



A better  
song TO sing

Finding life again  
through the invitations of Jesus

Mags Duggan

Foreword by Tracy Cotterell

‘Now here’s a provocative idea. Could the spiritual malaise we often feel – the frustration, disappointment, even boredom about our spiritual life – be signs of God’s Spirit yearning within us, wanting more for us than we’re living? Mags Duggan thinks so. Coming to us as both spiritual director and fellow pilgrim, wise from her wounds and sensitive to our longings, she draws us into six invitations from Jesus to find deeper grace and joy.’

**Sheridan Voysey, writer, speaker and author**

‘Mags Duggan’s wonderful new book is spiritual writing at its best. It’s seriously rooted in the text of scripture; it suggests ways of applying the biblical narratives to our own contemporary and sometimes rather messy lives; and it points us inexorably to look to Jesus for transforming truth and grace. I can’t recommend it enough! Read it and discover for yourself faith, joy, love and confidence in Jesus.’

**Michael Parsons, pastor, editor and author of *How to Read the Bible* (BRF, 2020)**

‘Mags’ unique gift of writing is evident in the way she uses scripture to speak into our heartfelt experiences. With authenticity, wisdom, sensitivity and gentle challenge, she invites us into deeper insights of what it is like to be fallible humans, yet dearly beloved children of our Father.’

**Dr Pauline Yong, counsellor and spiritual director**

‘I found this a very moving book. Mags’ honesty, insight and ability to cut through the pretence of Christian faith are profoundly helpful... Any thoughtful reader will be greatly blessed by this book as it will help them to find greater joy in the “better song” of Jesus Christ.’

**Revd Canon Jonathan Perkin, vicar of St Andrews and St Bartholomew, Churchdown, Gloucester**

‘Mags’ book draws us to a place of longing to respond to the invitations of Jesus. Whether it’s responding to his invitation to fullness of life, to leave our past ways of thinking and enter his life-giving grace, to meet our deepest needs and desires, to rest in him, trust him or settle our home in his love, Mags shows us that there is hope for living a life transformed by Jesus.’

**Karla Hawthorne, The Navigators, International Missionary Staff Care**

‘Mags has the ability to write words which can be read with ease and yet contain deep truths. As she explores some of the invitations of Jesus, she marries up theological and biblical references with personal examples which bring the truths of God to our own lives. As Mags points out, the central issue for any of the invitations from Jesus can be summarised as “Will you trust me?”. Read the book to find out why it’s so important that we do that.’

**Sarah Hay, HR Manager European Christian Mission and Course Leader, Redcliffe College**

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In memory of Libby Hinton and Ruth Myers

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# Acknowledgements

This book actually began life about 15 years ago when I gave a series of talks on 'The invitations of Jesus' to a group of very weary missionaries from Central Asia who had gathered together for a break in Thailand. They needed to hear again that there was life beyond the fatigue, disappointments and demands that they were experiencing daily in their lives in those far-flung places they called home. The content of the book grew a little more in substance through retreats with ECM (European Christian Mission) workers and with UK Navigator staff, and then, finally, during another retreat at Penhurst Retreat Centre, it was suggested that I might want to put the content of the retreats into written form. Thank you to all who participated in those retreats and especially to those who encouraged me to put down on paper what was already written on my heart; your encouragement blessed this book into being.

There have been others whose encouragement has meant so much to me over the months spent writing the words which make up this book. The words 'Thank you' hardly seem adequate for the load of gratitude they carry, but they are meant with all my heart, so...

Thanks to Mike Parsons, friend and former editor, who was the first to see the notes which eventually became this book and liked what he saw. You somehow saw beyond the thin layer of those initial words to the substance beneath them. There would be no book without your wise eyes and generous heart. Thank you.

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Most days, the act of writing is a joy and a sheer delight, but there are other days when it feels lonely and scary and I wonder if what I'm writing will make any sense to anyone, and that's when I've so needed support and prayer – and received it. So thanks to the men and women in Dave and Tracey's Connect group from St Andrew's, Churchdown; to near and dear friends Pauline, Rosemary, Shelley, Di, Diane, Ros, Tony, Ruth and Rich, Tzuchien and Amy, Anne and David, Jonathan and Jessica. Thanks to far away but near-in-heart friends Dave and Karen, Craig and Kris, Ed and Conni, John and Jen, Les and Karla, MaryKate, Karen K. Thank you for all the hours of listening that you have given me, for cups of coffee and (sometimes) cake, for holding me in prayer, for holding me in love, for lifting me up on to the shoulders of your confidence in God for me and for this book.

