

The Torch

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Of first importance

[Dr Gordon Temple, Torch's outgoing CEO, introduces this issue with some reflections on his 47 years' connection with Torch, and thoughts on what he sees as the two most significant values the organisation holds dear]

Moving towards the close of one of his letters, the apostle Paul brings to his readers something of vital importance:

'Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first

importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures . . . ’

1 Corinthians 15:1–4

You’ll notice that what Paul thinks is most important is not one thing but three. I want to echo Paul. There is nothing more important than these: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. They are the events of first importance in all of history.

This Easter I stepped down from the leadership of Torch Trust after 16 challenging but fulfilling years as chief executive. It’s time to pass the leadership of our vital ministry into fresh and younger hands.

After interviews and prayerful consideration, the trustees have appointed Julia Hyde as Acting Chief Executive Officer to lead this ministry into the future that God has for it. I pray that she knows the same strengthening and encouragement that I have found in serving God through Torch. I ask that as you have supported me with your prayers, you now support her.

I find myself thinking, as Paul must have done, ‘What should I pass on to those who continue?’ My years of learning and experience should not be lost. And, of all the things feel I should pass on, everything that I feel must not be forgotten, what is of first importance?

Some years ago, with the help of our friend Rev Roy Searle, we set out to capture in words the values that characterise Torch. Values don’t define the activities of Torch but rather set out

the way we approach what we do. They reflect the way God has led us and shape the way we do things now.

In thinking about the future of Torch, it is these values I most wish to emphasise. Activities, projects and programmes come and go. But the ongoing values Torch holds remain: Christ-centred, People-focussed, Open, and Creative. And for me, it's the first two of these that are of prime importance.

Torch is Christ-centred. The Torch Trust is a Christian organisation, called into existence by his word to Torch's co-founder Stella Heath. It means that we recognise that Jesus is Lord. This is not just something we declare with our lips, but we accept him as King over all we seek to do, aiming always to do it in his way.

Torch is People-focussed. God called Torch into existence to serve people impacted by sight loss to whatever degree, to enable them to discover Christian faith and live fulfilling Christian lives. The way we do this is relational. Our focus is not the programme or the project, but the person. Our desire is that people with sight loss find true identity in relationship with Christ, and find their security and belonging in relationship to others in a Jesus-centred community.

When Jesus was asked which is the most important commandment, he replied with two which, he observed, together sum up all the other commandments: ‘Love the Lord your God’ and ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’

This challenge comes to us all: to live Christ-centred lives as an expression of our love for our Lord and to show love

with words and deeds among the people he has called us to serve.

In closing, I should add that Julia Hyde has asked that I continue to edit this magazine, at least for the next couple of editions. So until next time, God bless you all!

Mr Mdaiwa's mercy

Now for something a little different. Amisadai Monger, aged just 13, has lived most of her life in Tanzania, where her family served as missionaries in the Mwanza region. This is her winning entry in a short story competition. It's set in the modern-day village of Kayenze on Lake Victoria and is based on the parable of the unmerciful servant found in Matthew 18:23–35.

The red sun was emerging from the depths of Lake Victoria. Fishermen

tugged at their nets full of dagaa (small fish). Mr Mdaiwa stood at the shore listening contentedly to the friendly hustle and bustle of the nearby market. 'Bei nzuri! (Good price!)' merchants cried as they lured buyers to their stalls of mangoes and pineapples.

'Mdaiwa!'

A shrill voice cut through the gentle lapping of the water of Lake Victoria and the squawks of Malibu storks. Mdaiwa turned around, annoyed. He groaned inwardly, it was none other than his obnoxious neighbour, Tatizo.

'What do you want?' scowled Mdaiwa. He looked into Tatizo's sneering face.

'The Mwenyekiti (village chairman), Mr Samehe, wants to see you. He wants the money you owe him.'

