

## Bob Reminisces

Bob sat in the warm sun, looking out across the bay to the sea. He thought of summer camps; they had gone to sea everyday, except Sundays, whatever the weather.

But did they never go on Sundays? He thought about that. Yes, when he had first gone to the summer camp, they had gone on Sundays as well. But, he recalled, the beach was always more crowded on Sundays and people wore less. Each year there seemed to be more people and in the sand dunes one began disturbing couples in positions that seemed odd to young boys. Yes, that must have been the reason they stopped going to the beach on Sundays.

How had he come to be involved in those camps? He could not remember. They were London boys there, except the few that had come from his village; and the camp was run by Plymouth Brethren, so days began and ended with prayers. There was a service each Sunday morning in the building that served as dining hall and meeting place; and in the evenings, he remembered, they sometimes held prayer meetings and 'testimony meetings.'

He remembered the prayer meetings. One was supposed to wait to be moved by the Spirit. But it seemed to him that it was expected that everyone would pray at some point. He remembered he would be wondering "What I am going say?" But he always managed something. Indeed, as he got older he realized that most of the *ex tempore* prayers were almost as formulaic as those he was familiar with in his own church liturgy.

He had been brought up in what he considered was "middle of the road Anglicanism" in his village. So how had he come to go to these summer camps each year? He could not really remember. He recalled that when he first went it was with several boys from the village. He supposed that there must have been one or two with connexions to Plymouth Brethren, though there were, as far he knew, no Plymouth Brethren in the village.

Yes, that was odd, he thought. Over the years the others from the village dropped away; in the end it was only he and his brother that went. They used to look forward to it each year. There was always a lot to do at the camp and they liked living under canvass in those big bell tents.

At first they had gone only for a fortnight each year, but gradually that got extended till they seemed to spend most of the summer there. It got them away from home.

Bob thought of his boyhood years. They were good times and bad times. Would his mum and dad have stayed together if they had been a generation younger, he wondered. Possibly not, he thought; people seem to divorce so readily now.

He thought of his father: how his father would try to do what was right for his children, and of his father's problems with depression and alcohol. The latter his father had eventually controlled, but the former remained with him till the end.

Had he always suffered depression? Was it something to do with his upbringing, Bob wondered. Bob's father had lost his own father when he was very young and his mother in his early teens. Had that triggered depression? Was it because of his experiences in the war?

Bob did not know. He knew his father had joined the Air Force right at the start of World War II, and that his father had wanted to fly but could not because of a color blindness. He knew his father was in Holland at the end of the war. What had he been doing there? His father said very little about the war. Why! He

did not even know what sort of color blindness his father had. Now he would never know.

Memories of his father disturbed Bob. He did not want to think any more, and he began to doze off in the the warm sunshine.

He woke, startled by the squawking of gulls.

Sea-gulls, Bob thought - Llandudno. I never overslept at conferences there, not with those noisy seagulls waking me everyday.

He slowly opened his eyes and looked about him. He was confused. This isn't Llandudno, he thought. I remember Llandudno - its esplanade and that seafront, and the Great Orme. Anyway, conferences were years later.

Years later than what? thought Bob.

Then he remembered the summer camps again. Oh yes, he thought, I liked those camps. I wonder what happened to everyone afterwards.

He thought of those Plymouth Brethren he had once known and long forgotten about. He had always had a soft spot them; from them he had learnt a love of the scriptures and of the Eucharist, which they celebrated Sunday by Sunday. It was through them he had come to take his religion seriously and this had eventually led him to become a Catholic; but that was another matter - his thoughts were still back in his teens.

He recalled those in his village he had known and wondered what had happened to them.

Most of all he recalled Abigail - her dark, black hair and her captivating eyes. He had been a shy, tongue-tied youngster then. He had never told her how he had really felt; yet she had known. He was sure she had known. She had, he thought, also had some feeling for him but they both seem to know deep down that things would not have worked out.

But why not? Bob thought. Were they really so ill-matched? He knew he had once been very fond of Abby. He had heard years later from his mother that Abby had married and had a son. He thought there had been other children, but he was not sure. Wasn't there, he asked himself, some problem? She had had some problem with drink, hadn't she? And wasn't there a divorce?

This made him feel very sad. He wondered if things would have been different if he had married her. He would have made her happy.

But would he? Were they really not ill-matched? He did not know. The thoughts disturbed him. But he would like to have known what had happened to Abby.

Enough of that, he thought. Have I not been happy in my marriage? How long have I been married to Karen? Sixty years is it, or more? I loose count. I wonder where she is now? She's gone to visit someone, I think, but I don't remember whom. She should be coming back soon. I do miss her.

Bob's mind went back to his university days as an undergraduate. It was a happy time, as he recalled. He had freedom he had not known before; he had been responsible for himself but without the responsibilities that came later. He was very fortunate, he remembered, as his grant had been generous; and in those days the drug culture was virtually unknown. Where could he have got drugs, even if he had wished to? He had had of course his fair share of alcohol; but there was certainly no pressure to over-indulge.

He felt sorry for youngsters now with their loans, and insidious peer pressures of all kinds. He hoped his grandchildren would survive this. He preferred not to think too much about that; he felt more comfortable in the past.

He wondered what had happened to those he had known at university. How

had they made out.? He had kept in touch with some; but gradually over the years he had lost contact with most.

It had been there he had met Karen; that had been in his final year, though it was two more years before they had married.

He thought about the time his children were young. As he looked out over the sea in the afternoon sun, Bob recalled summer holidays in caravans by the sea. They had been very happy times. He tried to think of the different holidays but they seem to keep running one into another, like some great long holiday with the sun always shining, with sands and rock pools and splashing and swimming in the sea. Where had all that time gone?

Bob was vaguely aware that his children were now grown up. Indeed, they must be. He had grandchildren, hadn't he? Yes, they came to see him where he was staying. Why was he here?

He remembered: Karen had gone away. Where had she gone to? He could not remember but he knew she would be coming back. Of course, he had come here to wait for her. It was very nice. Not, of course, like the hotels he had stayed in at conferences in Llandudno, Brighton, Harrogate, Scarborough and other places. He had like Scarborough; a very pretty place, he thought. But he had been disappointed with Brighton. He did not remember the other places so well.

But he was not at a conference now; that he was sure about. It was more like a holiday, but not like those holidays in a caravan by the sea. There were no children here; that's, he thought, why I like seeing the grandchildren so much. I miss children. Yes, he thought as he closed his eyes in the late afternoon sun, yes, I miss children.

Then he saw Karen coming towards him.

"I knew you would come back. I've missed you, Karen," he said. "I have missed you very much."

"And I've missed you too, Bob," said Karen. "I'm back now. I shan't leave you again; you are coming home with me."

Shortly afterwards Sister Anne came onto the terrace; it was time to bring Bob into tea. She looked at Bob in his wheelchair. She knew that Bob would not be having tea that evening, as she crossed herself and prayed that his soul rest in peace.