



QUESTIONS

for your real life journey

Episode 23: Major Jonny Smith

How do we face change?

1. IN COMMUNITY (11:54)

As the child of Salvation Army officers, Jonny moved around a lot in his youth. He wonders whether this is the reason he really struggles with change.

'I used to be really private: although I was really outgoing, I had internal stuff I would never ever talk about. I used to try and face change by myself.

'The way I've learned to face change is to have people around me and to journey in community: to have people beside you that you can weep with or be really joyful with.

'And the more I've journeyed with God, the more I've come to understand that we're created in the image of God, who is Father, Son and Spirit: a community. So unless we're in community, we're not going to understand what life is. But if we have community around us, when we're facing change of any sort it's going to really help us on the journey that we're on.'

Does your upbringing explain your feelings about change? Do you agree that having people alongside you helps you to deal with change? Is this still true if they're going through change themselves? Does the idea of God being a community of three-in-one help you face change?

2. OPEN AND HONEST (14:44)

Jonny says that although most people who meet him assume he's the life and soul of the party, because he loves a good laugh and has a sort of bravado, there have been points in his journey when he's hit really bad lows:

'When my son was born, I put on lots of weight, and I was getting really stressed out and angry. My brother-in-law suggested I chatted to professional about it. But because my brother-in-law had said it, I wasn't going to do it. It took me a year to realise that I needed help.

'The first time I met my counsellor, I came away absolutely buzzing, because I thought he was going to sought me out. But the next time I saw him, I started getting worse. And I went deeper and deeper, and – eventually – I turned a corner. He was the first person, I think ever, to really start to help me understand who I was.'

How closely does the person others think you are match the person you actually are? When people you trust give you advice, do you listen to or rebel against that advice? Why do you think that is? Why do you think the process of becoming more open and honest can actually make things worse for a while? Is the vulnerability of openness and honesty worth it?



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How do we move through suffering?

3. BREAKING THROUGH (20:37)

Jonny talks about visiting a care home at Christmas where a Salvation Army officer lived with advanced Alzheimer's, and being surprised that her face light up with a huge smile every time the band played a carol.

'To me, it was a reminder that God can still break through. Even in the worst possible suffering, there is still hope.

'But although I really believe that, I then look at the most extreme suffering that's happened on this planet and think, "Where does the hope come when people are in the most awful of situations?" My faith says there still has to be hope, because there is God. If there wasn't God, there would be no hope. But because there is God, there has to always be hope.

'There's a line from the carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, that I really love: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." And to me that says that whatever anyone's going through, because of the incarnate Christ there is always hope.'

Do you believe that even in the worst possible suffering, there is still hope? How does God's presence in a situation bring you hope?

4. MEMORIES (23:21)

Jonny refers to having two really memorable experiences in his journey of faith – when he became a Christian at Roots, and when he was called to officership at a Youth Councils.

'If you chat to my wife, she will tell you that her becoming a Christian was a very gentle process over time. For me, it wasn't. And I'm really glad it wasn't, because in the times when I have the biggest doubts, in the times I want to walk away, in the times when it's tough, I look back on those two fundamental moments and I cannot deny that something happened.

'The guy I was in 1999 – the real fired-up kind of guy – that's still me. But the God I now know is so different from the God I knew then. And one of the reasons for that is because I have met people from all around this world created in the image of God. So the image of God I have has gone deeper and deeper and deeper. And for me, that's really helped my journey. But even knowing all of that, I still sometimes need to remember those moments.'

Do you have any memorable experiences in your journey of faith? What are they? How does remembering them help you when you're going through tough times? How have you and your image of God changed over the years? Have you met Christians from different denominational backgrounds or countries? What impact have they had on your image of God?



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How do we receive joy?

5. PARKRUN 'JOY' (33:19)

Jonny says he's been doing a lot of thinking about Parkrun. While his local Parkrun attracts 400 people, only about 2% of those are the ones who actually make it happen. Everyone else turns up, they get their joy from running a 5k, and they feel joy from being a part of the Parkrun community. And some of them might have a coffee together afterwards and experience even more 'joy'. But then they'll go home and won't speak to each other for the rest of the week. The danger is that the joy is temporary, and disappears when everyone goes home.

People's experience of joy can be much the same when they are part of a church community.

'But,' says Jonny, I think joy is so much more than that. And I think to experience real joy you've got to go deeper and deeper and deeper on your journey with God. And you discover things that are really tough on that journey. But it doesn't mean that the joy disappears. I think real joy can still be found in those tough, tough places.'

What do you think about Jonny's analogy of the temporary joy people experience at Parkrun being similar to how people experience joy as part of a church community? What might it look like to experience joy as part of a church community on a daily basis? Jonny suggests that when you go deeper with God, you discover things that are really tough – but you also can find real joy. Have you experienced this in your own journey?

