PEOPLE WHO HAVE INSPIRED ME

The death last month of Nelson Mandela united the world in an appreciation of the transformational power of self-sacrifice and forgiveness. His long walk to freedom began with innumerable small steps of self-restraint chiselled out in the rock yards of his imprisonment on Robben Island.

That Christ-like combination of self-sacrifice and forgiveness seem to be linked by unbroken chords that tug at the human heart. Of course Mandela is iconic. And we can’t all be Mandela’s. But each of us have been inspired not only by his life and story but by many other lives and stories that will never hit the headlines.

I have begun to think a lot recently about extraordinary ordinary people who have somehow grasped the simplicity of The Way of Jesus; pilgrims who have learned to take small steps of self-restraint and have had extraordinary adventures with Christ.

One such person was Bert Bissell. I spoke about Bert on Remembrance Sunday. Bert was a small man, wiry and tough-minded yet his narrow frame cradled one of the most compassionate hearts I have known.

Bert was Dudley’s first probation officer. He would support, care for, cagoule and challenge his ‘naughty boys’ (as he called them) from his garden shed – that’s how the probation service started in Dudley! At the end of the Second World War, through which Bert had been a pacifist, he decided to take a group of young offenders out on an adventure with a purpose. He took them up the 4,409ft granite hulk of Ben Nevis on Victory over Japan Day in 1945. Each lad was told by Bert to carry a boulder up the hill in their rucksacks. And at the top they laid a cairn.

Some 45 years later I had the privilege of climbing Ben Nevis with Bert on his last ever trip up the mountain. He was 89. It took him six hours to get up to the top and a further seven to descend. With him were many of the 26 men whose lives were transformed by Bert and found that The Way led them to become ordained Methodist Ministers. On that brisk April day in 1991, with snow still on the peak, a group of fifty or sixty folk gathered round what had become a huge peace cairn. We sang hymns, prayed for peace in our world and, with eyes streaming with tears – partly from the occasion, partly from the wind whipping around our faces – Bert led us in the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer that seemed freighted with simplicity and weighty glory on that mountain top.

I got to know Bert as a young journalist on the Express & Star. He would turn up every Friday afternoon without fail to hand in a little bit of news about the Young Men’s Bible Class, which he founded in Vicar Street in 1925 and which he ran for 70 years.

Bert was passionate about telling people about Jesus. His winsome way with words, the twinkle of his bright eyes, his love of the scriptures, his simple way of life – all these things were so attractive to others whom he met. He never ‘bible-bashed’ people – he never quoted verses at people. He just loved to open up the bible and let the bible read his life and the lives of those he loved.

Humble Bert is one of the towering figures of my life.

Another is Mollie, Miss Mollie Gibbons, of Stanley in Country Durham. I met Mollie as a student at Durham University. She was one of my teachers – though she never entered a lecture hall, never marked my essays and never knew the impact she was having.

By the time I met Mollie, in the autumn of 1983, she was gnarled by arthritis. Her hands were contorted. Her back was bent. Yet her face glowed. Mollie was a Christian who never preached a sermon, never led a service, never addressed a huge crowd. I think I only ever saw her stand up once and she was well under five feet tall. As far as I can remember I don’t think I even ever saw her walk. She was chair-bound and tiny.

Yet she was a pilgrim who had travelled far towards the Father’s heart. You know how it is with people who have suffered deeply and yet have found the bitterness of suffering washed clean by forgiveness – well Mollie was one of God’s sainted ones. She had lost a sweetheart in the war and was forever alone. She had spent her life in service, cleaning and keeping house.

Her hard work had afforded her a small one-bedroomed bungalow on the windswept bleak treeless hillside of
Stanley. Yet, when she prayed, in her soft Geordie accent, it felt like you had been transferred into the very throne room of God. She would pray only one prayer, the daily prayer of Cardinal Newman. Whenever I pray that prayer, at a funeral or graveside, I think of Mollie and the warm way in which she would say its final phrase: ‘Then in His mercy may He give us a safe lodging, and a holy rest and peace at the last.’

It is the Mollies and Berts of this world as well as the Mandelas who we need to remember and treasure, learn from and meditate upon.

Who are your Mollies and Berts?
Thank God for them today.
Why not write them a letter.