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BRENTON RAGLESS:

A time, a place and a purpose

Giving something away can
help us find ourselves

by Wendy Rush

Finding Jesus in the Christmas frenzy by John Beasy

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Brenton and Hayley Ragless



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Brenton and his father Leigh Ragless with Leigh's vintage 1961 fire engine

Moving from weather presenter to the Channel Nine news desk earlier this year was yet another stage in a journey that Brenton Ragless sometimes likens to an episode of Mr Squiggle. Rise talks to him about his career, his life, his faith and what the future may hold.

By Wendy Rush.

BRENTON RAGLESS:

A time, a place and a purpose

Weather – or not?

When Brenton Ragless finished year twelve at Blackwood High School he had no clear career path in mind and television was not 'on his radar'. Twenty years later, while he loves what he does, he concedes that he has no idea where the next twenty years will take him. Paraphrasing John Lennon, he says "life is what happens when you're wondering what to do!"

Brenton initially pursued a career in tourism, studying at TAFE and even becoming a bus driver and tour guide. Growing up, his father was a volunteer firefighter with the Eden Hills Country Fire Service (CFS), and the local brigade was like a second home to him. It was here, watching his Dad attend to bushfires - including Ash Wednesday – and other natural disasters over the years, that Brenton's appreciation for the weather began to grow.

"Dad was a radar technician at Adelaide Airport and I often spent time with him at work watching planes take off from the runway, which only added to my fascination for the skies."

Brenton's family were keen competition swimmers with the Marion Swimming

Club. When a hip injury at fourteen kept him out of the water for several months he joined his mother pool-side to announce the competitors behind the blocks. That announcing opportunity led to an interest in volunteering with radio station Life FM in 1994. The station was in its first year of full-time broadcasting and operating under the name of Alta Mira FM.

"I volunteered for different shifts across the week for several years before I was offered my first full-time role – not announcing, but voicing the 'Dial-it Weather Information Service' which Telstra had contracted Life FM to produce. So began my early path towards becoming a weather presenter."

After volunteering as an announcer for four years Brenton was awarded his first full-time radio shift presenting the afternoon show, followed by two years co-hosting 'breakfast' with Len Firth - 'The Brekky Show with Raggy & Len'. He was on air with Life FM for just under eight years.

"I can honestly say they were some of the best days of my life – working in a team of wonderful people, all for the common purpose of making a difference in our city. It was the happiest and most uplifting place I have ever worked.

"I was young, independent and impressionable and the faithful leadership, companionship and camaraderie kept me in good stead during those fundamental years of my late teens and early twenties. It really helped define who I am today.

Environmental impact

"We are all products of our environment. Take a drive down any seaside esplanade and it's easy to see how the salty air affects vehicles and buildings. And the same can be said for us. Whoever we spend our time with, where and how we spend that time, has a profound effect on our character. Proverbs 27 says 'As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.'

"One of those men is Len Firth – one of my best mates who would later become a groomsman in my wedding. We shared two years in 'breakfast' together, and they remain two of the best years of my life. There was no secret formula – we just enjoyed being ourselves and sharing life's moments with our audience."

Those moments were not always fun. The events of 11 September 2001 proved quite a challenge. Brenton had seen the attacks on

the World Trade Centre in New York unfold late Monday night local time and he realised many who were already asleep would wake to hear the news on the Life FM breakfast program. He went straight to the studio and spent a sleepless night preparing the structure and audio elements of the show. It was a day like no other they had ever experienced.

“But that’s what the ‘gig’ was about” says Brenton. “Sharing ‘life’ and walking it out together on-air, no matter the nature of events. And it’s what I still do today, albeit from a different platform.”

A new Season

The same year he began volunteering with Alta Mira FM Brenton was finally old enough to follow in his father’s footsteps and he joined the ranks of the Eden Hills CFS Brigade. Eight years later CFS Headquarters offered him a casual position as media liaison officer. For a while he managed to juggle Life FM and the CFS, but when the CFS offered him a full-time position he felt that God was moving him on from radio to begin a new season.

“It saddened me to leave Life FM, and especially the ‘brekky show’, but looking back there’s no doubt in my mind it was part of God’s plan for me.”

As media spokesperson for the CFS, Brenton worked very closely with the team at Channel Nine and various media outlets, providing commentary on fires and other natural and man-made disasters including the fatal Black Tuesday bushfires on the Eyre Peninsula. He returned to study and, after five years full-time with the CFS, having graduated with a Masters Degree in Media and Communication, he spent a year on contract with the Department of Defence at Edinburgh and then in Canberra.

Returning to Adelaide in 2008 Brenton learned that the weather role at Channel Nine was vacant following the retirement of Keith Martyn. After a series of meetings and auditions, and thanks to the strong connections he’d formed with Channel Nine during his time at the CFS, Brenton feels blessed to have been offered the role.

2008 was made even more special when he married his wife, Hayley.

“I have Life FM to thank for that connection. Diamonds Camera and Video have always been generous supporters of Life FM and when I moved to the CFS I chose Diamonds for all our film processing. Hayley worked in the processing lab, so over many months of dropping by and picking up the CFS prints, our relationship ‘developed’.”



Brenton and Hayley on their wedding day

Shifting gears

In addition to career and relationship transformations, Brenton also went through a physical transformation, dropping 30kg. What motivated him and, importantly, how did he manage to achieve such a dramatic result?

“Basically my conviction became my motivation. More specifically, to be a healthy father for my kids. Hayley and I don’t have any children yet but I want to be the healthiest I can be when they arrive, and to ensure I’m around for them as long as possible.