I hardly know how to express my thanks to Tracy Cotterell for such a beautifully written foreword. Thank you, Tracy, for so obviously understanding the intent of the book and for recognising the desire of my heart that all who read the book would discover a better song to sing in their own lives. Thank you for capturing all of that and for expressing it so richly and so warmly.

And finally, thanks to Karen Anderson, friend, listener, cheerleader and unofficial editor whose great gift to me was to read every word of every draft of every chapter with fresh eyes, a wise mind and a kind heart. Thank you for such a gift, and for the gift of your consistent encouragement and support and trust in God for me as I wrote; this book – and my life – is richer because of those gifts.



# Foreword

Imagine a friend – a really good friend: someone you trust to handle the truths you’re prepared to reveal to them about the secret disappointments, the unresolved restlessness, the yearnings for a richer, deeper, hope-filled life that’s worth living as a follower of Jesus in your world.

Mags is such a friend – to me and to many others whom she’s loved and encouraged and challenged over decades. She’s also a skilled spiritual director, a sought-after speaker, a voracious reader, a faith-filled woman of prayer, a lover of beauty, a stunning singer and a generous host who manages to make every meal something of a feast, despite her reluctance to hang around too long in the kitchen.

There are some people you just want to spend time with because they have the godly gift of helping you see life afresh – your life, your context, your hopes and your fears. All of us have seasons when someone like that can make all the difference in the world. All of us, at times, find ourselves in a place we didn’t choose, didn’t hope for, doing things we didn’t dream about or pray for. All of us, in an honest moment, might voice a disappointment or doubt in the God we’ve sought to know and to serve, or a dissatisfaction with ourselves as a disciple of Christ.

Though she laughs easily, Mags hasn’t led an easy life, neither professionally nor personally. Nor has she shied away from people in pain, or confusion, or doubt, or faithlessness, or those who struggle to make sense of Jesus’ invitation to abundant life right now. She’s traversed the terrain of life-changing tragedy herself; she’s lived

through losses that have come in different forms over the years; she's walked through the wilderness.

But she has lived well.

She's lived well because she's lived honestly before God. She's lived well because her yearning to trust him deeply for a life worth living hasn't abated after all these years. She's lived well because she's lived in the real world – the disruptive world of jobs, and family, and finances, and organisations, and friends – and in the real and radical world of the Bible.

In all the ups and down, she's sought the life of Christ.

When is it a good time to write a book like this? When you've lived life over a long time and have come to trust the wisdom that you're offering to others. When you've walked closely enough with many different people and seen them come alive afresh to God. When you've ascended the mountains of joy and plumbed the depths of despair and today sing a better song than you sang all those years ago.

Mags has much wisdom to share about this life in Christ. In this book, she's chosen to explore just six of the many invitations Jesus extends to us. I guess she'd say they've been some of the great life-changing invitations for her, the ones she's wrestled with most.

Jesus' invitation to...

- abundant life in our real, everyday lives;
- freedom from beliefs and behaviours that bind us;
- refreshment through his thirst-quenching presence;
- vulnerability through naming our deepest desires and truest longings;
- rest from life-sapping burdens;
- peace by receiving his lavish love, offered with all wisdom and understanding.

Imagine a friend: a woman who would walk with you as you explore Jesus' invitations for yourself – in your world, in real life, with honesty and hope. If you've picked up this book, perhaps you're looking for such a friend. Read this book that way, for it has been written that way: written in prayer that you, the reader, would discover a better song to sing – in all of life, in your life. May it be so.

**Tracy Cotterell**

Managing Director, London Institute of Contemporary Christianity

# Introduction

The film was totally engaging. Julie Walters, heartbreakingly convincing as Rita, a young working-class hairdresser who, in an effort to ‘better herself’, had enrolled in an Open University English literature course. Her assigned tutor was the initially uninterested, consistently drunk and divorce-threatened Dr Frank Bryant, played by Michael Caine. Through her course and her relationship with Dr Bryant, Rita was exposed to a world that was radically different from the one she had spent a lifetime living. The changes she experienced as she became more involved with the realities of this new life were challenging and not necessarily for the better, but in the midst of these changes, the rituals of the weekend remained the same. Most Saturday nights saw Rita and her husband, her sister and her sister’s fiancé, her mum and her dad in the same pub they’d always gone to, sitting in the same seats they’d always sat in, drinking the same drinks they’d always drunk, listening to the same music they’d always listened to. It was on one of these nights out, while everyone was singing along with uninhibited gusto to a song from the jukebox, that Rita turned her head for a moment and glanced at her mother, sitting, quiet, in the midst of the noise, clutching her drink, the tears on her cheeks wet and unwiped.

