**PAUL STAFFORD**

**(currently in LLM training in the Diocese of Monmouth)**

I was fortunate to grow up in a loving family with parents of very modest means who sacrificed much for my education. My father was a Roman Catholic who became alienated from the church when his parish priest refused to marry him to a non-Catholic. My mother grew up with her Calvinistic Methodist grandparents, but early years of two or three times Sunday chapel, followed by the convent school in Holyhead and then by marriage to my father, meant that I grew up in a household where there was distrust of religion. Christianity was little understood and church was not attended. My teachers at my first school inculcated an abiding respect for a mysterious God; but religious education at my second school was not a serious curriculum subject. So through my teens I regarded God as distant, unknowable and judgmental; while Jesus was a white-robed hero in Victorian illustrations in the bible I was given as a child but, because it was the AV, could not understand.

I discovered Jesus at university and accepted Him, hesitantly, tentatively, encouraged by older friends who became ordained. I read the bible daily; and with others, weekly, in groups. After graduating, the single permanent feature of my life which has brought the longest, deepest friendships has been the weekly house group where, with others of all ages from whichever church I was attending at the time, we would share a meal in someone’s home, study scripture and pray. I realise now this house group model was something similar to the Eucharistic fellowship of the early church, and it has convinced me that house groups ought to be present in every church. Faith does not grow and cannot easily be shared unless we daily engage with scripture so that we can find God in Jesus. And we need to discuss scripture with others so that we can learn from and encourage one another.

My working life has been spent first as an academic, teaching history at Oxford, and then as a barrister in London. One morning ten years ago, I was reading Luke 12.48: ‘from everyone who has been given much, much will be expected; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.’ Sometimes scripture shouts at you. I felt I had been given and entrusted with the knowledge of scripture for so many years that I ought to do what I could for others to find that same abundant life that Jesus had given me. So I decided to explore vocation, primarily so that I could teach and help others understand scripture grounded in the historical person of Jesus who lived, died and was raised from the dead. The more I study scripture, the more astonished I am by its historical and theological richness and the wisdom, majesty and patience of God’s self-revelation and love towards humanity. If you let scripture work in your mind and heart as you read and think and pray, God will show you what is your calling and the answer, for you, of the question in Luke 12.48.