“When I was 34 I landed myself in hospital with an infection that took several months to get over. This experience – together with a family history of other health concerns combined with my desire to be a fit and healthy Dad – was enough to shift gears mentally. Losing weight starts with the mind, not the stomach.”

Brenton commenced with a portion controlled weekly meal program which helped re-educate him on making better meal choices and forming better habits. The program’s convenience also meant he wasn’t being tempted by visits to the shops.

He still enjoys treats but aims for at least five ‘good’ days in the week so he can relax on the weekend. His advice to others? “Don’t plan to ‘diet’ for three or six months. It has to become a permanent lifestyle choice, so just try reversing one poor habit a month. It’s taken me three years to lose it, but it will take the rest of my life to keep it off, so I accept that it’s always going to be a challenge for me.

“The satisfaction of losing the weight has been liberating and has helped change my whole outlook – I wish I’d done it sooner!”

Clearly Brenton is happiest in roles that bring him into direct contact with the public. “The best thing about my job is the connection to

community. The studio time is only a small component – it’s the daily interaction you have outside the studio with people in the street, at the shops, in the cafes, attending events. The personal connection you experience with people from all walks of life that truly makes the job special.

“A real thrill is when I meet people for the first time who have followed my progress since I started announcing at Alta Mira FM in 1994 – I still have people who I meet for the first time that have literally listened, read and watched my progress over the last twenty years and though I’ve never actually met them before there’s a special connection, almost a sense of ‘family’, when I speak to them.

“Presenting the news is simply about sharing life together. I am just as affected by the news as everybody else, and though I might be the one presenting the facts, I’m watching and absorbing it just like our viewers at home. Sharing the events of life helps to connect us.”

An episode of Mr Squiggle

Brenton’s life and career have presented plenty of surprises and detours. It hasn’t all been a journey of ‘onward and upwards’.

“There’s no such thing as a continued rise to success. I’ve had plenty of ‘ups and downs’ along the way. It’s more about how you recover from them and what you learn to launch you to the next phase of your life.”

Not many people would realise that Brenton was re-trenched from work after buying his first house, has been on unemployment benefits, was based in Canberra on contract with the Defence Department for a period and very nearly had a career as the host of the dolphin show at Sea World – none of which was planned.

“Just as there is the certainty of change in seasonal weather, so too there is the certainty of change in our own lives. Not long after I started at Nine it finally dawned on me that I’d been keeping the wrong attitude about finding God’s purpose for my life. My initial plea was: ‘Lord, show me the plan you have for me - I’m here, I’m ready, willing and waiting – just tell me what you want me to do.’

“But God has a simple answer for that: ‘hang on, that’s no fun – you want me to tell you what I have planned and purposed for you!? Where’s the faith? Where’s the trust? Where’s the element of surprise?! How do I – as your loving Father – get to delight in you, if you know everything I have in store for you!?’

“And of course He’s right. What loving parent would wrap their kid’s Christmas or birthday present in glad wrap! No – any good parent spends time to wrap and detail a present for their kid, so they can delight in their child as they pull back the wrapping paper with eager expectation and burst into joy when they discover what it is.

“So my approach has changed – ‘Lord, I can see that you have a plan and purpose for my life, and as much as I want to know what that is, I trust that what I live out day by day fulfills your purpose.’

“To use a TV analogy, life for me feels like an episode of Mr Squiggle, the character from space who’d use his pencil for a nose to draw a picture from abstract lines, dots, circles and squiggles. We all thought, ‘nah – there’s no way he can draw something from that!’ But sure enough, at his own leisurely pace he’d draw the big picture!

“Years of growing up around the fire station, tour guiding, attending church, voicing Telstra’s weather service, announcing at Life FM, working for the CFS, among so many other life experiences, all seemed to me to be like abstract lines, dots, circles and squiggles. God, the Architect of Life, hand illustrates the bigger picture. Meanwhile I’m just like Blackboard – ‘HURRY UP!!!’

“Nothing we do is ever wasted, and God’s timing is not our own! “

A product of his environment

Another major influence as a child was Brenton’s local church in Eden Hills and he was particularly interested in the epic weather stories of the Bible, like Noah’s Ark and the Great Flood, Moses parting the Red Sea and Jesus calming the storm.

“Over the years growing up in Kid’s Church and Youth Group, my faith developed from a simple understanding of some of these ‘Color-Illustrated Best Loved Bible Stories

of All Time’ to a more in-depth personal revelation of Jesus Christ.

“We are all products of our environment, and I truly consider myself very blessed that I have been surrounded by good people, in particular mentors that encouraged and inspired me in my late teens and twenties. This was especially true during my time at Life FM when I enjoyed contact with other Christians outside of church.

“Looking back and seeing God’s hand on my life has only made my faith stronger and brought me closer to Him. That’s not to say I don’t have my daily woes, but my relationship with Jesus gives me the strength and confidence to embrace each day. I feel like I have a perspective and outlook on life that without God would be clouded and burdened – the very opposite of the Life that Jesus brings.

“Looking back and seeing God’s hand on my life has only made my faith stronger and brought me closer to Him”

“I can honestly say that I would be nowhere without God. My faith in Him is fundamental to who I am, and everything I live for.”

Passionate about his faith, Brenton is also passionate about news events – the daily incidents and activities that affect our lives. “Not in a voyeuristic way, but with compassion, empathy and conviction in times of challenge; and with pride, joy and enthusiasm for the moments that encourage and inspire us” he says.

“I am passionate about Creation, which under-pins my interest in the weather, and I share particular concern for when the weather turns wild, especially when Australians band together during times of natural disasters. The worst of our weather brings out the best in our people.”

