

The Greatest Injustice in the World ... and the Greatest Love



David Hull speaks to Nicky and Pippa Gumbel about biblical revelation, renewal and revival, hallmarks throughout their life of ministry.

‘Unfortunately, Nicky fell through the shower the day we arrived. It smashed and we spent quite a bit of time in casualty, having his hands stitched together. He ended up looking like an extraordinary visual aid!’ Pippa described the striking scene as she spoke of her trip to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, where Nicky preached on Easter Day 2023.

The day proved to be extraordinarily providential in more ways than one. They had received and accepted the invitation some time previously, and yet it would provide the perfect setting for the launch of Alpha International’s 2033 initiative, with ten years to go until the two-thousandth anniversary of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is an initiative that has become a driving passion of their shared ministry since stepping down from the leadership of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) two years ago.

Standing side by side in ministry, Rev. Nicky Gumbel, former Vicar of HTB and Pioneer of the Alpha Course, and his wife Pippa will be well-known to our readers. It is a ministry marked by an emphasis on making Jesus known, undergirded by an unshakeable belief in the unique, combined power of the Bible and the Holy Spirit. I was glad to have the opportunity to update them on our fresh focus for MET:Revive and to hear their reflections on our shared convictions. The themes of biblical revelation, renewal and revival flowed freely, intertwining the conversation.

THE BIBLE IS WHERE I ENCOUNTER JESUS

Nicky and Pippa are known to many around the world through their daily Bible reading initiative, recently rebranded The Bible with Nicky and Pippa Gumbel (not their choice of name!) Now in its fifteenth year, the project started in 2009 and has produced a new version every two years: from the original classic version, which takes people through the whole Bible in one year with comments from Nicky and Pippa – in about 25 minutes a day – to a ‘10-second version’ of a verse, thought and prayer for the day circulated on social media. ‘There’s something for

every season of life,’ says Nicky. ‘Some days people have time for the longer version; sometimes they can only fit in something shorter – there’s something for everyone!’

I asked what he himself had discovered from these years of intensive work on the Bible. ‘The Bible speaks today! God still speaks through what he has spoken. It’s far more important that God speaks to me than I speak to him, and the main way in which he speaks to me is through the Bible. It’s how I encountered Jesus in the first place and it continues to be the main way in which I encounter him now.’

‘What have I learned? – I have so much more to learn,’ answers Pippa. ‘You learn something new every day, that’s the amazing thing, and you don’t get bored with the Bible. I enjoy the discipline – Nicky is much more disciplined than I am, and I need that – something to read every day. I go through different phases – at first, I was struck by much of the humour of the Bible. Now, with the wars, I’m much more aware of the seriousness of what’s going on. The emphasis constantly changes.’

THE FLOWING WATER IS WHERE I SWIM

The influence of daily Bible reading is evident even in our brief conversation. To keep on top of the schedule, Nicky works about three weeks ahead. ‘The verse that struck me today,’ he mentioned, ‘is “out of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).’

Suddenly, he is talking about another great passion of his life: ‘We need water coming in and water going out. I swim in the Serpentine in the morning. Water comes in and water goes out. A swimming pool might look clean, but it’s full of chlorine; it’s actually very dirty. The Serpentine looks dirty, but really it’s clean, because the water flows.’

It’s a picture of renewal. ‘It’s what our lives and our churches need: water coming in and water going out. Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8) – power flowing in and power flowing out. If we don’t have water coming in, we dry up; if we don’t have water going out, we become like the Dead Sea with no life.’

Since leaving HTB, Nicky and Pippa have joined Holy Trinity Clapham – once William Wilberforce’s church – which HTB has helped to rejuvenate. ‘Evangelism is the water flowing in; for us that’s Alpha.’ Nicky and Pippa are now leading their 101st Alpha group in unbroken succession. ‘We’re also always looking to plant churches. That’s the water flowing out. It’s a way to keep churches healthy and young. Give away your best people! – It makes room for new leaders to emerge.’

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THE WAVES ARE WHERE I SURF

Flowing water provides a picture of revival, too. ‘The Holy Spirit flows in waves. Sometimes it can seem very powerful and dramatic, at other times it is much quieter and calmer. We’re much less interested in the manifestation; it’s what happens in the heart that matters. God is incredibly generous.’ He takes us back to his daily reading: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, running over, will be poured into your lap” (Luke 6:38). ‘All we have to do is ask!’

‘When you see a wave coming,’ Pippa adds, ‘you want to get on board, to ride with it, and to make sure the old don’t stand back and think, “That’s not the way we did things in our day.” I have been very encouraged by the Asbury movement in the US, which has continued in universities and churches across the country, growing spontaneously amongst students. It all begins with seeking the presence of God. Before we can change the world, he has to change us first, and fill us with his Spirit.’

Nicky and Pippa’s heart for the young, for encouraging them to live for Jesus, raising them up in ministry, cheering them on, and passing on the baton, shines as they speak. ‘It gives us much joy,’ says Pippa.

They handed on the leadership of HTB two years ago, and now they have a ten-year plan for handing on Alpha. It will take them to Easter Day, 17 April 2033, two thousand years on from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nicky’s vision is as clear as ever, ‘Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of ALL nations” (Matthew 28:19). How are we doing? We have a massive opportunity to make the message of Jesus available to everyone on the planet. Amongst many terrible injustices, the greatest injustice in the world is never to have heard about Jesus. The greatest act of love is to tell people the good news about Jesus.



‘There have been moments in history when there has been the potential for exponential growth for the gospel. To name three, the first was Roman roads in the first century, enabling the gospel to go out in an extraordinary way. Next, was the printing press in Gutenberg. A hundred years later, Martin Luther was printing 5000 copies of the New Testament every week. This is the third. We now have technology which enables us to reach the entire globe. How is that going to be done? We believe our part is to make Alpha available to everyone on the planet by 2033 and we’ve already started work on a number of contextualised versions of the videos. Ten years gives us long enough to make it feel achievable, and short enough that most people can hope to be alive by that date!

‘We need everyone to do what they can to play their part. Some people will have a vision for everyone in their street, others for everyone in their town, or their nation, or their continent. It will require every local church ... every organisation ... every one of the 2.3 billion Christians around the world, all getting involved, asking ‘Lord, what can I do?’ and doing what they can to get the message out. All of us, working together, can do it!’



REV DR DAVID A. HULL

Rev Dr David A. Hull, Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together, is a Methodist Minister, currently serving as Lead Pastor of Freedom Church Bristol.

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