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***‘Coming alongside them…’***

**Stories from the towpath in the life of a Waterways Chaplain**

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B J Davis 2022©

*Fictional stories based on real life experiences*

**The One Where God Preserves A Life**

We pulled up into the car park after a quiet drive back from bridge 22; the air was full of our troubled thoughts. Neither of us were satisfied with having to leave him in the state he was in but what can we do now? He may not survive overnight and could well be found floating in the cut tomorrow. I had to go back to work tomorrow and Lizzie has Grandkids to look after.

“Let’s pray”, says Lizzie, expressing what we were both thinking and we bowed our heads and pleaded for Simon before the throne of Grace, praying for wisdom and guidance.

Simon had been referred to ‘us’, the small Waterways Chaplaincy, by the boating authority Canal & River Trust- ‘The Trust’. The licensing officer Graham was concerned after he had been to see him as he wasn’t paying his narrowboat license and had stayed well past the 14 days he was allowed to be moored up in the same spot along the canal.

“He was as white as a sheet, there didn’t look like a fire going and he said he was hungry even though he was moored near a pub selling food!” Graham explained to Lizzie, “He didn’t seem stable on his feet either and I think he’s in trouble.”

Lizzie called me and we arranged to go together but the earliest we could go was Sunday – 2 days away. It was Lizzie who had come to meet me when I had seen an interview she had done about the new, growing work of the volunteer Waterways Chaplaincy. I didn’t know there was a Chaplaincy but I did know there were a lot of Christians on the Waterways either living on their narrowboats or using them for holidays. I’d seen them when I had been on boating holidays with my friends. They had a little green fish in the window with ‘BCF’ on it: Boaters Christian Fellowship. I’d just bought my first narrowboat and used it at weekends which were longer now as I was only teaching 4 days a week. I was sure I would have time to help my boating friends in that time – was this what God was calling me to now?

The answer to that thought was ‘yes!’ I joined around 20 other volunteers who had been called to serve their neighbours on the waterways but we were spread very thinly over far too much waterway! I wasn’t even a proper Chaplain at that time – I was a probationary one. It had been a steep learning curve but one which God was guiding my, and other Waterways Chaplains steps. We were shining God’s light into the corners of the hidden communities now living on boats instead of on land. A good life. A friendly life. It could also be a lonely life at times. And those times were the ones we hoped to be there for.

We’d arranged to go and see Simon around 2 on the Sunday afternoon and found him moored quite close to Bridge 22 which carried a small road. Sure enough even though it was early spring there was no fire going from his little cruiser boat made of fibreglass. He wasn’t exactly sure who were but saw our dark navy gilets with ‘Waterways Chaplain’ in big white letters (we often do a little twirl to show what is on the back) and must have decided we were alright and invited us in. It became very apparent, very quickly, that he was in trouble. There was no heat – a wood stove sat dark and cold in the corner surrounded by dozens of empty bottles. He’d been sleeping on the sofa and invited us to sit on top of the bedding to chat.

We started to chat with Simon and quickly found out that his son was in the army but couldn’t get to see him for a while. His engine had broken down and he didn’t have any money for diesel. He couldn’t remember what he last ate and we could see in his eyes he was searching deep to try and find the answer. But his eyes also told us he was ill, they were gaunt and bloodshot; the red of his eyes standing out against his white face. I asked if he was seeing a Dr and he said he was and there was a letter in the ‘kitchen’ I could read. I found the letter quickly as the kitchen area was empty and that there was no food in his kitchen, not even a single tin. The letter was from a Mental Health Clinic and was a few months old.

“Can we contact this Dr for you and tell them you need to see them?” I asked as there was nowhere for him to charge a phone. He agreed and signed the bottom of the letter after I had written a statement. One of us would find some time tomorrow to call.

I had vouchers to give out for a local foodbank but they weren’t open until tomorrow. It was about 3pm Sunday afternoon and we were not close to any large supermarkets but remembered there was a garage not far away and they had a little food section – maybe we could get him something to eat there and maybe some logs for the fire?

We were able to get to the little shop and back before it closed at 4pm. We bought food that could be eaten straight away with no cooking like sandwiches, sausage rolls, fruit, bread, cheese, milk and some fire logs that just required lighting with no extra coal or wood but gave out a good load of heat.