A parochial South Australian, it is perhaps the tour guide in him that wants to show off his home state and make everyone feel welcome. He also expresses a deep love for Australians – from the Indigenous, through generations of ‘battlers’ to the new arrivals that now call this country home.

“We all have our own unique story to share and I love hearing about them.”

Inspired by passionate people

One place where unique stories are shared is the South Australian Prayer Breakfast. Brenton has acted as MC for six years, seeing attendance grow in number from a few hundred to almost 2,000. It is now the largest event of its kind in Australia and he speaks about his commitment to the breakfast and its significance.

“My inspiration is drawn from everybody’s enthusiasm for the event. To see the Adelaide Convention Centre packed end to end with passionate people for God and our city. When I MC from the stage, I’m thrilled to see so many familiar faces and equally excited to see so many new ones – it’s one of the events I feel most relaxed at because we’re all there for the same reason – though standing alone on stage singing the National Anthem is very intimidating!

“I love the fact that it really is growing in importance on the state’s calendar. I regularly have people ask about it across the year, with a genuine interest to attend the next one – and not just Christians either, its impact is felt far and wide.

“It’s a very professional event. Staging is as good, if not better, than other corporate events. It’s a great reflection of the width and breadth of SA’s Christian community and a shake-up to those that think Christians only meet in ‘old stone churches’ on a Sunday.”

Family heritage and future forecasts

Brenton has achieved an amazing amount in his life already, so what lies ahead?

“I don’t necessarily see myself in media forever. I’m grateful to be in the industry for as long as God wants me in it, but I don’t feel bound to it and still hope to explore my other passions in community engagement.”

Len Firth and ‘Raggy’ on air at Life FM



He recently completed a trade certificate in boiler operations. Growing up next to a railway line he has always wanted to learn how to drive steam trains.

"I also figured it would be a cool hobby to share one day with my own children. No kids as yet, but the train will be all steamed-up, waiting at the platform when we do! I'm only entry level at this stage, driving the small ride-on locos at the National Railway Museum and the Coastal Railway at Semaphore, but my long-term goal is to fire and drive the steam engines hauling the Cockle Train at Victor Harbor and the Pichi Richi Railway at Quorn."

Brenton's connection to the CFS remains strong and he still volunteers with an Air Operations Brigade which provides ground support for the water-bombing aircraft during the bushfire season. He would like to expand this further one day and maybe even become a Fire-Attack Supervisor from the air or even pilot the aircraft.

"In the meantime, I'm happy helping Dad to maintain his own collection of firefighting memorabilia including a 1961 Open-cab International Fire Engine."

In recent years Brenton has taken a deeper interest in his family heritage and has discovered that, at the age of twenty, his great, great grandfather John Ragless established a new life in South Australia, arriving here from London in 1838 after five months at sea. He camped out on the banks of the River Torrens and made his start as a woodcutter, supplying Adelaide with its growing need for timber.

"Four generations later I too found myself on the banks of the Torrens in my newly appointed role as a newsreader, presenting the bulletin live from the plaza of the new Adelaide Oval during the 2013 Ashes Test. It truly moved me to reflect on what had taken place over those 175 years, and how it is that I find myself living in this time and place. To paraphrase investor and philanthropist Warren Buffet – 'I now enjoy the shade from a tree that John Ragless planted a long time ago.'"

Had he sought a television career interstate, Brenton doubts that it would ever have happened. But by investing time and energy into South Australia and its people, God has opened doors and created opportunities that he could never have imagined possible.

Brenton quotes from Acts 17: 26 – 'From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the earth, and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.'

"What I do at Channel Nine, and all that goes with it, has confirmed the sense in me that, in as much as Adelaide is stepping up, we as residents need to keep in step with it with a renewed sense of pride, ownership and responsibility. We live in a defining period for our state, and for you and I – this is our chosen time and place in history.

"But it's more than just here and now, it's about looking beyond ourselves and understanding that, while what we do day by day may seem insignificant, we're actually investing in God's bigger picture – his people, his places – now and into the future. God is the Conductor, and we are His instruments – are we sitting in the audience watching, or are we part of the Orchestra?"

Brenton's 'back to basics' weight loss tips

Here are some rules that Brenton follows:

- Drinking mostly water with soft drinks, fruit juices and alcohol in low moderation
- Regular breakfasts and healthy snacking across the day – much smaller portions, but more often to keep the metabolism ticking over
- Factoring in half an hour every day to walk the dog, ride the bike or swim laps in the pool. "Gyms don't interest me – and getting outdoors has helped me find 'breathing space' for the soul!"
- Weighing himself every day to understand how his body fluctuates with what he eats. "It's helped me stay accountable"
- Minimising the 'free food' or 'unexpected calories' that find their way into our diet – the free lollies, chips, chocolates and cake that are offered up at office birthdays and parties. These 'empty' calories are a 'quick-fix'. "Leave them for the weekend when you can really treat yourself with the people you'll enjoy them with the most – you'll come to appreciate the treats a whole lot more!"