6. IN THE STENCH (35:55)

Jonny says that in church circles, we often talk about pursuing 'mountain top experiences' – experiences of significant revelation from God. 'If, as a follower of God, joy is only found at certain points, then I think we've got it wrong. I think we have to be able to find joy wherever we are.'

'I love the story of Corrie ten Boom. Her sister asked her at a real low point in that concentration camp, "Where on earth can you find joy in this horrible place we're in?" And she said she found joy in the lice, because the German guards apparently wouldn't raid their cabin because of the lice and the smell and the stench. But Corrie ten Boom found joy because of that. I think we've got to be people who really look for joy.'

Would you say you're someone who pursues 'mountain top experiences'? Why do you think that is? What characteristics do you think people like Corrie ten Boom have that enables them to find joy in the most unlikely places? Have you ever found joy in something unusual? Are there any aspects of your daily life that you dislike that you could start to view in a different way and find joy in?



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How do we mature in service?

7. MUTUAL INCONVENIENCE (42:05)

'My role is Intercultural Mission Enabler, but I want to be an intercultural person. What intercultural means is a willingness to enter another person's culture and space as much as you want them to enter your own. It's a willingness to be mutually inconvenienced. Often, we want it one way, but this is a mutual inconvenience. When you do that and it works, at its best you start to create a bigger story than each of you started with.'

Are you someone who is tolerant, accommodating or even accepting of others' cultures, space, ideas and beliefs – or are you someone who is genuinely intercultural? Is there a difference? When did you last let yourself become mutually inconvenienced? How did it grow you?

8. SCHOOL VOLUNTEERING (28:43, 50:42, 53:25)

Jonny explains that on Fridays, The Salvation Army has blessed him to spend a day volunteering in the school where he is the Chair of Governors. He reads with year sevens and goes out during lunchtime to try and engage the teenagers.

'That time is really precious. Most of those kids do not go anywhere near a church building. If I can signpost them to God, in a very different way, then I think it will be interesting to see how that journey develops with them.'

'It's about being "with" in a community that desperately needs to see positive people. If people could just go into schools and say, "I can offer you an hour, I can offer you two hours" – not to fix education problems, but simply to be a presence within that school – the difference that would make would be unbelievable.'

'Sometimes we can look at youth workers and think, "Wow, they are so gifted." And we can look at schools and think, "Well, I'm not a youth worker. So what on earth could I offer to that school?" And that's where I think we need to really check ourselves. Because I know a lot of teachers and head teachers, and I know if you were to say to them, "Could I offer you some of my time?" they would grab your hand off.'

'It's really important, though, that you're not doing it for your own glory. You're doing it because you want to enter a place and actually be part of helping and journey with people.'

How could you volunteer in your local school? How could you encourage, support and show gratitude to local teachers?



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Act: HOPE OUTSIDE

Jonny talks about running marathons, climbing to Everest basecamp and doing two Ironmans.

'Yeah, it's absolutely insane. But I do love seeing what the body can do. And to me, one of the key things on the journey I've been on is I've gone from showing up in a building, expecting to find God there to being out in the open and knowing that he is there. The best worship times I have are not in a building, but in the fresh air.

'Every time I go out, I'm determined to see just little signs of light, little signs of hope. Tomorrow morning, I'm going for a run, and I will run past St. Thomas's hospital, and I will pass the memorial. And it will remind me of friends who have died during this. There's something special as you run past that in the morning. I've got no doubt I'll run past people who are in the queue to be vaccinated as well. So it's little signs of hope in the darkness. Part of who I am is finding God in extreme sports.'

Run, cycle, open water swim, hike...

- Pick a sport – it doesn't have to be an extreme one – that you can go and do outside.
- If you would feel safer doing this with someone else, or it would motivate you to actually go and do it, arrange with a friend or group to go and do the same activity together.
- As you exercise, reflect on how it feels to push your body a bit more than you normally would (Be sensible and safe about this – it could mean doing a few 30 second sprints during a run.)

Worshipping in nature

- Go for a run or hike somewhere in nature – along a beach, through woodland, up a hill.
- As you journey, be aware of what you can see, hear, smell and touch. Ask God to speak to you through your senses.
- What does God want to say to you through nature? How does it make you want to respond to him in worship?

Worshipping in the built environment

- Go for a walk or run in a built environment – through a city, perhaps past some famous landmarks. Alternatively, walk into town, find a bench and 'people watch'.
- As you journey or sit, be aware of what you can see, hear, smell and touch. Ask God to speak to you through your senses.
- What does God want to say to you through people and the things we have built for living in community? How do these things make you want to respond to him in worship?