‘What’s wrong, Mother? Why are you crying?’

Her mother’s response was simple and profound:

‘There’s got to be better songs to sing than this.’

That one line, just ten words long, perfectly summarised the plot of *Educating Rita* and Rita's own longing for a better song to sing. Sitting in the darkness of the cinema that night, on the surprised edge of my own tears, I felt a deep resonance with those words; I understood something of the weight of resigned disappointment they held.

I had been a Christian for about 15 years by then. Looking from the outside, I doubt anyone would have guessed how I was really feeling about my life; I had become very adept at mask-wearing in certain company. No one could have guessed the dimensions of my own disappointment – or the bewildering dissonance I was experiencing between what I had been taught and believed about how life should be as a follower of Jesus and the actual reality of my life. It felt like a lonely place to be in. I seemed to have picked up an unwritten rule that the voice which rose from within and shouted, 'Look, the emperor's got no clothes!' should be shushed, perhaps by prayer and a more rigorous commitment to a disciplined life. I'm not sure that works, but I am sure I'm not alone in the experience of disappointment and dissonance.

After many years of working as a counsellor and pastor, the American writer Stephen W. Smith observed that many sincere followers of Jesus are living wholesome lives of quiet desperation.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps his words describe where we are right now; perhaps the words uttered by Rita's mum clothe the growing ache and emptiness that we may have been feeling for a while, as we realise that the 'highs' of inspiring conferences and occasional retreats and the spiritual buzz of men's breakfasts or women's days have led to diminishing returns. The heart-soaring worship and the preaching we hear in our thriving church on a Sunday morning may move us for moments, sometimes even days, with the hope of a different way of living, but then it all fades and we are back to 'normal'. As time goes by, there seem to be fewer and fewer places that hold out the possibility of a richer, deeper, God-infused life. For many of us, such a life seems more dream than reality anyway. Richard Foster describes aspects of that dream graphically:

Perhaps somewhere in the subterranean chambers of your life you have heard the call to deeper, fuller living. You have become weary of frothy experiences and shallow teaching. Every now and then you have caught glimpses, hints of something more than you have known.<sup>2</sup>

In over 30 years as a companion to men and women on their faith journey with God, I have listened to many sincere followers of Jesus as they've shared with me how worn out, bored, disappointed and frustrated they feel about the life they are living – and how ashamed and guilty they are for feeling this way. In quiet, sighing moments of unmasked honesty, they may admit, 'There has to be a better life to live than this – because *this* is no longer enough; there has to be more.' But having made such a costly admission – where to go? Perhaps better to just stuff that admission down into the deepest pocket of our hearts – pushing it in among the dreams and longings and hopes that are already gathering fluff there – and get on with life; any other way holds the potential for even more disappointment.

I wonder if these yearnings for 'more' in our experience of life as a follower of Jesus are actually a deep-heart responsiveness to a very intentional movement of the Holy Spirit who, like an eagle with her young, disrupts the comfortable nest of our 'business as usual' life and nudges us out into the adventure of an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus and an ever more wholehearted life. I wonder whether these restless yearnings may be our soul's faint echoing of God's own yearnings for us and for the life he longs for us to experience and live. It was Augustine who captured the age-old truth: 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.' I believe that there are times when, out of the strength of his passionate love for us, God gifts us with a restlessness that can only be satisfied by himself, by a more profound experience of his love, by a more vital experience of his presence – giving purpose to our days, direction to our lives, rest for our souls and freedom for all we have been created to be and to do.

The Bible is replete with grace-edged invitations, which draw us more fully into the life of God and into experiences of his love and purposes for us. Jesus put flesh on the bones of those invitations and gave them a voice. Over these past few years, as I've studied the invitations of Jesus sprinkled throughout the gospels, I've come to see that, in each of them, Jesus is offering us a richer, more authentic way to live; we are given the music and the words for a better song to sing.

It's the song that Jesus himself sang out with his life as he lived as a man – and as a child of the same God and Father who is ours too. It's the song of a grace-shaped, love-crafted, freedom-owned, God-dependent life. But Jesus is not only the way to this life; he *is* the life. He doesn't just sing the song; he himself *is* the song. Every invitation that Jesus holds out to us is an invitation to a deeper experience of his life permeating and saturating our own, transforming us into the men and the women we *know*, in the very depths of our being, we were created to be. Every invitation is an opportunity to allow him to be present in our lives in the fullness of who he is, to be drawn ever further into the adventure of knowing him, of loving him, of becoming more and more like him in every part of our being. Every invitation is an invitation to hope – that life really can be different; that a fuller, deeper, richer life can be more than a dream.

