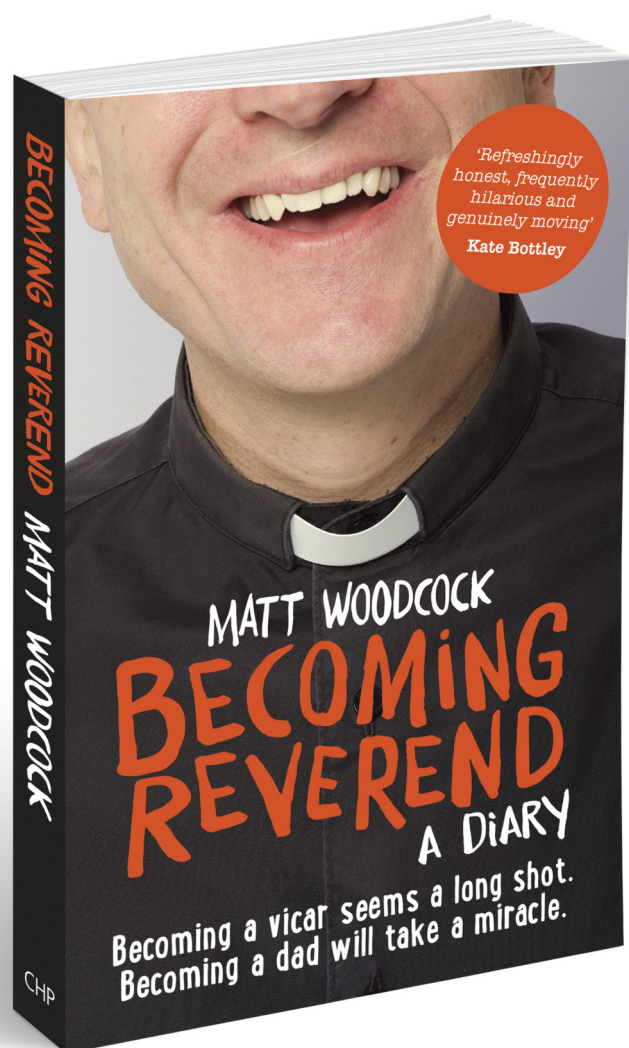


BECOMING REVEREND

A DIARY

MATT WOODCOCK



BOOK GROUP NOTES

by Kate Bruce

About the book

Matt ('Woody') Woodcock is a bloke; a blokey kind of bloke. He's not a socks with sandals sort of guy. This diary invites us into Woody's story from journalist to vicar. It's not always a pretty story. Irreverent, rude, funny, profound, messy and painful, this book takes you on an earthy journey with heavenly themes. While St Paul had his Damascus Road experience, for Woody it was on the A19 to Selby. God joined Woody in his Ford Fiesta and presented him with an offer he found impossible to refuse. The diary traces how that offer unfolds.

By the end you will definitely know more about Woody's sperm count than you ever wanted. You will probably fear for the state of his liver. You will feel deep compassion for his wife, and sympathy with his in-laws. You will long to meet his Mum. You will laugh and ache at the same time. You will find God. Not a plastic, neat and tidy God, dashboard-sized and predictable, but a God who sees Woody's wildness and trumps it to infinity, and beyond. A God found on night club dance floors;

in the IVF clinic; propping up the bar; at the heart of bromances; in the midst of rows; in reconciling hugs, and in unexpected corners... even in the Church.

The diary traces the story from that layby on the A19, via the toilet befouled by our hero at his Bishops' Advisory Panel, into the territory of theological training at Cranmer Hall in Durham. Here Woody comes up against his foibles, but not before he has made sure everybody else is well acquainted with their own shortcomings. He is disarmingly honest, refreshingly silly and deeply sincere. We are given an insight into Woody's marriage, the struggles he and Anna go through attempting to have children, his wild array of friends, and the move from York to Hull to begin full-time ministry.

What is clearly apparent throughout is that our blokey hero, as well as being loud and in your face, sometimes unreasonable, and often exhausting, is captivated – utterly captivated – by Jesus, and head-over-heels in love with his wife (who, by the way, must be a saint).

