rocked continuously from side to side to try and help him to breathe and stop his lungs from solidifying. During that time, that whole time, the Lord was with me. I also knew that I only had to pick up the phone and my Minister would come, or I could call friends from church and they would come." Never alone! Never.

Roger's illness did not abate and his condition continued to worsen. The memory is not an easy one for Lynn to recall. Her voice wavers. "They wanted to switch off the machine. They said there was nothing more they could do. I just didn't feel it was right. I wanted my sons to be there. I called Justin, who lived in Cornwall, and he came straightaway, but we couldn't find Nathan anywhere. We knew he was

doing a roofing job somewhere but we didn't know where. We had the police out looking for him. By the time Nathan came in, Roger's blood count and everything had changed (for the better) so they decided to carry on with the treatment."

Any hopes or thoughts of a recovery were nonetheless short lived, as Roger remained gravely ill. Like many before her, and many more to come, Lynn came to more or less live at the hospital for a while. "One night he was really ill and they said I could stay at the hospital. I was in this room on my own. I had been sitting with Roger as long as I could. I remember sitting on this bed in this room feeling so lonely and so afraid when there was a tap at the window." In the middle of the night, Lynn's friends had arrived. Finding some difficulty in getting onto the ward they had found a way through the operating theatre area. "They had felt that I needed them." Lonely, but never alone!

A week later Roger's condition worsened still. At Lynn's request, their minister came along after church on Sunday to bring communion for Roger. "The whole ward just went so quiet. There was an Asian family there. I had got to know them. We used to sit outside praying. As we started communion there was a man there (in hospital) with his wife visiting him. I felt the Lord say 'go and ask her,' so I asked her if she wanted to come for communion. She said that she would love to but that she hadn't been confirmed. She had never taken communion. I remember saying to her, 'if you love the Lord you are so welcome to come and join us'. She again said that she hadn't been confirmed. My minister went and spoke to her. She told him, 'I have never been confirmed'. He said, "nor have I." So she came and joined us. We stopped the bed for a while so we could give Roger communion. This woman began to hug everybody afterwards. It was such a wonderful moment. Even in that situation the Lord was there." Bringing beauty from ashes!

Lynn continues, "a few days later, I had Justin and Nathan with me when the surgeon called us in and said 'there is nothing more we can do'. The medical staff asked for permission to turn off the machines. "Once again, I sat in the stillness. I just couldn't imagine Roger being in a wheelchair with some kind of a permanent oxygen mask. I just

thought 'if this is what the Lord wants then'. I phoned Roger's brother and called him to come in. I went in with the surgeon. I didn't want them to do it without me being there with him. I sat with Roger as they switched off the machines. I phoned our minister and he came straight to me. They told me it would happen but it would take four or five hours. We sat with Roger praying and reading the bible. It only took half an hour. I knew, I knew exactly when his soul had left his body. What I was looking at now wasn't my husband."

People will say that with time, it gets easier. Lynn will tell you that this is not the case at all. It may become more bearable, but it doesn't become easier. As we will see, she ought to know.

In time, Lynn met and later married John Firth. Two people, both having lost their spouse well before time. Neither of them had expected it to happen at that time of their lives, and both of them had lived through an experience defined by emotional trauma. Two people who shared a common faith, who were in a process of recovery, but who would have had nothing in common only a matter of months earlier, and probably would have passed one another by with little more than a customary glance.

Lynn's meeting with John is recorded in his testimony where it presents evidence of the significant conspiratorial match making skills of their mutual friends Pete and Mary.

In earthly terms, Lynn declares without hesitation that there have been high points in her life; those moments and experiences that stand out from relative normality. "Having my two children and having two amazing husbands in Roger and now John," she declares with gratitude rather than pride. As we know, Lynn and Roger were blessed with two boys, Nathan, a roofer living in and around the Swindon area, and Justin who had relocated to Cornwall.

When looking at some of those aspects of life that may disappoint us Lynn is mindful of her struggle on behalf of her close family. She is concerned for their spiritual well being as they would seem on the face of it to be bereft of any kind of faith in anything other than those things



that can be seen right in front of them. Temporary things. Surprisingly, Lynn struggles to tell people about Jesus, not because she is shy or reluctant, but because for her it's so obvious. "How can they not see it?" she asks. It is as if others are blind to the blindingly obvious. It can perhaps be difficult to know how to explain something that you have never been without to someone who has no understanding of it at all. There is a lesson here for modern churches wherein they all too often emphasise the concept of family and family life. The term 'church family' is regularly used, and it is a wonderful thing to focus upon, but we must ask how does that seem to those, and there are many of them, who have no experience of a family to relate to? We speak enthusiastically to people of things that have no meaning to them and if we are not careful, they can easily become marginalised and isolated.