Mdaiwa's face dropped. He had been dreading this day. He owed Mr Samehe

a very large sum of money which he hadn't managed to repay . . . yet. He would find a way. But for the moment, he would have to face the Mwenyekiti's wrath. Mdaiwa set off towards the village office, trudging slowly, trying to ignore Tatizo's taunting jeers.

Mr Samehe was sitting at the single wooden table in the shadows of the small office. 'Mr Mdaiwa, I loaned you 100,000 shillings for your new boat. You promised the money back after one month.' He clapped his hands sharply together. 'It has been five months and still you have not laid down the money. Where is it, Mdaiwa?'

Mr Samehe frowned at Mdaiwa from behind his desk, crinkles forming on his forehead.

Mdaiwa wiped the sweat from his brow. He didn't have the money. He had used

it for a relative's wedding and did not have enough to buy a new boat.

'Please, Mr Samehe, I will repay it! Give me more time, I beg of you! Just one more month,' Mdaiwa beseeched.

'Ehhhheee,' Mr Samehe exclaimed crossly. 'You must give it now.'

Mdaiwa knew he could not repay that money. And how would he get the money if he didn't have a boat to catch fish? If he could not fish, how would he and his wife and seven children live? No, he would have to sell everything and his older children would have to go to the city to beg for money. He pleaded for forgiveness and mercy.

Mr Samehe looked at him with compassion. 'Sawa (okay), Mr Mdaiwa, I will have mercy on you. I shall cancel your debt altogether!'

‘Asante, Bwana! (Thank you, sir!) I am forever grateful!’

Mdaiwa shook Mr Samehe’s hand and quickly made his way back down the dirt track to his house. As he walked through the fields of brown-tipped maize, he came across Mama Rehema carrying her buckets of water back from the lake. She was a widow, one of Mdaiwa’s neighbours, and owed him 10,000 shillings which she had borrowed for medicine for her sick child.

**Mdaiwa stopped her in the path.
‘Rehema, where is my money? You should have repaid it ages ago. Nipe pesa! (Give me money!)’**

‘Please Mdaiwa, my child has been so sick. She has malaria again and I still need the money for more dawa (medicine). I’ll give it to you once my child is better. I promise!’ she implored.

‘That’s no excuse. Your child is not so sick. See, she still cooks ugali (maize dish) and sweeps the dust off your floors! Give me the money! If you don’t I will take your goats and throw you out of your house.’

Rehema begged his forgiveness, but Mr Mdaiwa refused to listen. In the end she wept and ran off in the direction of her house.

Tatizo had seen and heard the whole encounter. He soon passed by other neighbours and told them how Mdaiwa, despite being forgiven his debt, was refusing to forgive the debt of widow Rehema. The neighbours took the news back to Mr Samehe, the Mwenyekiti.

Later that day, as the sun began to sink into the glistening lake, Mr Samehe and some of the other village leaders stood at the doorway of Mdawai’s tiny house overlooking the lake. Mdawai could tell

by the fierce look on the Mwenyekiti's face that he was not just coming to share his ugali.

‘Mdaiwa, I had mercy on you just this morning by cancelling your debt completely. Why then do you not have mercy on your fellows? Why did you threaten poor Rehema with taking her goats and throwing her out of her house? She owed you only 10,000 shillings, whereas you owed me 100,000 shillings. Surely you are the one to be punished. You must sell all your belongings, including your old boat and house, to repay your debt. Your children will have to beg on the streets of Mwanza, and you . . . you shall be put in the village jail. Let this be a lesson to you.’

‘Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or

**sister who sins against me?
Up to seven times?’**

**Jesus answered, “I tell you,
not seven times, but
seventy-seven times.””**

Matthew 18:21–22

Holy habits

[Hopefully, mercy and generosity to others become habits of life as we get to know Jesus more. In this next piece, James Catford, former chief executive of the Bible Society of England and Wales challenges us about what he calls holy habits]

Brushing my teeth is a daily ritual – a habit formed decades ago with occasional resistance and a healthy dose of parental supervision.

Now I'd need to work hard to not clean my teeth in the morning. I'd need to say, 'Don't head for the bathroom, don't reach for the toothpaste, don't squeeze it onto the toothbrush.'

