

Robin Fisher describes his journey to faith, medicine and mission



CAUGHT UNAWARES

key points

At 25 Robin was awaiting a new army assignment, when a friend invited him to a Christian event.

With only two A levels and no science qualifications, medicine seemed out of the question, but God seemed to have other plans.

His career has taken him across continents and has opened doors, giving Robin opportunities to practise medicine and share faith in numerous contexts.

I was an army officer and enjoying every minute of it. The travel, the life style, and the sense of being involved in something that mattered. I had just arrived back from two years in Berlin, at that time the flashpoint of East-West politics. 'Guarding the free world from communism' seemed a worthwhile job, even if I was only a lowly platoon commander.

I arrived in my regiment's depot in Winchester for a new assignment. Brian, an old school acquaintance was also stationed there. He asked me if I would like to go to a meeting where there would be a 'Christian talk'. 'Fine', I thought. I was new in town, needed to make friends, and here was a really friendly face. The Christian bit could gently wash over my head; I could cope with that.

Brought up in a culturally 'Christian' home, I had been quietly indoctrinated into English Christianity. All true doubtless, but rather 'out there'. As I grew up I let its influence slip off like an old coat.

Battle

The ballroom of the Kensington Palace Hotel was where the Stewards' Trust, a group of London Christians, held their meetings. My friend Brian assures me that a worthy, but not particularly exciting Gospel talk took place. I remember none of it, except, curiously enough, the word 'Abraham'. I was aware only of a furious battle that had suddenly broken out in my head. 'I am here

and I will not pass your way again' I seemed to hear. God had suddenly come round the corner and we had met face to face. I was terrified.

At the break for coffee I was conscious that there was a long drive back and it was already late. I was desperate to stay for what the speaker said was the short bit for people who wanted to know how to become a Christian. More furious conflict; at the end of this 15 minute talk I just had go up to the speaker and say 'I have become a Christian', whatever that meant.

On the way home I was conscious that life had already changed. A brief 45 minutes with our local vicar the next day, and it began to make sense. I took my first steps towards understanding the extraordinary thing that God had done for me in Christ; the thing that I have been trying to understand and appreciate all my life.

Two days later my deep experience of Christ was sealed by my complete release from smoking, something I had struggled with for two years. Lighting a cigarette after lunch just to say goodbye, I heard with the utmost clarity 'Put it out!' I did, and it stayed out.

But life became difficult. New challenges at work were demanding. It took me a long time to come out as an open Christian, and the conversion of my life style was a long time coming. But, difficult as life was, Jesus was present to me in a way that was palpable. The idea of mission in his service became the core part of my experience of him.

Long term?

Two years later, and now 27 years old, I was in Sharjah, in what were then the Trucial States, now the Emirates. Fun and exciting though it was, I knew that I was not really an army officer at heart, and it seemed incompatible with married life. Anna and I had been married for only a few months and here I was, in the middle of a desert, loving it and wishing with all my heart I could share it with her. I realised that long term, the Army was not for me. But what was? What did the Lord want for the two of us? And where did 'mission' come in?

I was caught unawares by the sudden and, this time, completely silent conviction that medicine was the direction that I should be taking. Caught unawares and shocked because it was actually impossible. Medicine required three A levels in science subjects. I had not even a single GCE science O level. Actually I could muster two arts A levels, the rock bottom requirement for university entrance.

Impossible too, because of geography. I was miles into the desert, working as a Desert Intelligence Officer (DIO). Communication was by flimsy blue airmail forms and took many days to arrive. How could I find out about university entrance, ask advice, discuss it with Anna, send in forms? It was March, and as far as I could see, UCCA forms had to have been in by October the previous year. 'OK' I said to myself. 'Next year. I could leave the Army, go to a technical college, do A levels and go to university the year after.' Then the silent sudden conviction. 'No. Not next year. This year. This October.' It was ludicrous. And impossible because three years at university was one thing; six years was quite another. How would we eat, start a family, what would our families think? Impossible because the Trucial Oman Scouts, the Foreign Office-run force with which I was working, decided unilaterally to extend my contract until the end of the year. Impossible too because, however convinced I myself was, what about Anna? If this really was from God, then God would have to speak directly to her.

Medical school

In June a letter arrived from Bristol University Medical School. 'We have a policy of accepting mature students. Please attend for an interview.' This was progress, but, how was I to escape from the Arabian desert to attend an interview in Bristol? And how was I to pay for the flight? My exasperated superiors gave me a week to make the round trip. An income tax rebate met the cost practically to the nearest penny. There was one seat left on the BOAC jet and I scrambled on board. At Heathrow I met Anna at the arrivals gate. Wonderfully, God had spoken to her and we were at one.

The interview took place in a room that, oddly, was almost full of stacked chairs. The dean was, I think, a little shocked that my application was the result of a sudden decision taken three months

previously. But he took me very seriously. 'Would you like to ask us anything?' he asked smiling at the end of our absurdly brief talk. 'I need to know your decision now' I said, 'because if it is "yes", I have to go right away and tell my regiment that I am leaving'.

It was 'yes'. 'It's sink or swim' he said with the same smile. 'Pass the exams or you're out.' Back in the Gulf they agreed to release me just before the university term started. But only just. On Friday afternoon I took off from Sharjah as an army officer. On Monday morning I attended my first lecture as a medical student. What was my friend Brian's response? Robin at medical school? It's got to be a miracle!

Open doors

After this I never for one moment could believe that I 'owned' my medical qualification or the future that came with it. I was to learn that a medical degree was the key to opening doors for Christ in a multitude of cultures and places. I started TB work at Mafraq hospital in Jordan because its slowness and predictability allowed us to spend extended time with our patients. I learned there that in-depth evangelism can go hand in hand with state of the art medical care. Primary health care was a passport into Southern Sudan. General practice in Sparkbrook, Birmingham gave us an open door into the Muslim community there, and I learned that there is a choice to be made between making lots of money and godly Christian medical care. We experienced at first hand a God who loves to answer prayer for those who do not know him. In every case it has been what needed doing, rather than what we would have chosen. But it is an honourable and useful job as well as a passport and meal ticket. It is joy and fun as well as hard work.

But I never thought that God would use medicine to take us and the family to a mountain top in Yemen, the dust of Port Sudan, the humidity of Juba or the delights of a Kurdish restaurant in Sheffield. I never thought that the doors opened by medicine would have led to our starting a theological college, or my being ordained in the Sudanese Episcopal Church. I never thought that he would give us so many dear friends in so many strange places. Above all, I've had so many experiences of God and so many proofs of his extraordinary love and power, and of his sense of humour too.

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