From the many invitations Jesus gave, we will focus on just six. In each of the chapters that follow we will unpack a single invitation, trusting that the Holy Spirit will draw us more deeply into understanding the life that Jesus wants to share with us, the life that God has on his heart for us to live.

Anthony de Mello once wryly commented that 'no one gets drunk on the word "wine"',<sup>3</sup> and we don't learn to sing our better song by just reading the words or by listening to the music – we learn to sing by singing. With this in mind, each chapter ends with a focused reflection, a prayer form or spiritual practice which may help us to engage more intentionally and personally with the particular

invitation of that chapter. As we walk with Jesus through these words, I trust that we will discover new depths of energy and desire to live more fully, more freely, more courageously, more wholeheartedly Christlike lives. This is my hope-laden prayer for you as you read this book; it is the ongoing prayer for my life.

Before reading any further, it might be helpful to pause for a moment in God's presence; to bring yourself to him for all that he might want to do for you and in you as you read through this book. You might find it helpful to use the prayer below or allow it to be a springboard into your own prayer.

O Lord,  
Hear the sighing longings of my soul  
For more...  
More life,  
More love,  
More freedom  
To be  
All that you desire for me.

O Lord,  
Teach me a better song to sing.  
Give me  
An open ear to hear it and  
Courage to sing it –  
Not in some distant day  
Or distant place,  
But here, now,  
On this day,  
In this place.

O Lord,  
Give me  
Your song.  
Amen



## 1

# *This is the life*

**'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'**

JOHN 10:10 (NIV)

**The abundant life is an ordinary life transformed by the power of God through Jesus Christ living in us.**

Stephen W. Smith<sup>4</sup>

Hanging in my bathroom is a canvas print depicting a scene of utter tranquillity. Dusk. Hints of pink and grey feathering the wisps of clouds reflected in the ripples of the lake. The dark silhouette of trees frame the outer borders and, peeking out at the bottom, the edges of a wind-weathered dock. Across those edges, the words, 'This is the life.' No exclamation mark needed; it's a statement of fact. The print was a gift from my friends Dave and Karen and is a precious reminder of my favourite place on earth – their summer cabin on the shores of Deer Lake in Minnesota. There have been so many times over the years when dusk has found me sitting in a canoe on that lake, my paddle resting across my knees, my whole being as hushed and as still as the lake itself, and I've whispered to myself, 'This is the life.'

But it's not.

It's a pause, a break, a moment of peace amid the busyness, the duties and the demands of the rest of life.

It may not be a canoe on a lake which draws these words out of us. It could be the exhilaration at the end of a run when the blood is pumping and we feel as though we are living on every cylinder God has given us. Closer to home, it could be the satisfaction of a cup of tea in the garden after a hard afternoon of digging and planting, or the joy of getting a group of family and friends together for a special occasion – and everyone is happy, no one is grumpy, the food is good, the wine is flowing and, as we look around, we sense those words rising from the depths of our hearts: ‘This is the life.’

Each one of us probably has a picture that epitomises what that phrase means to us. It may not be hanging in our bathroom, but it’s there, tucked away somewhere in a neglected corner of our minds and our hearts. It may represent our idea of the best life we can imagine living – until something happens (or doesn’t happen) to wake us up to the possibility that perhaps there could be an even better life to live than the one we’re currently living, one which has very little to do with what is going on ‘out there’ and much more to do with what is going on ‘in here’, in the depths of who I am.

Some while after my dad died, I asked my mother how she was feeling about her life. Her poignant response has stayed with me: ‘My life is full, but my heart is empty.’ We don’t have to have lost a loved one to identify with those words. Our lives can be full of good and helpful things, our time may be spent well and productively, and yet we can feel like our hearts, our souls, the very core of who we are, are sometimes achingly empty.