There are a range of questions below for those who know and love the Church, and for those who don't.

Questions for Discussion

Prologue

1. Reflecting on his Bishops' Advisory Panel Woody comments 'I have been utterly myself these three days' (p. 2). Are there aspects of his behaviour that surprise, disturb or amuse you?
2. The diary flashes back (p. 3) to Woody's A19 experience. He seeks help to make spiritual sense of it all and seeks the counsel of Sister Cecilia. Have you ever had an experience of something 'other' that you couldn't explain? What did you do about it?

Year One

1. Wednesday 23rd September (p. 11). It's Woody's first day at 'vicar factory'. What strikes you about his first few days, up until 1st October when he goes on a long-planned trip to South Africa?
2. Reflecting on a particular service in South Africa, Woody writes: 'amid the comedy farce there were some holy moments too' (p. 15). What do you think a 'holy moment' is? Can you identify 'holy moments' in the trip as a whole (pp. 13–19)? Have you ever experienced a 'holy moment'?
3. Wednesday 28th October (p. 22). Woody comments that his housemate Dan 'feels that Christians should never compromise under any circumstances.' Woody parries with 'real life isn't as black and white as that.' Who do you agree with and why?
4. Friday 6th November (p. 25). What do you make of this man who speaks of drawing people to Jesus, having a heart for people, and then overshares, over-indulges and belly laughs during prayers... in a bar? Do we carry ideas of what we think 'good Christians' look like? Where do these images come from?
5. Monday 16 November (p. 29). Woody struggles with his perception that he is being churned out as a vicar with an appropriate Anglican cut to his jib. Looking at his reflections in the following diary entries, what else is he learning in this period of formation? (Have a look at: Saturday 14th November, Sunday 15th November, Friday 27th November, Wednesday 9th December, Tuesday 29th December.)

Year Two

1. Friday 1st January (p. 41). 'Anna suggested that at the end of every day I should recall a moment of joy. She reckons that no matter how dark, depressing or annoying the day, there will always have been something to lift my heart, lighten my step and quicken my heart.' Reflecting on your own day (or yesterday) do you think Anna's idea holds water?
2. Wednesday 13th January (p. 43). 'Morning Glory has just got very real... We all find it reassuring that God is in all of this. In the darkness and the light.' In your experience, how do we find God in the dark places?
3. How does Morning Glory help Woody to find God?
4. Tuesday 28th January (p. 46). Woody brings up with Anna the possibility of their moving from York for his curacy. Reflecting on what you know so far of Anna's story, what is the impact of Woody's calling to ministry on her life?
5. Tuesday 2nd February (p. 48). Woody writes: 'I'm convinced that God is doing stuff in people's lives all over the place. They just don't recognize him yet.' Do you agree with Woody's view? Have you examples to support your opinions?
6. Woody's frustration with fellow students' views on mission continues as he reflects on their faith sharing weekend:

It was interesting that none of our group thought that talking to people about our faith – or at least asking people what they thought about it – was integral to mission. We love to call it the 'Good News' but many Christians seem increasingly reluctant or even embarrassed to share it. (p. 59)

Do you agree that Christians are becoming more reluctant to share their faith? Do you think talking about faith is essential to Christian mission?

7. Thursday 18th March (p. 63). Describing the evening people gathered to pray for his infertility, Woody writes: 'The college chapel felt thick with the presence of God.' What do you think he means by this? Have you ever had an experience of God which resonates with Woody's description?

8. Monday 12th April (p. 74). Woody describes needing to be honest with God about all he is carrying and reflects:

Life takes on such a lighter, more hopeful hue when I spend proper time with God. It's crazy that I so often shut him out when things are painful and dark. Mornings like this remind me why I believe. I now feel ready to endure the IVF and keep believing for Auntie Lynne. God is real. He works.

What do you make of Woody's desire to share his pain with God and his trust in God in spite of his infertility and his Auntie's illness?

