



Pastor's Page

A Memorable Festival.

Let me remind you good people that this weekend's little break is the last Bank Holiday we'll have until Boxing Day! Now hasn't that cheered you up?! For me this weekend has become inexorably linked with the Gorsley Christian festival which I visited for the first time 6 years ago.

I knew about the event due to the fact that the minister of the church in Gorsley is a friend of mine who became a Christian at the same church as I did in Oldham. Knowing a little about the festival I saw this as a great opportunity to introduce members of my new church to a fairly large Christian gathering. So this is what I did.

My strongest memory from that day is a bitter sweet one, but one that I cherish. It occurred during the evening meeting. The worship officially began at 7.30pm but we were in our places in the 800-seater marquee at about 7.15pm. The music was great as the congregation sang God's praises. There were interviews, sketches, and worship and about half way through (like most good Christian meetings) there was an offering. My minister friend explained what the money was going towards and then said "and after the offering a friend of mine, Mark Simmons, will pray" Well he'd never mentioned this to me, but I wasn't surprised as John is inclined to do such things! So gently pushing past our little group of Selly Parkers I made my way up to the stage. John smiled and said something like "go for it bro" So I "went for it" in a kind of Baptist way! Once the prayer was over I began to walk back to my seat. But even before I had completed my first step John put his hand on my shoulder and said "Mark, do you remember those open-air meetings that we used to do outside Oldham Town Hall?" "What!..., not now John" I muttered under my breath "There are 800 people out there who've come to hear Tony Campolo speak not to hear you and me reminisce on our formative days in Lancashire!" He continued undaunted, giving me feed lines to old gags, and then suggesting old songs that we use to do. I tried to indicate by body language that this was not the time or place for such things, but to no avail. he seemed determined to turn the event into an episode of "The Good Old Days" "What about that song, '*Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water*'" He said. I quickly reminded him that Geoff our old minister used to sing that and I didn't know the words. He then said "Well Geoff's here! - Geoff why don't you come on down and join us?" From here on in it all becomes a bit of a blur! I picked up an electric guitar (which is not really my thing) Geoff who I hadn't seen for years appeared at my side and John called up Tony Campolo (International evangelist, Professor of Sociology and ex-spiritual advisor to President Bill Clinton) to play the spoons!! If I had had my pyjamas on I would have known it was a dream! However the fact that I was wearing fairly normal clothes made me suspect that this was really happening! The four of us then did a unique version of this old, rather cheesy Lynn Anderson song. Geoff as always, sang his heart out and when we finished the audience roared its approval (I think they were just relieved that it was over!) I ran off stage quickly before John got any more bright ideas!

What I didn't know that night was that this would be the last time I ever saw Geoff Jones. He died a few months later. But as I think back to this occasion I am so grateful to the Lord for giving me this final encounter with a man who had been a powerful influence in my life for over 30 years. And my final memory of him is of a man still singing of his saviour, still serving God enthusiastically, and still "putting his hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water". I pray that you and I will do the same, until the end of our days.

26th August 2007