There are times when, in the goodness of God, a shaft of truth comes breaking into our lives, showing us not just what our life is, but what it could be, what it might yet be. A while ago, I came across a poem by the American educator and author Dawna Markova, which, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, did exactly that for me. Her poem became a mirror of truth in which I caught a glimpse of the reality of my life at that time. Her words challenged me, unsettled me and stirred in me a longing to live differently – not to settle into complacency or

compromise, but to move more surely into whatever life God had for me to live. Here are her words:

*I will not die an unlived life.  
I will not live in fear  
of falling or catching fire.  
I choose to inhabit my days,  
to allow my living to open me,  
to make me less afraid,  
more accessible,  
to loosen my heart  
until it becomes a wing,  
a torch, a promise.  
I choose to risk my significance;  
to live so that which came to me as seed  
goes to the next as blossom  
and that which came to me as blossom,  
goes on as fruit.<sup>5</sup>*

Would I die an ‘unlived life’? I hoped I wouldn’t, but in the bright light of Markova’s words I realised that, for the most part, I was living my life quite tentatively and guardedly. I saw that I was living an increasingly rushed life of duty and commitment, which seemed to be becoming narrower and less expansive with each passing year. I sensed a gradual wearing away of joy and hope – not huge, but experienced as a growing weariness and a staleness which seemed to linger around the edges of my days.

Markova’s words stirred in me a longing to live with greater passion and purpose. Her words painted a picture of a life which wasn’t governed by fear, but was open and vulnerable to others; which wasn’t self-protective or hesitant, but willing to take risks, to grow and to change. This was not a tight, narrow life, but an expansively exuberant life, a wholehearted life that contributed something worthwhile and lasting to the lives of others. In this poem I saw flashes of truth, moments when light splashed across the words,

and I caught glimpses of God's own desire for my own life. In no time at all, the Holy Spirit had scooped up the yearnings that had been brought to the surface by Markova's words and carried them – and me – into the presence of Jesus and the declared purpose of his coming: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10, NIV).

The heartbeat which pulses through all of Jesus' invitations is cradled within the declaration of these words – that we would experience the fullest and deepest and richest life imaginable. We may have read or heard these words so many times that we pass over them with hardly a second thought, but if we allow ourselves to hear them with the raw energy, freshness and passion with which Jesus spoke them, these words are dynamite. Exploding our complacency and complicity in living small, guarded lives, they drop us right into the throbbing heart of God's desire for us – life in all its fullness.

Different translations help in capturing the meaning of the words Jesus uses here:

I came that they may have *and* enjoy life, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]. (AMP)

My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. (NLT)

But I have come to *give you everything in abundance, more than you expect* – life in its fullness until you overflow! (TPT)

These words describe in no uncertain terms the kind of life that God wants for us, and it is far from a wearisome, carefully orchestrated life of sin-avoidance or sin-management. It goes beyond the pursuit of holiness and righteousness (as good as those pursuits are), and it goes beyond duty and discipline (as worthy as they are). Jesus' words hold out the hope of a richly textured wholeness for our lives, whatever the circumstances and wherever those lives are lived.

# Notes

- 1 Stephen W. Smith, *The Lazarus Life: Spiritual transformation for ordinary people* (David C. Cook, 2008), p. 19.
- 2 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), p. 3.
- 3 Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (Image Books, 1984), p. 2.
- 4 Stephen W. Smith, *The Jesus Life: Eight ways to recover authentic spirituality* (David C. Cook, 2012), p. 72.
- 5 Dawna Markova, *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming passion and purpose* (Conari Press, 2000), p. 1. Reprinted with permission.



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Anna Chaplaincy  
Living Faith  
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**There has to be more than this... because *this* is no longer enough.**

Many sincere followers of Jesus are secretly disappointed, dissatisfied and quietly desperate for more than they are currently experiencing. That *more* is found as we respond to the invitations of Jesus, which hold out to us the hope of dynamic change, of a truly vibrant, transformed life – a better song to sing. Each chapter explores one specific invitation, drawing out its possible implications for our lives, and suggests a spiritual practice or reflection to help us ground that invitation in our present-day reality.

**Mags Duggan** was a missionary in East Asia for over 20 years before returning to the UK and joining the faculty at Redcliffe College, where she lectured in Spiritual Formation and Soul Care. A retreat leader and spiritual director, she is passionate about helping others nurture their relationship with God. She authored *God among the Ruins* (BRF, 2018).

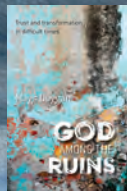
*'Now here's a provocative idea. Could the spiritual malaise we often feel – the frustration, disappointment, even boredom about our spiritual life – be signs of God's Spirit yearning within us, wanting more for us than we're living? Mags Duggan thinks so. Coming to us as both spiritual director and fellow pilgrim, wise from her wounds and sensitive to our longings, she draws us into six invitations from Jesus to find deeper grace and joy.'*

Sheridan Voysey, writer, speaker and author

PRAISE FOR GOD AMONG THE RUINS

*'If you have struggled with believing in a loving God when your world collapses, this book will serve you well. It certainly guided and helped me.'*

Dr MaryKate Morse, professor, author and spiritual director



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