In the same way, it's perfectly possible to wake up each morning praying.

Habits take no more than three months to form. What is agonising at first can become second nature. It would be harder not to do them.

It was Dallas Willard, the American philosopher who writes on Christian spiritual formation, who told me about waking up praying. For Dallas it wasn't about running through the day telling God what he wanted done . . . rather, Dallas would pray through his day releasing each part to the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit. This gives us the opportunity to relinquish control and press more fully into God.

‘I can’t make this work’ is my most common prayer in the morning, as I turn the day over to God and watch how he walks with me through it.

Holy habits, as Richard Forster calls them in his widely acclaimed book on spiritual disciplines called Celebration of Discipline, are a wonderful grace for us. They are not law but practices that Christians down the ages have often found transformative.

Getting into work early can give us a few minutes’ peace with a cup of coffee. A sacred moment. Simply placing our hands around a mug in an attitude of prayer can be a silent act of relinquishment, of supplication, and of listening.

English writer and theologian G K Chesterton (1874–1936) said, ‘You say grace before eating a meal. I say grace

before reading the morning paper or opening the door to a friend.'

Taking his idea further, we can let the phone ring one more time as we invite God into our conversation. Or we can volunteer to make coffee, or do the mundane job at work, and practice the habit of pausing as we do so to reconnect with God.

However busy we are and whatever our practice or personality, everyone can find sacred pauses like this. We fold God into our lives or, more accurately, we fold our little kingdoms into God's far greater kingdom.

Hearts Aflame

Stella Heath, who co-founded Torch Trust and edited this magazine for many years, wrote many articles and books. A manuscript left unfinished at her death

in 2009 has now been completed by her companion of many years, Eileen Cole. The theme – opening up the Old Testament to today’s readers – is a vital one. In this edited extract from HEARTS AFLAME, Stella Heath looks at key lessons in the life of Abraham.

1. Abraham was chosen by God

God chose a faithful man, Abraham, to become the father of a special nation in which the Messiah, the deliverer promised to Eve, would eventually be born. The Messiah would defeat the devil, the enemy of all good. (See Nehemiah 9:7,8.)

2. Abraham was called by God

Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldees (Babylon), a well-developed city, which had a high standard of living.

I remember years ago visiting a museum which had just received artefacts from the city of Ur. I was allowed to hold a beautiful turquoise vase which had been dated as belonging to the time of Abraham. The vase was exquisite, gracefully shaped, and heavy.

The city of Ur was full of such beauty, but it was also full of idolatrous worship. In the centre of the city was an enormous structure called a ziggurat, where the moon and many other gods were worshipped, with practices which involved murder and hideous crimes against humanity.

Abraham lived with his family in the heart of this city. One day God called, “Leave this affluent, idolatrous place, and get out!”

What a challenge! How could he leave his home and all his friends? Abraham’s father, Terah, had many servants and relied on his son to help him organise the household. Abraham must have had some knowledge of God at that time, but could he trust God enough to obey him?

Yes, he could! He moved out of Ur, and travelled to the city of Haran, where he stayed with his ageing father. After the old man’s death, God renewed his call to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3.)

3. Abraham believed God and obeyed the call

It's no wonder that Abraham was called the Father of the Faithful, for, against all odds, he believed God. Romans 4:3 quotes an Old Testament statement (Genesis 15:6): 'Abraham believed God, and God accepted Abraham's faith, and that faith made him right with God' (NCV).

The call of Abraham is mentioned in Hebrews 11:8,9, where the writer emphasises Abraham's great faith: 'Abraham had faith and obeyed God. He was told to go the land that God had said would be his, and he left for a country he had never seen. Because Abraham had faith, he lived as a stranger in the promised land' (CEV).

When he began to establish his home life in the new land, Abraham was aware

of the need for sacrifice for sin. He built altars at many of his campsites, which shows that he placed the worship of the one true God high on his family's agenda. Abraham talked with God, was led by God and obeyed God.

