

# Vicar's Pastoral Letter

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**Subject :** What's your inspiration and how do you measure success?

Dear Friends,

One of the people who first drew me towards the Christian faith was not a character from the Bible, not even Jesus, but an artist: Vincent Van Gogh. Van Gogh's painting "Sunflowers" is one of the best known and most valuable works in the history of art and yet the artist himself lived in abject poverty and obscurity crippled with mental illness and eventually took his own life.

What was it about this man that attracted me to him and provided a prelude to my own Christian journey? It was two connected things: firstly, his humility. Van Gogh lived, worked and ultimately died with those whom society regarded as the lowest of the low: those who would never amount to anything in worldly terms and indeed were rejected and viewed as an embarrassment and a scourge on society. He didn't live with them because he was "investigating" them or because it was a trendy thing to do but because he was one of them. Van Gogh wasn't making a documentary but living a life. But, secondly, he saw in these dregs of society a dignity and an authenticity that he didn't find in the highly Christian, middle class, home of his upbringing and this led him to have an unquenchable lust for life and a deep desire to reveal the heart of things whether painting peasants in the field or the wonders and glories of nature.

Although society was cruel to him and others, nevertheless he had a passion for life and it is this passion that is conveyed in all of his work. Why did Van Gogh paint? Was it to become famous or wealthy? Most certainly not! He only sold a handful of paintings in his lifetime for a few francs and some of these were used to board up a pig sty! He painted because for him it was the right thing to do and because he could do no other. It was his expression and outpouring of his passion for life.

And it was this similar outpouring and passion that I discovered in the life of Jesus. The forerunner of Jesus was John the Baptist whilst for me the forerunner of my own Christian journey was Vincent Van Gogh. There is no doubt that the gods of our modern society are fame and fortune and we live in the age of the "celeb" where glitzy so called "successful" people are ever dangled before our eyes with the implication that if you're not one of them then somehow you're a failure. Am I immune from this? No. Would I personally like fame and fortune? If I'm honest, Yes. Am I likely to ever get it? No. Is it a right aspiration and would it be the right way to go? Most certainly not! I'm being honest about this because I suspect that very few of us, deep down, wouldn't secretly like a go at being famous and rich. But, sour grapes apart, there is a better way to live and greater things to aspire to.

In the wilderness, during His temptations, Jesus was offered instant satisfaction in turning stones into bread. He was offered fame in performing stunts by throwing Himself off the pinnacle of the Temple and landing safely. He was offered power and wealth by claiming all the kingdoms of the world were He to give His soul to the devil. Jesus was indeed tempted in every way like us but, unlike us, He did not give in to temptation and He told the devil to get behind Him and kept His focus on God, God's righteousness, and the purpose and path that God had set before Him. Jesus is not a "celeb" but a Saviour! He was penniless, lived and associated with the dregs of society and was ultimately rejected and crucified as an outcast by those He had come to save. He was buried as an unknown in an unknown and unmarked tomb.

This is the price you pay for following Jesus and the question to all of us is "Are we prepared to pay it?" You may not win an Oscar and you will not become a star and yet your star will shine in the purposes and Kingdom of God. You will have a lust for life that will carry you over into the next and ultimately God, not the public, will be your judge. And if you need any proof then I recommend that you go and look at a copy of Van Gogh's Sunflowers and remember the passion that went into it. And then have a look at the Cross and contemplate The Passion of our Lord Jesus. And where are they now? Van Gogh's paintings are virtually priceless and Jesus paid the price for all of us when He died upon the Cross and rose again to become The Saviour of The World.

With every blessing for this season of Lent.

*Peter*

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