Before we left, promising to return and let him know what the Drs said, I reminded him about the voucher I had written for him, “What’s that for again?” Simon asked, “New shoes?”

Lizzie and I looked at each other, he couldn’t remember.

So, you can imagine what it was like having to leave him. Somehow we had to get back to him with a plan for some help. We called the NHS 111 service and they said they would call us back. They never did.

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The next morning I received a message from Lizzie, she’d gone back and parked the car practically blocking the path from the bridge to get to Simon. He was alive but when she got him off the boat, his legs were weak but she just about managed to get him up the short muddy path to the car to take him to A&E.

“We think it’s pneumonia” the Dr told Lizzie, “we’ll keep him in and alert the mental health team.”

We continued in our prayers and got the other Chaplains on the Prayer Chain to pray for him too, visiting him a couple of times a week in hospital. It was a short while before he remembered who we were but he was slowly growing stronger. We chatted and it felt right to ask him if he would like me to pray with him. “Please,” he replied, “I don’t know what’s gonna happen – it’s a good job you came eh?”

“Gods timing is perfect,” I replied.

He told us he’d been in touch with a friend and was going to stay with him when he was discharged. “I’m thinking that living on the cruiser is too much for me right now. I think I’ll sell it and see what happens.”

When he was better he did just that and found some accommodation to get fully well in and move onto the next part of his life.

**The One Where ‘Nothing’ Happened**

So, I was a probationary Waterways Chaplain. Not really sure what I was doing but was prepared to go out and do ‘it’ anyway. If I was going out walking along the canal with my dark navy blue gilet on, I prayed. That much I did know what to do.

The Waterways Chaplaincy was new, particularly around here. People would need to get to know us, to trust us, but I was only one Chaplain on a canal stretch of around 20 miles, the same for Lizzie probably. That was out of 2,000 miles of waterways – a drop in a bucket. Or a canal.

It was a cold walk but the towpath was not as muddy as I was expecting as there was a solid base under most of the winter mud. The mud was criss-crossed with cycle, dog and boot tracks. But no one was around now. I continued walking, darting around large muddy puddles on the towpath. A lone dog walker came around the corner towards me, we look at each other and say ‘hello’ and carry on our ways. I prayed for them and their family that God would speak into their life, draw them near to Him, revealing Himself to them.

Eventually I come to a section where there are some boats moored up but it is getting towards an early spring evening and no one is out. The contents of a couple of boats have spilled out onto the towpath; a bag of rubbish waiting to be taken to the bins, the odd door mat where boaters disembark, empty water containers waiting to be filled. The well-decks have a cacophony of belongings like neatly stacked coal sacks and wood, foraged wood tossed in the deck for kindling, folded chairs ,boxes of boaters’ booty, an axe, the odd burnt-out battery.

You think they don’t see you- but they do. As I walk past, I pray again for whoever may be inside. They see the large letters, if not this time, the next. There is one small green boat, maybe 40 foot, the curtain in the galley pulls as I walk past and smile in case I’m seen. Smoke is coming from the chimney so it has probably not long been lit as the smoke comes as the fire warms. Just after the small line of boats is a lock with a lovely lock cottage by the side. A blackboard on the wall decorated with ‘boaters roses’ says they offer services to the boaters with supplies of coal, wood, rope, oil, mooring pins, milk, tea and coffee, matches and water from the tap by the side of the lock. All beautifully sign written by hand. A couple of swans approach as they see me head towards the cottage hoping I have food for them, which, alas, I don’t.

I tentatively knock on the cottage door. “We don’t knock on boats,” I can remember Lizzie tell me, “It’s an invasion of their privacy and the boaters don’t like it. It’s their home.” A tall slim gentleman comes to the door and I smile. It’s cold so the door isn’t completely opened. “Hi, I’m Jayne and you may have seen me around walking up and down, I’m a volunteer Waterways Chaplain. We are here if people want us,” I quickly add as I see he is not sure where the conversation is going, “We are happy to come and listen if anyone needs someone to talk to and maybe help if there is anything we can do. A friendly ear. We don’t preach,” I added with a smile, “may I put one of my cards in your window if anyone needs us, please?” He seemed relieved that was all I was asking and agreed. I smiled and left after my bumbling introduction and prayed quickly for whoever lived in that house.