More on Brenton at 9news.com.au/meet-the-team/adelaide/brenton-ragless

More on Life FM 107.9 at lifefm.net

The South Australian Prayer Breakfast is organised by CBMC International SA Inc in conjunction with the SA Parliamentary Christian Fellowship. See more here: cbmcint.com.au

More of John Franklin's work at facebook.com/jfk.franklin



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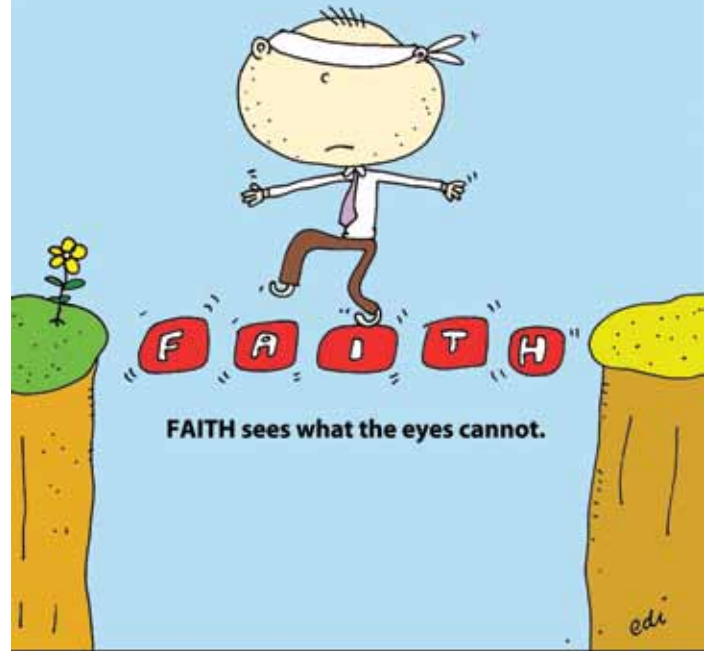
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Finding Jesus in the Christmas Frenzy

By Rev Dr John Beasy

Each year I visit Melbourne in late November to chair the National meetings of the Australian Baptist movement. During this time, I take a walk down the Bourke Street Mall. On each occasion my attention is drawn to the huge crowd of people gathered around the Myer shop-front. People are lined up and the lines extend along multiple window displays. People of all ages stare in amazement and wonder at the creative scenes in the window. These scenes have varied over the years, with stories of Santa, Elves, toys, and reindeers. Last year the display was of the Ginger Bread Man. There was much excitement had by all in viewing his adventures with music and lights blazing. As I cast my eyes over this gathering, however, there was not one sight of a manger or baby Jesus.

WHERE was JESUS ? - was my compelling thought.

As I wandered beside the long line of people waiting for their glimpse of the Ginger Bread Man - I noticed further up the Mall, past the main doors of the Myer entrance, a solitary person standing by another window. I walked over, looked closely, and saw in a small window a scene of the nativity. It was

off to the side - it was not easy to see - it was not lit up and only one person was there. Everyone else, it seemed, was caught up in the hustle and bustle of the lights and excitement surrounding the Ginger Bread Man.

For just a moment, I felt deeply disappointed that Jesus was not front and centre. But then my mind went to the reality of that very first Christmas, where Jesus was also not front and centre of people's attention. At that time, Bethlehem was abuzz with activity. It was full house. There was no room for Jesus in the Inn. If that was how it was on the first Christmas, then why should I have expected any more visibility, presence or priority given to Jesus in the hearts and minds of people today?

That Myer moment impressed upon me a most wonderful reality of Christmas - that Jesus is present, but not in the middle of the commercial frenzy with all its alluring bells and whistles. Rather Jesus is present in the

smaller windows of life. He is found by those searching in the right places. The shepherds sought Jesus, found Him, and went away with joy in their hearts. So did the wise men. So did that one person standing at the small Myer window last Christmas. It is always the case. Seek and you will find Jesus.

SO - surprising as it may seem, I have now concluded that the Myer display is actually very close to the REAL Christmas. In fact closer than I had ever imagined. Jesus was there just as he was in Bethlehem, with little room afforded him, but able to be found by true seekers.

If you are in Melbourne this Christmas, go to the Bourke Street Mall. Look at the crowds gathered around the ginger bread man or whatever it will be. You are NEAR Jesus but He is not there. Walk a little further up - seek Jesus out - and in a small, more obscure window, you will find Him. At that moment you will have encountered and engaged with the true moment of Christmas.

Rev Dr John Beasy is Senior Pastor at Enfield Baptist Church and Founder and Director of LifeWell. He is National Chair of Australian Baptist Ministries, Executive Member of the Baptist World Alliance, Chair of Company of Grace Vietnam and serves on the board of Gospel for Bangladesh. He was regional director of the Department of Human Services in Victoria for 14 years.

I was hungry and you fed me, a stranger and you invited me in

By Rev Dr Lynn Arnold AO

What if our national anthem and motto contained a powerful Gospel message? No country does that, does it? Not quite. Yet a dependency of Australia, Norfolk Island, has the solitary word 'Inasmuch' as its motto; while the Pacific Island territory of Pitcairn has these words as its Anthem:

*Then shall the King
Say unto them
On his right hand:
Come ye blessed of my Father
Inherit the kingdom prepared for you
From the foundation of the world
I was hunger'd and ye gave me meat,
I was thirsty and ye gave me drink
I was a stranger and ye took me in,
Naked and ye clothed me,
I was sick and ye visited me,*

*I was in prison and ye came unto me
In as much ye have done it unto one of
the least of
These my brethren
Ye have done it unto me,
Ye have done it unto me.*

Listening to two Norfolk Island women sing these words to me in 2012, Matthew 25 immediately came to mind. I thought how wonderful it was that these two specks of territory had more than a century ago opted to convey the powerful message of Jesus' 'Inasmuch Sermon' through their national symbols.

There is a lot of history that lies behind why the 'Inasmuch Sermon' has such an important place in Pitcairn and Norfolk Island

As Australians we are proud of our nation's ideal of a 'fair go'. What would this look like in practice if we lived according to Jesus' words in Matthew 25, often referred to as 'the Inasmuch Sermon'?