Lynn remembers her concern for her dying father as the duration of his life drew to the inevitable close. As he effectively waited in hospital for that which must come to every single one of us, Lynn purchased a bible for him, even though he had never owned one nor shown any interest in the story it tells within it's pages. A man who had been content for his three year old daughter to be taken to church by a family friend in preference to taking her himself. In the front of this bible Lynn wrote the words, 'listen for the voice'. Words that are there for all of us to take note of.

"He was so scared, so frightened," Lynn recalls. "I sat and read to him from the bible. I guess that was for my peace as well as his. I know that gave my dad some peace." Let us stop for a moment and consider something that arises from the memory of the last days of this man. Why would a man who confesses no belief of anything beyond this life have a fear of death? That wouldn't make any sense would it? We can well understand why one might want to avoid death, especially if we believe ourselves to be equipped with the instinct to stay alive. However, we have the ability to rationalise and would therefore surely know that we cannot stay alive. There may be some anxiety. That would be understandable for us, but fear would serve no purpose in the face of the inevitable. So why is it there? What is it that Lynn's father was so frightened of? That is a question to ask yourself, is it not?

Lynn continues on the subject of concern for her family, “I really want my son to believe.” She uses the term ‘son’, in the singular tense.

Lynn has told us of those high points in her life. We already know of the deeply felt loss of her first husband and could be forgiven for thinking that this would be remembered as the lowest moment in Lynn’s life. Alas, it is not so.

“I used to call Nathan every Tuesday to get a shopping list from him, for his weekly shop. On a Friday I used to go in and do all his paperwork with him. It was 6<sup>th</sup> December in 2011. It was a Tuesday. Christmas was coming. Nathan used to look after a couple of his friend’s children if they were going off somewhere or going out to work, so he used to stock his cupboard up with bits of chocolate and little treats for the children. This Tuesday, I phoned him up asking for his shopping list and it was one of the longest shopping lists he’d ever given me. It just seemed to go on and on. I remember asking him ‘are you sure you want all of this?’ He said, ‘of course, I get hungry’, and laughed. So I went to the shop and got everything, then took it to his home in Fairford. He wasn’t there, so I phoned him up. He was just coming home. He arrived and gave me his usual big hug, and said he loved me. We went into the house and checked the post to make sure there was nothing I needed to deal with, because of Nathan’s short-term memory, this is why I did it. We talked and laughed and put the shopping away. We joked about the fact that the cupboards were absolutely stacked and we couldn’t get another thing in there. We had a short talk like we normally did. He said he was tired and fed up with not having any work; not being allowed to work. He wished it would sort itself out, but otherwise he was as usual. He gave me a hug and said ‘I’ll see you on Friday,’ then I got in the car and drove home. It was just an ordinary evening. Nothing special. We went to bed, and then at about half past eleven Justin phoned me to say ‘Mom, I’ve had Nathan on the phone, talking about suicide and about ending everything. He wanted to tell me he loved me and what he would like played at his funeral. We quickly got up. I phoned Nathan’s friend who lived just around the corner from him. I left a message for him. Not really sure what to do. We got in the car and started to drive. I phoned the police from the car to tell them what we suspected might be happening. We

got to the house. We couldn't get in the front door. That was locked, which Nathan didn't normally do. We looked through the letterbox. We could see him sat on the stairs. We could just see his feet through the letterbox. I shouted to call him. I kept on calling him as John had a look and said 'we've got to get in'. So we went round the back and tried to get over the fence. It must have looked really odd. Two older people trying to climb a fence isn't good. We couldn't do it. There was no way. Just as we were going back to the front a young ambulance woman arrived. She just leapt over the fence. The back door was open and she went in. We went round to the front. The young woman opened the front door. She said 'no, you can't come in!' It seemed to spiral. It was a horrible feeling of not being in control of what was going on. The other ambulance people went in. A policeman arrived soon after the ambulance people had gone in, and it was he who confirmed that Nathan had died." Lynn fainted instantly, and was quickly caught by the observant police officer. As she came round, Lynn and John were taken to sit in the ambulance. "They asked if there was anywhere we could go at that time. They didn't want us to go back to Cheltenham but wanted us to go somewhere that they could drop us off and then come and see us. The only people I could think of were friends from church. The police took us to Jane and Kevin's house. It took a lot of knocking on the door. It was Kevin that came down. The police explained what had happened. They took us in and gave us a hot drink and a big hug. I phoned Justin to tell him just to take his time because he had said he was on his way when he phoned me. Jane made us go and lay down until Justin arrived. I can still see Justin walking through that door right now, almost wishing that what he knew were not true. It was easy for me to comfort him then, because I had something to focus on, but what was going through my mind as well was that John had to go through this all over again. We went home. We didn't see anyone else. It was very early in the morning so we didn't phone anyone. We waited. I remember having to phone my Mom, then Pete and Mary, our best friends. They were with us within the hour. Kevin, Nathan's best friend who I had phoned earlier had picked up my message just before he was going to work. I had to tell him what had happened. He came straight over to Cheltenham. I had to phone all of Nathan's friends. He had so many. It was just disbelief from everybody. I just had this numb feeling. James, the Minister from Fairford came