9. Saturday 8th May (p. 86). Woody asks how the church can be more attractive to men, especially the kind of men who are 'happy to talk football, cars and power tools, but struggle with anything deeper'. How do you respond to his question?
10. Friday 11th June (pp. 97–8). Woody describes his experience of knocking on doors to meet people and talk about God. What do you think about his experiences?
11. Sunday 20th June (p. 99). Woody expresses a high view of preaching: 'I'm passionate that preaching should always stir our senses – laughter, anger, tears, whatever. But it must stir something, anything in fact. If our hearers are bored and disengaged we're not doing it properly.' Have you experienced sermons which have stirred you? Do you think there is still a place for preaching in the 21st century?
12. Tuesday 17th August (p. 115). Woody comments on the effect of being with the lads on Pathfinder camp: 'As we sat under the Criccieth moonlight it dawned on me that these boys had helped to reignite my faith and reaffirm my priestly calling.' What do you think the camp experience has given to Woody? (pp. 112–5)
13. Sunday 26th September (p. 125). Woody writes about chewing over Allan Bloom's view that:

'individuals can no longer take themselves seriously and that, in spite of the fact that they now have the liberty to believe and do as they like, many do not believe in anything anymore, and all spend their lives in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face the fact, not to look into the abyss.'

Woody rejects this perspective, arguing that:

Most people still have an innate desire to believe in something. That inner spiritual thirst is there somewhere. Surely? When people are brave enough, compelled enough, to slow the frenzy of work and play and stop gorging on the fleeting pleasures of shopping, sex, footy, lager and tacky TV, the bigger questions of life, a deeper truth, will emerge.'

Which opinion do you agree with and why?

14. Friday 8th October (p. 129) Woody states that: 'We've ordained generations of clergy who effortlessly talk the language of Radio 4. Let's ordain a few who talk the language of Coronation Street.'

Do you think his opinion is fair, or is he knocking at a caricature?

15. Saturday 13th November (pp. 139–41). What do you think about Woody's spiritual exercise, and his conversation with the lads over poker? In what ways do you think these two events might be connected?
16. Wednesday 24th November (p. 142) Woody gets his Discipleship group to reflect on 'the hour they first believed'. If relevant, share something of the 'hour you first believed'.
17. Friday 31st December (p. 158–60). Woody reflects on the year, commenting that 'People with big faith pray big prayers. They pray for miracles – and believe they are possible.'
- What do you think of the idea of prayer being answered?
- Do you have examples of answered prayer in your own life?
- How do you respond when prayers seem not to be answered?

Year Three

1. Wednesday 26th January to Tuesday 1st February (pp. 167–71). Woody gives us an insight into his insecurity and the underlying causes of 'emailgate'. How do you respond to his honesty?
2. Thursday 17th March (p. 186). 'On a night out with Paul Bromley, they discuss 'how realistic it was to truly be ourselves as priests'. Do you think that priests are pressured into conforming to a particular likeness? If so, where does that pressure come from?

3. Saturday 26th March (p. 189). Woody is away on a silent retreat and, unusually, decides to stay silent. In the silence he experiences God in a profound way: 'Suddenly I became unmistakably aware of God's presence in everything I saw, heard and felt...' In the silence he becomes more deeply aware of God in nature, colour, sound and abundance.

Where do you have spaces for silence in your life? To what extent does busyness distract us from awareness of God?

4. Tuesday 10th May (p. 201) reflecting on Thom and Alex's wedding, Woody compares the wedding to a service he attended earlier that day and muses:

I'm convinced that Jesus – given a choice – would have been on the dance floor with a tie around his head at Thom and Alex's wedding rather than at that service... I'm convinced the Kingdom of God is more like a wedding than a traditional church service.

What do you make of Woody's image of Jesus?

Do you think Woody's vision of the Church is attractive and appropriate, or superficial and irreverent?

5. Friday 10th June (p. 210). Reflecting on his time at Cranmer Hall, Woody writes: 'I learned far more than theology here' (p. 210). What do you think he has learned through this part of his training?
6. Thursday 16th June (p. 213). 'Bamburghgate' erupts. What are the key threads of the argument? What do you think Woody could learn from this?
7. Looking back over the whole diary discuss what things have most struck you? What have you enjoyed? Have you found anything challenging or difficult?
8. If you could ask Woody one question, what would it be and why?

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