(not the least being the aftermath of the story of the Mutiny on the Bounty), but it has made me think a lot about the power of this part of the Gospel in our own community. How do we respond to Jesus' call for us to be there for the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger at the gate, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned?

The beauty of the words incline us emotionally to say that we would do all that Jesus would expect; but the reality is often very different. More than that, we can too easily miss some key points in these words; for Jesus actually expects much more of us than merely giving charity to those in need. In these few gospel verses, he lays before us profound challenges.



In encountering need in our community, there is often the tendency to do so by encountering problems rather than encountering real people. We start doing this by labelling – we talk of the poor, the hungry, the sick and other such terms that, in their plural sense, strip away the individuality of people leaving us only with their problems standing before us. Yet in the 'Inasmuch Sermon', the word 'I' keeps appearing:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' [v35-6]

This is no anonymous approach to those in need. The 'I' in the needy other demands to be recognised.

However, there is an even greater point to be understood here. Jesus not only personalises those in need, he also strips them totally of their 'otherness' by immediately equating them with himself ('the King'). And in this way, he creates a unity out of the 'two greatest commandments' – Loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves. By not merely likening himself to those in need – 'imagine that it was I who was hungry ...' – but by being definitive – 'I was hungry' – Jesus becomes the marginalised. So, if we are to love God (Father and Son), we must find ourselves loving our marginalised neighbour as ourselves.

This leads to yet another level of understanding – the strong Kingdom component of the 'Inasmuch Sermon'. In these verses, Jesus speaks as the King, bringing into our focus the words of the Lord's Prayer – "Your Kingdom come". In doing so, he asks that we encounter the marginalised in a kingdom-building way. By this I mean that he asks of us that we prophetically forth tell a world where the marginalised of our contemporary world may be freed from the bonds of their marginalisation. In the words of Isaiah, we are called to participate in acts that:

loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke. [Isaiah 58:6]

This cannot be done by merely reacting to need when we encounter it by bringing immediate help, important as that is; it also requires that we consider what we as Christians can do to challenge the causes of such need and seek to take on the prevailing direction of world's social winds that promote belief in the inevitability that such marginalisation is simply the way things are. Jesus tells us that he came that we 'might have life in all its fullness' (John 10:10). He

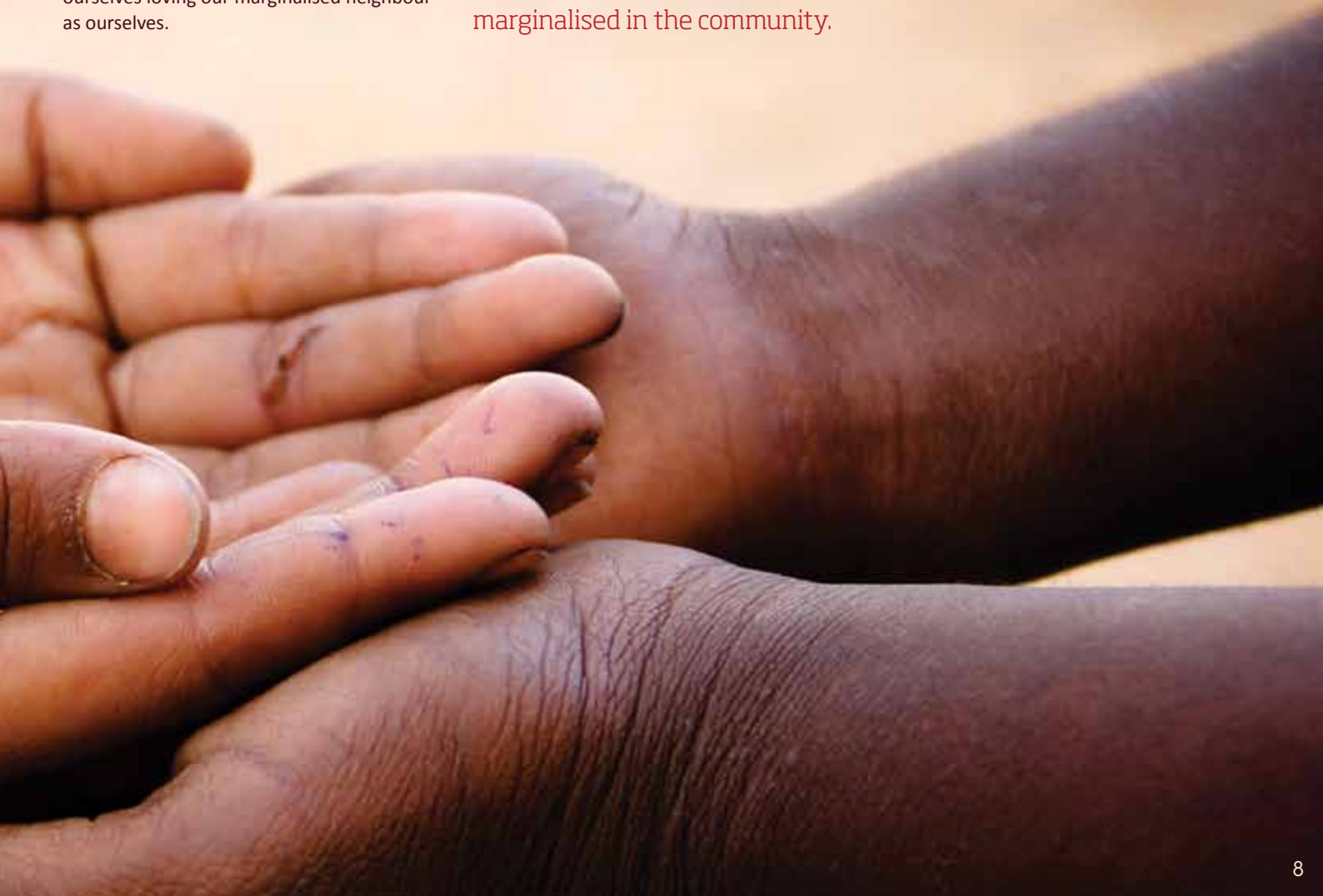
does not mean by this that a select group of 'us' will be the beneficiaries of his coming, he intends it to be a universal 'us', absorbing all the marginalised 'them'.