I make it back to my car just as it would have been too dark to walk safely on the towpath without a torch. Note to self: put a small torch in your gilet pocket. Nothing much to record in the little note book in my pocket. ‘Informal conversations:’? I record 1 counting the gentleman out with his dog. ‘Formal conversations: 1 again, I write, counting the lock keeper because at least it was a couple of sentences.

This was a typical walk out on the towpath for my first year. The one where nothing (much) happened. I did a lot of walking, praying, giving out leaflets, even got to tell a number of dog walkers what a Waterways Chaplain was after reading it from my back on coming up behind me.

The man in the little green boat was introduced to me one day by the owner of the lock cottage. I brought him coffee and cake and we sat and chatted about things. One of which I can remember made me very sad at the time. “I like fishing,” he said quietly, “at least I can get a meal that way.” I was able to help him later sort out some addition to his pension and bring him some shopping now and again until the extra money came in.

The man in the lock cottage became a good friend with Lizzie and I over time, sometimes we even got a free cup of tea or coffee! As he heard over time from other boaters coming through the lock how the river chaplains had helped them, he then started doing the same. People chat as they go through a lock, especially here where boaters may stop for a few supplies and ask for recommendations where to shop, or moor. He would recommend us if they needed some help and mentioned they were struggling. We would come alongside, smile, sit and listen. One of those dog walkers because a Waterways Chaplain a couple of years later.

**The One Where He Walked!**

They were there waiting for me to come in on the Friday afternoon. They were always smiling but this time they were both there together waiting for me, even more excited.

Two dear boating friends of mine, Jean and Sam, were always there on a Friday evening when I came down to my boat with a smile and a chat. They were made for each other, two but one. We would often go out for a meal together with a few other friends and then Saturday morning I’d make bacon sandwiches and take them over in exchange for a cup of tea.

On a previous weekend, I had come down to the little marina where my boat was moored and here they were again, but a little occupied and worried. As I was balancing on the front of my boat to put the hose in to top up the water tank, Jean came over and asked how my week had been? Busy few days teaching, then catching up with sleep, a walk along the canal this morning and then here.

“We’ve been really busy these last few weeks with a neighbour of ours, Tony, he’s really struggling health wise; he’s not steady on his feet anymore and had to go into a wheel chair. It’s made him really down but we love him to bits. We’re not sure what to do.” My friends would find that hard as they have hearts of gold and are very sensitive to other peoples’ situations. “He’s not himself, he needs to be in a care home really and although he has agreed to this, we can’t find one for him. He’s not himself. We take him into a home which we think is great but he just doesn’t feel at home. Would you pray for him? We need a good home for him”

I smiled, “Of course I will.” I jumped down off the bow onto the pontoon and went inside to put the kettle on so we could continue to catch up.

So, the following Friday when I came in they didn’t even wait for me to settle in with my bags.

“We found a home for him! You wouldn’t believe it – we managed to persuade him to come to this care home not too far from us, but didn’t hold out much hope. We pushed Tony in and staff came to welcome us. Tony listened and then we took him around.

By the time we came back into the reception hall, he was smiling and even stood up to shake hands with the manager! We couldn’t believe it! It must have been the prayers from the Chaplaincy – thank you, thank you so much. We can’t tell you how much this means to us and him.”

**The One Where He Was Walking In Water**

I came across Roy as he wasn’t moored too far from me. Paul, on a boat near him, was obviously worried about him as he caught my eye one Saturday morning after I had come back from breakfast with other boaters.

I lingered to chat with Paul whilst the others went on. I knew Paul as we had met before and I’d invited him onto the front of my boat for a coffee and bacon sandwich. He was on his own, just brushing the leaves off the top of his boat one morning just as I was making breakfast so I said I had plenty and would he like some?

“Will you come with me and have a chat with him? We’re quite friendly and if you come too and I introduce you, he might be alright with you as well” Paul explained. “He’s in a bit of a state but won’t do anything about it. He could lose his job if he doesn’t get sorted as sometimes he drinks too much and keeps being late or calling in sick. You’ll get a shock if he lets you on his boat. He’s a lovely guy, he’s helped other boaters in the past but now it’s his turn for some help.” He smiled, “I’ve heard you Chaplains help others without being preachy.” I smiled back.