Our link with Abraham

Abraham is a great example to us today, as his faith in God was so strong. Those who trust in Jesus as their Saviour are called into a relationship with him too. We are told in Galatians 3:26–29: ‘You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . You belong to Christ, so you are Abraham's descendants. You will inherit all of God's promises, because of the promise God made to Abraham’ (NCV).

Pause for thought

Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith is it impossible to please God. Abraham was outstanding because of his faith, and the more he walked with God the more his faith grew. That is the same today. As we get to know God, we are stronger, and more able to believe him.

Caleb – man of God

[In our next article we turn from one giant of the Old Testament to another: Caleb. This edited study has been written by regular contributor Michael Stafford, a missionary in Africa before spending many years serving with Torch Trust. It comes from his book **GOD'S SPECIAL PEOPLE, published by Torch Trust and available in various formats.]**

Caleb was a pattern of what a man of God should be: consistent in youth, middle age and old age.

He was ardent in youth

We first encounter Caleb as a young man in Numbers 13 where Moses had sent 12 men to spy out the land of Canaan and report back to him. The account of this story is a sad one: the spies discovered a wonderful, fruitful land which would make a great home for God's people but there were intimidating enemies who were so strong and fearsome that 10 of the spies felt they could never be overcome. Caleb alone spoke out, claiming that, with God's enabling, they could defeat the enemy and occupy the land. However, the people would not listen.

They were like a crowd of frightened sheep and even tried to stone Caleb.

There have been many ‘lone voices’ through the years, both in Christianity and politics. Christian examples would be William Carey, the father of the missionary movement who was opposed in his missionary plans by his own church, and William Wilberforce who lobbied . . . for many years to end slave trading.

The Lord said to Moses: ‘. . . because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him to the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it’ (Numbers 14:22–24).

He was steadfast in middle age

The enthusiasm of youth often wanes in later life, but this did not happen with Caleb, who endured the next 40 years of wandering and suffering with the Israelites, yet clung to the promises of God.

The hardest thing in the Christian life is not the challenges and the exciting things, but the daily slog and apparent lack of God at work even though we pray. Unless, like Caleb, we cling to God's promises, we will go downhill in our Christian life . . . Caleb kept in mind the future possession of the land God was giving them. He was a man with vision, and we also need to keep in view the glorious future which God has promised us.

He was undaunted in old age

The next significant mention of Caleb is found in the book of Joshua, when he was 85 years old!

After the Israelites had entered the land, Joshua apportioned different areas among the tribes, and within those areas individual people were given pieces of land. Thus we find Caleb in chapter 14 petitioning Joshua for land in Hebron:

‘ . . . I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then . . . You yourself heard . . . that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.’

Caleb did not have Hebron handed to him on a plate! He had to fight for it. It was the very place where the giants were – and it was a mountain! He succeeded in possessing this place because he ‘wholly followed the Lord’. There were no half-measures or compromises

. . . Caleb’s faith was not confined to a particular era of his life. He was consistent right through to old age Do you trust God like that? Do you depend utterly on him? He is able to save; he is able to keep.

Where did it come from?

Janet Stafford, Michael’s wife and Torch’s International Leader, has been visiting blind and partially sighted people in Malawi for over 25 years, distributing aid, speaking at churches

and conferences, and holding basic clinics. She has a wealth of stories of answered prayer and miracles. Here's one of them:

Bonde, a partially sighted man, was able to support his family by making dresses and other items with the sewing machine we had given him. He was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and had many sores on his body and especially his back, but there was no chemist nearby to buy and medical items. Bonde was due to come to have his dressings changed, and while I was waiting for him I decided to open a few of the boxes of goods that had come in the container from the UK.

Out of over 200 boxes that still needed opening, I chose a box of shoes. Well, I couldn't believe my eyes, as there, attached inside the lid of the box, was a packet of large plasters! I was so excited, for many reasons. The fact of

opening that particular box out of about 200 was surely the Lord's leading. How did plasters get into a box that contained shoes? God had heard my heart's desire. What joy and delight! This was such an encouragement to Bonde as it made him realise how much God really cared for him, especially in the days that were so difficult for him.