How are we to do that? If we look once more at the 'Inasmuch Sermon' we see that Jesus upends prevailing convention – he includes both the 'worthy' and the 'unworthy' from the world view as meriting his call for compassion – the prisoner and the stranger at the gate rank equally with what the world might deem the deserving needy. He sweeps away the earthly anticipation of a King resplendent in glory with one who is clothed in the wretchedness of those he describes. Essentially, he takes on the prevailing direction of the world's social winds. How then can we, who profess to follow him, do anything other than the same.

I guess our national anthem and motto won't be changed any time soon – but what if our self-ascribed Australian virtues of 'mateship' and a 'fair go' became synonymous with the true spirit of 'Inasmuch'?

*Then shall the King
Say unto them*

Rev Dr Lynn Arnold AO was the Labor Premier of South Australia in 1992-1993. After leaving politics, he worked for World Vision from 1997 to 2007 and for Anglicare SA from 2008 to 2012. He was ordained as a deacon in 2013, and now works with those who are marginalised in the community.





find ourselves

Giving something away can help us

By Wendy Rush

Unlike generations that have gone before us, we live in an age of entitlement, within a society that is structured around “I” and “me” and the expectation of instant gratification as the reward for everything we do. While we scream loudly about our rights, how often do we hear about our responsibilities? And while we scramble over others to reach the dizzy heights of prosperity, how often do we overlook the miracle of one human being caring for another? As a result our society seems to be defined by those things that cripple it - crime, self-destruction, dysfunctional relationships, and lack of purpose. All those things that undermine our ability to build community.

Those with a true sense of community are also those who know what it is to give something up for another human being. Even giving where there is no possibility of a return.

The most prominent example of giving without expectation of a return is seen at Easter. Easter focuses on the act of sacrificial giving. Christ gave his life in order to offer us life, knowing full well that none of us can repay the debt or give anything of real value in return.

Quite often when we give something to someone – whether a gesture, a gift,

a service or a compliment – we expect something back. At the very least a “thank you” or perhaps an understanding that the favour will be returned at a later stage.

The movie *Pay it Forward* tells the story of a boy who creates a wave of good deeds designed to impact on the other person. But implicit in the storyline is the expectation that these good deeds will eventually be returned.

In a society where recognition and reward for self seems paramount, one of the things we don’t seem very good at is giving for the sake of giving.

Giving because it’s the right thing to do.
Giving because someone is in need.
Giving because you have the opportunity.
Giving because someone else will benefit.

I once read a story about a student nurse who was charged with caring for a patient called Eileen. As a result of suffering a cerebral aneurysm, Eileen was left with no conscious control over her body. The medical staff at the hospital where she was being cared for thought she was totally unconscious - unable to feel pain and unaware of anything going on around her.

The hospital staff had to turn her hourly to prevent bedsores, and feed her twice a day through a stomach tube. ‘When it’s this bad,’ an older nurse told the student nurse, ‘You have to detach yourself emotionally’. Eileen came to be treated as a thing, a vegetable. But the young nurse decided to treat her differently. She talked to Eileen, sang to her, and even brought her little gifts. One Thanksgiving she said to Eileen, ‘I was supposed to have today off, but I couldn’t miss seeing you on Thanksgiving.’ The telephone rang and as the nurse turned to answer it, she looked back at the patient: Eileen was looking at her and crying. Damp circles stained her pillow. That was the only human emotion Eileen ever showed, but it was enough to change the attitude of the entire hospital staff toward her. Not long afterward, Eileen died. The young nurse says ‘I keep thinking about her ... I owe her an awful lot. Except for Eileen, I might never have known what it’s like to give myself to someone who can’t give back.’

Increasing your life’s purpose and impact on the world must involve others – including



those who are unable, or unwilling, to respond to your kindness. So what's in it for us? According to Ian Anderson, flute playing front man for rock group Jethro Tull, "It's only the giving that makes us what we are."

Our capacity to give is directly related to our ability to love. Giving teaches us that love should, by its very nature, be unconditional. American philosopher Mortimer Adler said "Love consists in giving without getting in return; in giving what is not owed, what is not due the other. That's why true love is never based, as associations for utility or pleasure are, on a fair exchange."

If you are looking for your purpose in life, or if you are exploring your passion, don't be surprised if you find the answer in your giving. At the very least as we reach out to

others we will discover more about who we are. Like the young student nurse as she reached out to her patient Eileen, we may also encounter some unexpected rewards along the way.

Winston Churchill said, 'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.'

The selfless giving that we see at Easter can also be seen at Christmas. When we look at the Christ child we see a man, the Son

of God, who chose to lower himself to our level, to take on the restrictions of a physical state like ours and to lead a life whose sole purpose was to give until it hurt – to give to people who could never adequately repay him. It was done out of love by a God who is love.

Let's challenge ourselves to look for opportunities to give, to serve, to care, to love without any expectation of a response. Let the reward be in knowing that you have made a difference in the life of someone else.