Their two white cruiser boats were moored amongst others near a lovely old Flint Mill dating back from as far as the late 18th century on the canal – I’d visited it before. Loads of work had been carried out by volunteers on the Mill as the wheel turned freely now but was no longer grinding flint. They had also renovated a tiny cottage next to it with an equally tiny cottage garden. The cottage had a very low roof with two rooms both down and up. It had been completed to show the possible furnishings from that period, what you would once have called ‘quaint’ but now we say ‘compact & bijou’!

I put my Chaplaincy gilet on and we set off for the short walk down the towpath to where they were moored. Roy was sitting outside on a folding camping chair, enjoying the morning sun.

“This is Jayne” Paul announced, “She helps people, she’s really nice; this is the lady I told you about that makes me bacon sandwiches if I’m around. I make sure I’m around a lot!” he said unashamedly with a grin. We all smiled and started chatting about the area Roy was moored as he was new to this part of the canal; where the bins are, the shops – that type of thing. Then we talked about the name of his boat, how long he had had it, why he’d bought one until finally one of us brought up the real reason I was there.

“He won’t tell you but he’s not got much food at the moment and doesn’t get paid until the end of next week.” Roy looked away down the canal.

“Roy, may I help you out with some shopping to tie you over until you get paid?” It’s always best to ask and not assume anyone wants or will accept help. Jesus often asked those who came to him what they wanted him to do for them. Roy was obviously comfortable with this approach as he turned back, “I’m just a bit short this week, but a few bits would help I suppose. Thanks”

As we discussed what sorts of food he liked it emerged that he didn’t have any means of heating it apart from a small gas camping stove but no canisters. I added them to my mental list. I later brought back food that mostly didn’t require heating sandwiches, pasties, soups, cheese, ham, bread, coffee, pasteurised milk, chocolate, some fruit etc. Not exactly a balanced diet but one that is necessary at the moment.

As I arrived back with the shopping, Paul appeared from inside with Roy and asked me in.

Well!

“Please be careful” Roy said, “It’s a bit damp in here.” That was an understatement – there must have been a couple of inches of water in the cabin area in the cruiser. I started telling him what was in the shopping bags, and he took out the sandwich on the top and started eating it.

“Have you got anywhere to store the cold bits?” I asked, “Just this cold box” he replied as he pulled out a 12V cold box that wasn’t plugged in. Inside the cool box there was some water slopping around complete with a few dead flies. “Aahh, this needs a little clean out- shall I take it back to my boat later and give it a rinse for you?” He nodded.

“I’ve got a leak somewhere,” he finally shared about the water on the floor, “I’ve got to get around to fixing it.”

“I’ll help!” Paul piped up. I added that I had a hand pump that I used for getting water out of my engine bay and we could use that. I disappeared quickly to go and get it as Roy was finding somewhere to put his bits of shopping. Between us, Paul and I were able to pump out the water and find out where the leak was coming in because Paul climbed under the bed area and fixed it with a fiberglass mix. It was a good job he was small. Roy started to smile a bit after eating some more from the shopping and putting what he could in the ‘cold’ box.

“What do I owe you?”

“Nothing, we’re glad to help.” I replied

“But why – why do all this?

“It’s not much,” I said with a smile

“She’s a Chaplain!” Paul piped up, “They share with people.”

“Yes, that’s true. We know God loves us, so we go and try to be God’s hands and feet on the towpath to show that love to others if we can.”

He was a little shy at my reply, “Well, thank you, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome! I’m just glad to don’t have to slop around in water when you get out of bed in the morning; not a good start to the day.” I smiled and left.

**The One With The Spotless Mud**

There were two large round patches of cleared mud up from a little track off the towpath leading into some trees. They weren’t quite crop circles but definitely unusual especially as one had a crucifix shape marked out in stones in it, maybe a foot long. There were no leaves in the area or rubbish, it had been very carefully done by someone.

One day whilst walking the opposite direction to my normal walk. A couple of gentlemen came up behind me walking their dogs. “What’s a Waterways Chaplain then?” One asked, obviously reading the back of my gilet.