As his body got weaker he was unable to come for his dressings to be changed, so I went to him. Then one day I received a message: Bonde had slipped away to be with Jesus. He was now out of his pain and suffering.

Blessings in Malawi

Next I bring you a greeting from one of Torch's blind trustees, Macdonald Tembo. Macdonald wrote to me rejoicing after the Easter season prayer gathering

at Konsere, attended by almost 500 people with sight loss. He said:

“The messages delivered during the prayer gathering centred much on salvation. Many speakers encouraged the assembly that we should not look down upon ourselves . . . being blind does not deny us to enter heaven. We too are God’s children . . . the only thing is to have faith in Jesus and believe in our hearts that he is our Saviour and the Son of God.”

Hope

[Now come some thoughts on hope – a gift from God which we all need. This short piece has been written by Paula King, who works in Torch House in England as one of the Client Services team.]

Are you someone who hopes for materialistic or emotional fulfilment? Do you hope your football team wins that important match? Do you put your hope in outcomes such as meeting the person of your dreams, or being wealthy, to make your dreams come true?

Be honest! It's very easy to get caught up in the trappings of everyday life and its expectations.

What about spiritual hope? Surely that is something so much deeper and more fulfilling than anything you can imagine? How do you feel about putting all your hopes in God, in his plan for you as you go through life's journey? That is what we are called to do as Christians. So, why don't we? Do we lack trust in God's plan for us? Knowing that spiritual hope is so much richer and more immeasurable than anything we

can imagine, surely it should be a natural thing to do.

Psalm 25:5 says, 'Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.' In Psalm 33:20 we read, 'We wait in hope for the Lord; He is our help and shield.' There are many other verses about hope in the Bible. The word 'hope' appears 180 times in the NIV (English) Bible. You may recall being told that if a phrase or word is repeated, then it is because God is telling us something is important and we need to listen to it.

Perhaps the message about spiritual hope is something you need to hear and attend to today. Are you without spiritual hope? Are you too entangled in the daily mire that you cannot see any hope? I encourage you to lift your eyes to the Lord, as he meets you where you are, taking you by the hand.

Get going for the gospel!

[We all long to see the Gospel transform our own communities around the world. But how do we do that effectively? Here, in this final short article, church leader Yemi Adedeji and Gavin Calver, Director of Mission for the Evangelical Alliance in the UK, give us some challenges around these compelling words of Jesus from Matthew 28]

Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’

First, get going! In the Great Commission in Matthew 28, the Greek which we translate ‘therefore go’ is a mixture of tenses. It’s past, present and future. Jesus is saying, ‘Wherever you have been, wherever you are, and wherever you are going, make disciples.’ But you need to ‘go’! It was as Jesus’s followers fell down in total adoration of him, lost in wonder, love and praise, they were inspired to go on mission. So the first part in transforming lives is to get going.

And, says Yemi, it is this passion for the gospel which inspires us to transform: ‘In working together, we have to feel that faith is contagious and share in the ministry together, from whatever background we are from.’

Second . . . we are called not to make decisions, but to make disciples. An altogether tougher task! The Great Commission is always directed

outwards, to the unreached. Jesus met a downtrodden woman from an unreached Samaritan tribe, who probably worshipped another god. He reached out to her in a conversation that engaged her world, but was also quick to direct the conversation onto her knowing the person of Christ and the transformation that comes by following him. Says Gavin: ‘Every location is a sharing opportunity – the market, the school playground and our workplaces; locations where we live Jesus, show Jesus and help others to walk like Jesus.’

When this seems hard we must remember that nothing shall ever rob us of Jesus’s presence. He adds, ‘Matthew gives us the assurance that this baby to be born would be Immanuel (‘God with us’ Matthew 1:23), and closes with the assurance that he is still with us, until the end of time.