And it doesn't matter how much we try, we can never out give Jesus Christ. His advice on giving? "Don't look for applause. When you help someone out, don't think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively."

Suzannah's Gold

By Carol Preston



This is Australian historical fiction based on characters from the author's family and our country's early history. The story opens in Sydney in 1838 with Caroline Chisolm pursuing her mission to save innocents from abuse and degradation. Thirteen year old Suzannah Casey arrives in Sydney Harbour from Ireland after 9 months at sea and is assigned to a workhouse. Soon after she is taken in by Missus Chisolm who teaches her all she needs to know about taking care of a household and

organises for her to go into service in Goulburn Plains with recently released convict George Oakes.

George is gentle and kind and treats her as a friend rather than a servant and in time they marry and start a family. But life is hard and not everyone is as kind as George. Suzannah has to deal with trauma, loss and abuse at the hands of others. And when gold fever starts to spread even her husband abandons her in search of a fortune.

Around her neck Suzannah wears a locket with a Bible verse inside. It is a gift from her mother. But her memory of her last evening in Ireland before being deported carries with it fear and uncertainty – is her mother alive or is she dead? Will she ever hear from her family again? Throughout her experiences Suzannah carries with her, along with the locket, a strong faith that God is with her no matter what and despite the circumstances she is determined to trust him. She is also determined to stay faithful to her husband when he is off searching for gold while those around her believe she is within her rights to make a new life for herself. Her younger sister Mary Anne joins Suzannah in Australia and for a time adds to Suzannah's workload and worry.

Historical Australian events are highlighted throughout the story by news articles and letters – bushfires, floods, bushrangers, politics etc give context to the lives of Australia's pioneering men and women, personified by Suzannah, George and their community. There is also religious bigotry which Suzannah confronts in her own firm but gentle way.

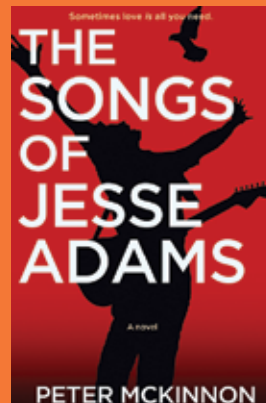
The story does not unfold in the way you would expect, and while there are periods of joy there are also times of great pain and distress. Suzannah delights in her family and in friendships which are often maintained over great distances. Her faith keeps her strong even when her body is weak, and her story is one of sacrifice, perseverance, hope and love. If you enjoy historical fiction, or you are particularly interested in how our early settlers lived and the legacy they left for us, then you will find this story engrossing.

'Suzannah's Gold' is published by Even Before Publishing and can be purchased at lightthedark.com.au. Also available in eBook format.

Reviewer: Wendy Rush

The Songs of Jesse Adams

By Peter McKinnon



It doesn't take the canny reader long to realise that Jesse Adams is an analogy for somebody else. His story evokes how the four New Testament gospels might have looked, had the events taken place in Australia in the volatile 1960s instead of ancient Palestine.

Peter McKinnon uses strokes of genius to translate Biblical events to a more modern and local setting. Jesse is a talented singer/musician and his band is originally comprised of hard-working shearers willing to

give the spotlight a try, as they are down on their luck. It's intriguing to match this novel's characters with their biblical counterparts. To mention just a few, the apostle Peter is the loyal and spontaneous Big Al, and you'll recognise James and John, the Sons of Thunder, in Johnny and Dean Moyle, the 'Chunder Brothers.' Annie Martin, a burned-out journalist who senses something special in Jesse, is this story's Mary Magdalene. Melbourne becomes the Jerusalem Jesse breaks his heart over. Then there's Flash, the Judas character, with his gripe that Jesse refused to sign a recording contract. And the Last Supper takes place in 'The Doubtful' hotel, after which Jesse retreats to the beer garden. He is crowned with the unofficial title of 'King of Pop' instead of King of the Jews. His songs, of course, are this story's version of Jesus' parables.

I found reading this story in a twentieth century, Australian setting extremely moving. It challenged me to wonder if I would have willingly followed Jesus, as I was always certain I would. Reading this book makes it harder to fault those ancient people who decided to turn away from Jesus without at least understanding the position they found themselves in. It's easier to sense the clout and power the ruling class and Pharisees would have wielded, presented in the form of three formidable men; Timothy Grady, the Cleric; Frank Pigdon, the Premier; and Bob Craven, the Media Mogul, each with their own reasons to want to silence Jesse Adams permanently.

The character of Jesse must have been a challenge to fine-tune perfectly from start to finish. At times, I felt he might have been unduly taken by surprise by some of the lines his detractors delivered to him, while at other times he seemed to lash out rather more reactively and emotionally than I would have expected. Then, at other moments, I wondered at his letting others talk him into their plans against his better judgment. Still, other readers may well disagree with me. As the historical Jesus caused stirs, rifts and factions wherever he walked, it seems reasonable that the character Jesse Adams may well do the same.

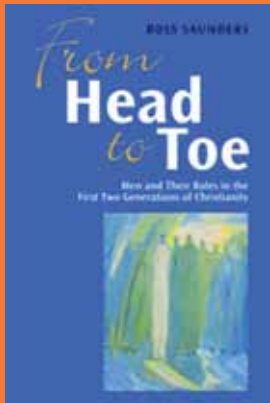
I recommend this thought-provoking book to anybody willing to read the familiar gospel story in a fresh and imaginative way. Prepare to have your pre-conceptions challenged.

'The Songs of Jesse Adams' is published by Acorn Press and can be purchased at acornpress.net.au. Also available in eBook format.