“We’re here to chat and help with people along the waterways. Sometimes people just want someone else to sit and listen to them, so we do that, we come alongside them, buy them a coffee and listen.” I joined them very carefully on their narrow towpath walk for a short distance.

“Is that all?” Asked the walker with a little Pug, a bit disappointed.

“Sometimes…” I smiled back, unapologetically, “… then we may never see them again as the boats move off around the system. People don’t mind that as they just want some time spent with someone who cares and they think they will never see us again.”

“Do they? See you again, I mean?” asked the Pug man.

“It may not be me, but we have Waterways Chaplains around the system now so they may bump into another Chaplain. God works in mysterious ways.”

“Oh, Ok, thanks,” he said as they disappeared and took a little path away from where we were across the field full of buttercups.

As I used Bridge 64 to follow the towpath across the other side and spotted a couple of tents in the woods just up from the towpath. I went up there, but the tents were sealed and there was no sight nor sound of anyone. I silently prayed for whoever they belonged to and decided to walk back this way in the morning. Before I left, I sent a quick message to the text prayer chain for others to pray for the occupants and the possibility of meeting them.

The next morning they were there; it was still before ten and they were each sitting in their respective tent doors. I smiled as I came up in the trees as they spotted me. People like their privacy – we understand that, and take people as we find them and treat them the same – with dignity.

“Good morning,” I called out as I got closer but not too close. Each little tent sat in a cleared circle of ground in the trees. Any leaves or buds had been cleared away; it was immaculate. In front of one of the tents, the one with the older gentleman, were stones fashioned in the shape of a crucifix a little way from his front door.

“I’m a Chaplain on the canal and I spotted your tents yesterday. I hope you don’t mind but I just wanted to check you were both ok? I couldn’t go by again without checking. I’m Jayne.”

The older gentleman got out and came and shook my hand, “I’m James – that’s Pete,” he said pointing to the younger.

“I love the cross you made – what’s that for?” I’ve found it’s best to not always assume in these things as we meet people of all different spiritual backgrounds.

“I believe in God,” James replied, “It helps me to remember and keeps me safe. I like to keep things clean around here to as it’s around the cross.” He continued.

I shared a little of how I had been walking yesterday and spotted the tents after I’d spoken to a couple of dog walkers on the towpath. “They took their dogs into a field of buttercups – you should have seen the Labrador when he came out all covered in yellow pollen! Hope they didn’t have to get the dogs into their cars – their seats would be full o f yellow pollen – that would not be easy to get out!”

“Is there anything I can help you with although you seem to have everything under control here?”

“My sleeping bag is a bit wet,” replied Pete, “it was my dad’s, but it must have touched the tent last night and got damper than normal.”

“I’ve got a spare one in my car if you like, then you can dry out your dad’s one out and use the spare and vice versa.”

“Great, thanks, that’s great.”

“I’ve been out in my tent for a year now,” James added, “it would be helpful to have a couple of jumpers and some water bottles. We always need water and it’s a long walk to the tap down on the canal.”

We often find homeless people down by the canal. I suppose it’s because boaters are very friendly and the people in the tents feel safer, boaters are happy to share what they have, especially with someone who is down on their luck. The other reason must be that there are water taps along the cut. We all need water to drink and wash, and this is free.

I returned the next day with 2 2litre bottles of water (as that was all I could carry), a few men’s jumpers that I kept in the cupboard at home, donated by my next door neighbour, were stuffed in my rucksack and a carry-a-bag with some chocolate bars and biscuits in; it’s always nice to have a little treat where ever you are.

Thankfully, there were still there when I returned. From my gilet pocket I took out a slim blue Waterways Chaplaincy New Testament, “I brought this for you too, James. I’ve written your name in the front. There are also sections there where it gives you the page number you might be looking for when you might want some help with things like praying, grief or comfort – all sorts of things. We like to share them as they are special to us. I’ve got one for you, Pete, I’ve written your name into.” I pointed out the Chaplaincy logo on the front.

When I returned that way ten days later, they were gone. So were James and Pete. You could still see the rough round shape, as I knew where to look, but bits of old leaves had blown across the circles and small weeds were starting to pop up. The stone cross shape was still there.

