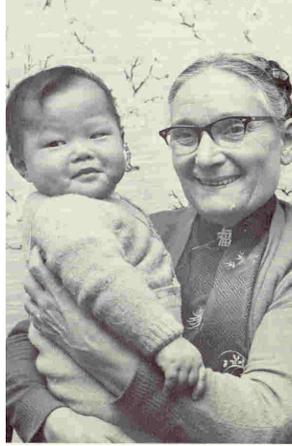


Gladys Aylward - Woman of Spirit



One of the greatest and most exciting spirits that sometimes animates the human soul is the spirit of adventure. I love venturing into a new environment, opening up a new area of intellectual enquiry or, when out in the countryside or new city, seeing what is around the next corner.

There is a great spirit of adventure in the Bible. That spirit of spiritual adventure has been there from the time Adam and Eve left the garden. And it runs through the whole Biblical story. I am thinking of Moses, who led the people for Israel away from slavery and through the wilderness, of Joshua, who took them across the river Jordan to the Promised Land. I am thinking of the pregnant Mary who set off on a long walk to visit her cousin Elizabeth; a visit that issued in joy and that wonderful poem of faith we call the Magnificat. I am thinking of Jesus who set out from Nazareth, through Galilee and on into Jerusalem on a donkey. I am thinking of Saul the Pharisee who set out on the road to Damascus and ended up with a new faith and a new name and, as Paul the Apostle, set off on many journeys across the Roman Empire. And that's just a small sample of the more obvious adventures and explorations about which we learn when we open the Bible.

But you could also say – 'no spirit of adventure, no Christianity in Britain'. Christianity came to this country via two different routes. First from Ireland via Iona and the Holy Island of Lindisfarne; then from Rome and into the southeast via Canterbury. It settled, of course, but no sooner than it did Christian people began to feel the need to set off on journeys once again. For some it was pilgrimage that made sense - trekking off to places where prayer had been valid and where they might be more assured of the presence of God. But for others the inspiration was to venture forth as missionaries, travelling to places where *they* would be strangers, encountering new sights, new languages, new people, new foods, new diseases, and, as well as new dangers, new delights.

The woman of spirit whom I want to mention this week was possessed by just this spirit of adventure and mission. Born into a working class family at the beginning of the twentieth century, Gladys Aylward left school at 14 to become a parlour maid, and at the age of 18 felt a call to live her life as a missionary. She never looked back from this youthful and unlikely sense of calling. A physically mouse-like frame disguised the fact she was a person of great heart and great determination. She didn't impress the authorities at missionary school and was dismissed. But she kept the faith with her vocational dream until she was 30 years old and the opportunity to go to China opened up for her.

She set off not by aeroplane or on an elegant ocean-going liner, for she was still very poor. Her's was an arduous overland journey with only her passport, a Bible and less than three pounds in her pocket. At one point on her journey she refused to leave a train despite being told it was only for the use of Russian military personnel. But she soon realized that was a bad idea and got off at the first stop. She then walked, alone, all the way back to the station from which she had previously departed. She was going

backwards to go forwards. It's often the case, and it doesn't matter as long as you remember what your destination is, what calling you are following.

China was her destination, her calling, and her destiny. Her desire was to tell Bible stories to people who had never heard them before. She joined an aging woman missionary who ran a hostel in the mountains to give shelter and food to mule drivers. They sought to achieve exceptional standards of cleanliness (no fleas) and told Bible stories after supper as part of the hospitality. The efforts she had made in order to be able to do this were huge. As well as the travel, she learnt the language and customs well enough to live and be accepted and communicate effectively. When the mission to mule drivers came to an end she was hired to implement the new government policy that banned the binding of the feet of young girls. We would now think of this as unspeakably cruel, but such traditions are hard to eliminate in remote rural regions, and one can only imagine the tension caused when this tiny little foreign woman took the local elders to task. But her persistence and determination won though; she was simply not inclined to give up. She remembered her destination and desire. But it was no longer simply China and Bible stories. It was the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, love and justice.

Perhaps the most exciting part of Gladys' life came when the Japanese began to wage war on China and the bombs started to fall. Rather than leave, she established what you might call a pop-up boarding school for 100 children. Sadly the war got worse and the area was occupied. A Catholic priest in the area told her he was leaving and urged her to do the same. She sent a note back saying, 'Christians never retreat!' She may not have retreated but she did need to travel. She gathered up her children and led them to safety by taking a 12-day trek through the mountains, often sleeping under the

skies overnight, and ultimately across the Yellow River to safety.

The journey was extremely arduous and dangerous and at the end of it she collapsed with a cocktail of diseases and complete exhaustion. No one thought she would live. But they were quite wrong. After she recovered she continued with yet more missionary work until, under a new political regime, she was no longer welcome to stay in China. Was that the end of her mission work? By no means! After about a decade back in England she established a new mission in Taiwan in 1958 where she ended her days in 1970.

We don't, in our sophisticated twenty-first century, find it easy to celebrate people of religious fervour and determination or to think of them as heroes. But this is the way Gladys was regarded, even before she died. A book was written about her life, and then a Hollywood film was made in which she was improbably played by the glamorous Ingrid Bergman. Gladys was devastated by the portrayal of her life, and the way biographical details were changed. A straightforwardly chaste person – apparently she never so much as kissed a man – she was particularly affronted by the love-interest that the Hollywood producers inevitably injected into the plot.

Christianity today has plenty of would-be missionaries, but when I hear of them I don't get anything like the sense of inspiration that I experience when thinking about Gladys Aylward. That mouse-like woman who received only a rudimentary education, failed at mission college and yet went on not only to tell Bible stories to mule drivers but to be a champion for children in the remote mountains of northern China, and was a woman of great spirit.

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge,
Sunday 26 June 2016
The Revd Dr Stephen Cherry, Dean