Reviewer: Paula Vince

From Head to Toe: Men and Their Roles in the First Two Generations of Christianity

By Ross Saunders



The book shows how Jesus turned the natural roles and rights of a Mediterranean male upside down. Whereas women moved upwards in importance and function in early Christianity, men moved downwards, hence the title: From Head to Toe.

Christian men will find this book helpful for discovering Jesus' perspective on their roles as men, especially leadership. Both men and women involved in formal leadership, whether in the church or elsewhere, will also find it useful. I

personally found it invaluable when completing an assignment on how Jesus' teaching was counter-cultural. And for the novel I am working on, it has given me valuable insight into the mindset of the men of those times.

The massive differences between current Australian culture and that of Jesus' time are fascinating. The book discusses the importance of honour and shame - probably the most important values of the day, as well as values of identity, limited supply and the acceptance of deception of 'outsiders'.

For example, it was expected that the eldest son would continue in his father's trade. If he chose otherwise, as Jesus and some of his disciples did, he brought shame on the family. Everyone's identity was about 'being a member of a family, a community and a village.' Compared to our emphasis on individual rights and achievement, 'a personal identity separate from anyone else was impossible and unthinkable.'

'Trying to acquire more land or sheep or friends or honourable mentions than was appropriate to your status would have been interpreted as trying to push in ahead of someone else... and you would be... dishonoured'. 'When Jesus proclaimed that the love of God was ... available to all who ask for it, he was going against the perception that everything was in limited supply.'

After a general discussion of first century Mediterranean values the book profiles twenty nine individual men of the New Testament. For each man we learn of his personal challenges in living out Jesus' radical teaching. It certainly gave me more empathy and understanding for just how much these men sacrificed to follow Jesus.

The final chapters cover Jesus' teaching on leadership, especially the leader-as-slave model. It finishes with the author commenting that 'these ideals, as espoused by Jesus...were to last but one more generation before being overtaken by natural human condition' where leadership reverted to domination rather than service. He concludes with a hope that the churches of today might reinstate Jesus Christ 'as head of the household of God'.

The book is well laid out, well researched and easy to read. I would certainly recommend it to others.

'From Head to Toe' is published by Acorn Press and can be purchased at acornpress.net.au. Also available in eBook format.

Reviewer: Cindy Williams



Active Faith is Good for Your Character

Thaddeus Baklinski reported on the work of a group of professors at Grove City College. Evidently, they have found a clear relationship between active participation in church and the development of positive character traits, particularly self-control.

The research, conducted by Drs Horton, Seybold and Welton (all professors in psychology), discovered that personal faith combined with belonging to a church was vastly more beneficial in dealing with stressful life events than simply having a vague personal belief.

The professors preface their report by commenting on the claims by the atheist, Richard Dawkins, who wants to believe that religious people are not more moral. The researchers found that this claim was quite wrong.

When explaining the results of their research, the professors said, "The benefits of religion for character development seem most likely to come from participation in a community and commitment to a belief system rather than a generalised spirituality. This is because a belief system and community result in expectations for behaviour, whereas a general feeling of religiosity does not."

The researchers noted that those with an active faith, lived out in a faith community, generally exhibited an increase in humility, healthy behaviour, honesty, and a work ethic, all of which required self control. Self control, they discovered, was encouraged by an active faith.

So, being actively involved in a faithful, vibrant church helps grow resilience, self-control and character. Interesting eh?

For more see: 'The Bible on the Key Issues of Life', by Dr Nick Hawkes, available from bookshops. Nick has degrees in science and theology. He is a pastor, writer and broadcaster.

www.nickhawkes.net

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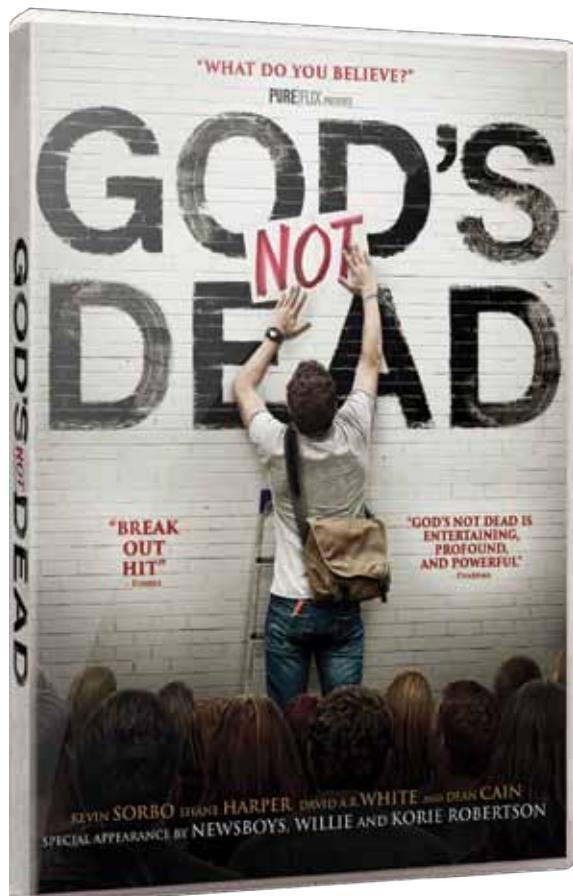
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GOD'S NOT DEAD

A Christian college freshman and his atheist philosophy professor debate the existence of God. To pass the course, Josh Wheaton must prove to the class that God is alive. Putting his relationships and his future on the line, will Josh be able to support his beliefs? Court is now in session!

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