**The One With Beer Over The Bow**

It must have looked really strange to anyone who wasn’t a boater with me pouring a large bottle of beer over his bow. Thankfully it was quite late in the evening and, although dark, the Tunnel Light on the front deck gave us an eerie glow.

Not only did we arrive late with hardly any daylight left on this summer evening, we were shattered, missed an amazing meal, the fish and chip shop had just closed and I had to make do with a pasta salad from the local supermarket and a chocolate bar! I say ‘I’ as the ‘we’ was a friend from my Church who had come along to help me with the locks as I’d had to stay late at work and it would have been nearly impossible for me to get there for the special ‘christening’. He had left quickly and jumped straight back onto a train. Thankfully everyone else I was due to meet down at the festival was quite happy and fed, and we all meandered down the partially lit towpath towards Wills new boat.

It was unusual for the towpath to be lit, but this is a boating festival. Solar LED’S abound – white, red, blue, multi-coloured, flashing, chasing through multiple buntings high above the boat into the night sky.

It was all happening totally as I wasn’t expecting; I needed to take a breath really, but everyone wanted to push on so it could be done tonight. I prayed silently as I walked down, for peace and clarity to share what I’d prepared. And energy.

One tradition on the cut is that when you rename a boat, you have a blessing said for it. I say ‘one’ tradition as no one can agree exactly how it is done; with the boat in the water, with the boat out of the water, with beer, with champagne, with a blessing or ‘no need to bother with all that’. This was a champagne one, but we were ‘going to drink it not waste it over the front’,Will had decreed. It was his new boat, new to him, and he had given it a new name which was now beautifully scribed in large letters on the side. The others had obviously seen the name as Will had brought the boat straight to the festival but he wanted a blessing. William was a graceful boating gentleman, caring, loud, rude. But he did love to share his boat with others and often invited friends in for a meal.

You might be thinking about how we ‘all’ got inside the boat? It was a wide-beam one, only useful on parts of the canals as not all the locks on the system were built wide enough – mostly where they were used to move goods like coal and aggregates. Most locks were wide enough to get a boat in no wider than 7 foot.

Guests sat in the chairs and sofa, a few stood and I sat on the arm of the sofa so I could be seen.

“Over to you Jayne,” Will said as he fell back into a chair with a fresh glass of champagne.

“I think we all know Will, and if you don’t you have certainly heard his loud laugh. It’s an unusual name you will now find on the side of this boat, ‘Quiescence’! You may not of heard of this word before and you may find it harder to pronounce this evening after your meal and drink…” some around the room were trying to say it, “…but Will tells me he heard it in a radio quiz once. He didn’t know what it meant either so was surprised when the quiz host said it meant ‘peace and at rest’. He knew straight away that that was the new name he wanted for his boat!

Jesus often spent time by water, in the towns around the rivers and lakes. Sometimes he got in a boat, nothing like this one, but a fishing boat to travel around the area with his friends, the disciples who were used to the water. Jesus sometimes asked people he met, ‘What would you like me to do for you?’ People might ask for healing, to settle a quarrel, what to do with their money or just ask for clarification on what he was sharing. Very few, if any, asked for peace or how to know the peace of God. “Come to me, everyone who is burdened, tired, fed up – I will give you rest (or peace),” Jesus said, and he could say it as he was God come down. Very few asked him about this peace. Might any of you here tonight consider this question and answer Jesus by saying we want peace with God, peace in our lives, a way back to respond to God through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection? May God bless this boat and it be a place of peace and rest for Will and anyone who comes aboard. May it be a place to reflect and consider, to be still, and even better, may each of you here this evening, pray and ask God for his perfect peace in your lives.”

The room was silent after I finished, but just for a moment or two.

“Right, let’s do the deed!” Will got up and picked up a large bottle of beer from beside him. We all moved towards the front deck, the bow, and as Will poured the beer out over the very front of the bow (careful not to get it onto the deck) everyone cheered.

I slept well that night.

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**Boating Vocabulary**

‘the cut’ a term on the canals for the canal where they have literally been ‘cut out of’ the ground.

‘bow’ the front of a boat

‘stern’ the back of a boat

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