

*This Saturday, 20 April, our Alpha Group are on retreat in Dalkeith....but what actually happens in an Alpha course...Colin Davey explains .*

## **The Alpha Course – so far**

*A Reflection by Colin Davey*

For me, the term 'Alpha' has disquieting, eugenic overtones. Furthermore, I had no wish to emerge from this course 'transformed' – quite happy as I am, thank you. Nonetheless, such reservations were put aside and I signed up, as ever, with an open mind. Not least, I did so to meet, and feel comfortable among, a different set of people within the complexity of our parishes, and to share a new experience with them.

Each session has the same basic structure: shared meal, video, group discussion. The video is the heart of the course, each week addressing a key question of faith (e.g. Why did Jesus die? What does the Holy Spirit do?) or lifelong meaning (e.g. Is there more to life than this? How can I make the most of the rest of my life?). As much as we can make the meal and, to a large extent, the discussion our own, the videos are beyond our control. They are quite different to what we're used to. Therein lies the challenge, the positive disruptor.

Throughout each video, the argument and evidence around the key question are introduced and developed by a pair of amiable hosts (think former Blue Peter presenters) while, somewhat inexplicably, they forge relentlessly through land, air and sea, pausing only briefly to recaffeinate. Confident, script-perfect, we are told little of their back story and so engage with them only at the depth of narrators. Interspersed we have light-hearted vox pops from the street, which I guess capture a diversity of views of the intended audience, which on this evidence comprises attractive young people (more on the demographics of evangelism below). In addition, and somewhat by contrast, we have impactful in-depth personal testimonies of lives changed around, adversity conquered, prayers that have worked (or that brought about an apparent coincidence), the brittle fold of angels softened. The videos are indeed packed with info, so you do need to concentrate.

But there's more: the real driver of each video is barrister turned Anglican priest Nicky, the intensely glowing core of Alpha, who digs deep into each key question with a mix of courtroom insight and evangelical zeal. Nicky takes a bit of getting used to – we discover that even his wife had reservations – but stick with it and we begin, as more details of his personal journey and circumstances are recounted, to find out why he's quite so irrepressibly happy. Fully human, genuine, open, fluent, energising,

passionate, fun even, always ready with a simple analogy to explain a difficult concept, but never patronising, Nicky lives out his words and scripture to the full, no room for doubt. I respect Nicky immensely because he's got the difficult job here, but nonetheless there is space between us, and I would understand if his style were simply too intense, or indeed conservative, for some; I can certainly recall some pushback among the discussions.

But I want to give an example of why Nicky is worth listening to. In the session 'Why and how should I pray?', we learn that we can get caught up in formalised ways and means, whereas, at heart, prayer is simply all about establishing and developing a personal relationship with God. Nicky hasn't forgotten this, in fact he says that prayer is the most important thing that we do as humans, even though sometimes it doesn't seem to work, at least not in the way that we anticipate, and that occasionally the answer is simply no. Just think of prayer as a conversation and off you go, on your own terms. The outcome of prayer can indeed be enigmatic and elusive, not a joker to play at every occasion, a 'get out of jail free' card (although one of the vox poppers prayed that the police wouldn't spot him hiding in a bush!). That's precisely why Alpha is useful even to grizzled Catholics: because we might know enough to overlook the most obvious things, miss the bigger picture having tackled the details.

Criticisms? There's a certain emphasis on evidence and proof, which I'm not sure is always necessary or warranted – exposing faith to rigorous scrutiny is to entirely miss the point – but I guess that's aimed at the new enquirer, for whom simple acceptance of the mystery is not going to cut it. For me, it's important to leave room for uncertainty because doubt creates a space that we can each fill with our own personal angle on faith (we're not drones after all). Also, although Alpha has clearly impacted multitudes, far and wide, I'm not convinced that videos work for me as a tool for evangelism. Most importantly though, contentious issues, such as those around non-binary gender and sexuality, are completely ignored (thus far, anyway). This is surely a missed opportunity to reach out and convey that there is room for equality, diversity and inclusion in the Church, otherwise whole sections of the community – those which are perhaps especially well understood, accepted and valued among our young people – are simply sidelined.

To finish, just to emphasize that this is only one opinion, although inevitably coloured by the views of others expressed during the discussions so far, where the world of Alpha meets our Catholic community and the rich diversity of experiences and histories of individuals within it. I thank them for their company, wisdom and good humour. Whether we actually found answers to these key questions seems curiously unimportant, the discussion itself being the thing of value. God bless the organisers and those who are looking after us, whether material, spiritual or digital. And God bless Nicky – I'm still listening, on my own terms.