

HEROES + HERETICS

Rebecca Horton describes a missionary to the 'Walled City'

HERO + HERETIC 22: Jackie Pullinger: An unqualified hero

'If I were you I would go out and buy a ticket for a boat going on the longest journey you can find and pray to know where to get off. If God doesn't want you on that boat he is perfectly able to stop you... or make the ship go anywhere in the world.'

Jackie's minister in London.¹

I wonder what we would say if one of our friends decided to do just this - set off unprepared to an unknown destination, assured that God would lead them. Reckless? Entitled? Misinformed? But called...? I'd be tempted to brush off their insistence that God was leading them and talk about how Scripture is sufficient, that we just can't expect guidance like that anymore. It sounds totally crazy, completely unbelievable, outrageously unwise: but there is no denying the good work that 22-year-old Jackie set out to do.

Jackie first describes wanting to be a missionary on hearing someone speak at her church as a child. This idea remained in her mind throughout her schooling, only fading as she progressed through music college and life as a teacher. Having dismissed any talk of a God who saves as 'mass emotion' in her teens, it is on attending a talk at a London flat that Jackie realised what Jesus actually came to do. And in that London flat our story begins.

Single, young and with a *'whole life to give'*, the



Jackie Pullinger

missionary idea resurfaced. She wrote to schools, societies, broadcasting companies in Africa. They all rejected her offer - what could a music teacher in her twenties possibly give? But she continued undeterred. Growing increasingly convinced that mission abroad was her calling, she cast around for signs.

Seeing a map of Hong Kong in a dream, she set off on that slow boat to China without any particular plan. In an NHS climate of careful resource allocation, planning, and cost-

benefit analysis, this still does not seem like a wise decision. But when we remember every human is made in the image of God... 'You could go all around the world to talk to one sailor about Christ' makes a bit more sense. The words 'You can't lose' encourage her as she sets sail.

a relational message from a relational God

'We loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.' (1 Thessalonians 2:8)

The venue for most of Jackie's ministry was inside the Walled City. Its walls have long come down, but in the 1960s it was unpoliced, rife with gangs, unwelcoming to strangers. It was a dangerous place to go; she was told they usually got rid of missionaries within six months.

The teenagers didn't care how many activities were put on, how many meals they were fed: 'What we want to know is if you are concerned for us'. Isn't this the same for our teenagers in the UK? Jesus showed a deeply personal, intimate love for his people. Jackie challenges us in that actually: this is what we should give people first. The teenagers of the Walled City concluded that 'either the British

Government sent you here as a spy, or what you say about Jesus is true'. They could see no other reason why someone would give their life to them.

She tells stories of this Jesus who ate with outcasts. Spotting a boy from her youth group in the street, she makes him pause by enlisting his help with her heavy accordion. Christopher says he gave up trying to be a Christian because Jesus likes good people. 'Do you know, if Jesus were alive today, he'd be here in the walled city sitting on the orange boxes talking to the pimps and the prostitutes down there in the mud.' The story rings more true than any theology; by that dusty, noisy roadside, Christopher became a Christian.

Jackie constantly reminds herself that her God died for her whilst she hated him. How else could she keep going when her youth club was trashed, nobody seemed to appreciate her, she was left alone? 'Praise God, Praise God' she mutters tearfully, sweeping up the mess. 'Praise God, Praise God' as she sobs and wants her enemies to suffer too. 'I did not feel like rejoicing or turning the other cheek.' Incredibly, the work she is doing is noticed by the main triad (gang) leader, Goko. 'You care for my brothers...' he makes it his business to protect her. He sent her guards night after night, even



Kowloon: The Walled City

when the guards became Christians, and consequently, rubbish fighters. This happened so often that gangs ended up needing to borrow fighters, as all of their men were either addicted to heroin or following Christ.

come and die

Maria was in debt and had no way to pay it off. The loan shark demanded she become a 'snake' – a prostitute under his

control – for two years, whilst all her earnings go to him. She had wanted to follow Christ in the past, had been helped out of the situation but found herself stuck in it again.

Jackie thought 'I had no intention of paying money to a girl who was not serious about changing her life'. But she went to see what she could do. On the way, she remembered her oboe: 'Like all oboists, I regarded it as a personal friend – handpicked and almost irreplaceable.' But someone who knew nothing of this had an interpretation of a message in tongues: 'The Lord Jesus Christ gave up his most precious possession for you, even his very life. Why do you store up treasures on earth? You should rather store up treasure in heaven'. Jackie knew what her decision needed to be.

The loan shark plays her argument back to her: 'Don't think she is going to change her life or be grateful to you in any way'. But now she has remembered what following Jesus means: 'He never said he would die for me only if I changed'. She answers Jesus' call: come and die.

addiction: purely spiritual?

'Only Jesus, the Lord of life, can settle a man's heart and take away that craving.'

lessons from Jackie's life

- God can use you (yes, you!) in your city, no matter your lack of worldly qualification.
- God really can and will provide for his people today - practically.
- Showing the person of Jesus is usually more compelling than reasoned theology.
- The gospel is a relational message from a relational God: this profoundly affects how we share it.
- Christ's love for you is unreasonable. Nothing you do can change it - this should be the pattern of how we treat others.

Pullinger is perhaps most famous for her ministry to addicts. This was never her specific intention. It started off informally, inviting those addicted into her house as a safe place to withdraw. She was insistent that, even if release from physical dependence could be gained by (consensually!) locking someone in a room for a week, unless some new purpose captured their heart they would go out and take the drug again. Indeed, she saw many young men turn back to Christ and have a lasting release from drug addiction. Her ministry was not without mistakes, at first believing that 'this experience [healing from addiction] should be possible for others if they were converted and filled with God's power'.

She doesn't offer answers as to why the miracle was not always repeated, but gives us an example of trusting God even when we don't understand. The controversy came when methadone was offered - and they decided to try without it. I'm not sure what to make of that. Some claimed that faith was simply a distraction, but Jackie remarked that anyone who said the work was simply mind over matter had not seen someone come off heroin before.

There were some extraordinary stories which challenged me and raised questions about the role of tongues and miraculous healing. In fact, a large part of the ministry involved praying in tongues. She tells a woman on conversion 'the Lord will also give you power to help you pray and this power will stay with you and teach you everything'. Although this does not necessarily mean speaking in tongues, this seems to be the pattern for all whom she led to Christ. I don't think Jackie would say that all Christians must speak in tongues: but she does argue against seeing spiritual gifts as an optional extra.

in all the streets and all the blocks

'Where can you find us if you visit Hong Kong? Hopefully in all the streets and all the blocks.'

Most of this article is based on her book *Chasing*

the Dragon, which spans about 20 years. Since then the walls of the city have come down, but Jackie (now aged 77) remains there. St Stephen's Society for drug withdrawal remains and continues to see miraculous results. Jackie is clear that it isn't a building or a specific ministry she wants to remain there; rather the relational love of Jesus permeating that city.

What can we learn? What struck me most about Jackie's ministry was the truly relational, self-sacrificial love she showed for the people of the Walled City. It's so easy to go into something with these intentions... and then have the people we are called to love turn into a statistic. I'm sure we have all seen this often on the wards. Jackie shows us how she walked alongside them, knowing she had found the treasure that is worth selling everything for (even your oboe!). She left London knowing God would make good his word of giving her more brothers and sisters, and really did treat the new converts like her family. And as she lives and works and worships in that city, she reminds them, herself, and us of the 'unreasonable' love Christ has for his people. ■

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REF

1. Pullinger J, Quicke A. *Chasing the Dragon*. Revised edition, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2006