over and sat with us. My Mom came over. It was just that feeling of total loss. What do I do now? Why didn't I see what was happening? Why didn't I see that he was upset? And yet, knowing that he was at peace. Something he hadn't had for a while. All the things you have to deal with at that time, when all you want to do is to sit in the corner and just make the world stop, and not have to do anything or speak to anybody or say nice pleasantries. Pete and Mary were very practical. The coroner called up. We had to organise for a funeral director to take Nathan to the morgue. That was something you have to think about at that time, but its something you just don't want to have to do. I had kept in touch with the funeral director that had done Roger's funeral. We sent Christmas cards to one another. I don't suppose many people do that do they? We had kept in touch. I phoned him. He just said 'I'll deal with it.' God's mercy and grace was there in something as mundane as that, without having to think about how you're going to deal with these things. Lots of phone calls. I remember people calling. Jane called all the church members in Fairford to let them know, but I called Rosie, also from church. She was just going into ministry. She wasn't home but I spoke with her son Robert, who was just amazing. He managed to say all of the right things without knowing it. There was that comfort of knowing that the Lord was there, speaking through him. The day never seems to end. It just goes on and on, and your mind is just whirling the whole time with questions. Then everybody went home, and it was time to be on our own. It sounds strange, but to just sit on your own and find that inner peace. You know He is there. Through all that turmoil. You could just sit there and almost give in to it."

"We will never know why. Only Nathan knows that, but we know that he is at peace. I struggled when Nathan died, because I didn't know where he was." It was Nathan's spiritual status that was now of the greatest concern.

Nathan had taken his life. The loss of a child, something that is dreaded by every reasonable parent. It makes no difference whether the child is an adult or not. Even those of us who acknowledge the great

uncertainties of life would hope that our time of departure from this earthly domain comes before that of our children.

Lynn and John bore the heavy burden of loss, as a couple should do. "I remember praying hard even though he had died. Please don't give up on him Lord."

The time came for Lynn and John to go and clean out and empty Nathan's house. If you have never had the task of removing the presence of a person who was close to you from the home in which they have lived then you have thus far been spared from something that you really do not ever want to do. It is painful. There are memories in there. There are reminders in there. There are secrets in there that you may not want to find. The entire experience can leave a bittersweet taste that stays with you long after the event itself. "We found a cross somewhere in every room of his house. On the bedside cabinet he had written out the well-known words of the poem by Verna Mae Thomas. This poem:

I carry a cross in my pocket  
A simple reminder to me  
Of the fact that I am a Christian  
No matter where I may be.

This little cross is not magic,  
Nor is it a good luck charm  
It isn't meant to protect me  
From every physical harm.

It's not for identification  
For all the world to see  
It's simply an understanding  
Between my Savior and me.

When I put my hand in my pocket  
To bring out a coin or a key  
The cross is there to remind me  
Of the price He paid for me.

It reminds me, too, to be thankful  
For my blessings day by day  
And to strive to serve Him better  
In all that I do and say.

It's also a daily reminder  
Of the peace and comfort I share  
With all who know my Master  
And give themselves to His care.

So, I carry a cross in my pocket  
Reminding no one but me  
That Jesus Christ is the Lord of my life  
If only I'll let Him be.

“He may not have told me but the Lord showed me.” The relief in Lynn’s voice can be clearly distinguished as she remembers the “peace that came over me at that moment.” Beauty from ashes once again.

Lynn’s husband John now carries the poem around with him each and every day.

Lynn has been blessed with much in her life. She has also blessed many others and continues to do so through her work in both the UK and Cambodia. She has also lost much, and has learned the hard way that we ought not to ‘plan a future’ in the way that so many people do, but that we should live for and in this day, being careful to do so responsibly.

In amongst such loss there remains one thing that Lynn has most surely retained. She has a treasured gift that has given greater light in the good times whilst bringing strength and comfort in the midst of deep and enduring heartache. Peace. The Bible refers to a peace that passes all understanding. Lynn has access to this peace. It sustains her. It covers her. It keeps her safe in the knowledge that whilst others may indeed fear this thing called death, it has no hold of any kind over her.

Lynn also knows what to do in the awful event that you may find yourself trying to support someone who is in the midst of experiencing

great loss through suicide. She tells us, “Sit and hold their hand. Don’t say ‘those words’. They don’t mean anything. Just be with them. They don’t want to be left on their own. Be with them, and pray with them.”

In 2020 Lynn can be regularly found at the small but intimate Harbour Mission building based in the harbour of Newquay, Cornwall. It’s right next door to the RNLi shop. There is peace to be found there. Come and sit for a while.