

THE LITTLE SHOP FULL OF BIG SURPRISES... This is a story – and like all good stories – it begins with

ONCE UPON A TIME.... in a faraway country called Oxfordshire/ Gloucestershire/ Wiltshire – there were lots of lovely little shops – some of them selling Christian books, and others fairtrade goods. In the town of Swindon – where they had a football club that tried very hard but wasn't very good – they had the Rainbow Christian Bookshop that had been serving the community for many years. And not too far away, in the small hamlet of Highworth – where the people always felt superior to those who came from Littleworth; there was a colourful brightly lit beautiful shop called the Lighthouse Bookshop. And in the city of dreaming spires where people sang madrigals in May – full of posh intellectuals who said things in latin to one another – there were three amazing Fairtrade shops – in Kidlington, Headington - and also one right in the centre in Cornmarket– called Fairtrade at St Michaels. They were all very successful and the people who sang madrigals in May were very proud of their fairtrade shops – and to each other they would say in posh voices “Bonum Est” – it is good.

But - right in the centre of this faraway country, in a sleepy market town that had a funny tall tower up on a hill, there was the most magical little shop of all. It was called the Mustard Seed, and it sold both Christian Books and fairtrade. It had colourful toys that made children very happy, and beautiful fairtrade gifts that made the producers in poor countries very happy. It also had lots of things that you need every day, like tea and coffee, and kitchen roll, and lots of delicious hot sauces from faraway places like Eswatini, and olive oil from Palestine. Many people called it “the little shop full of big surprises” and they loved going in there to be surprised.

But then – on a particular Thursday afternoon- a dark cloud descended over this faraway land. The dark cloud was called lockdown – and it prevented people going out to meet one another and from going to the shops. It was also a strangely peaceful time, with no noisy cars belching fumes, and no aeroplanes in the sky, and people learnt how to zoom and to shop online. The little shops did suffer of course because they had no customers, but they knew that the dark cloud would eventually blow away – which it did. And when it went away, the people went out again – blinking in the sunlight and meeting up.

But during lockdown they had forgotten how to shop – and they no longer visited the little shops that needed them to survive. So - one by one, sadly, these little shops closed their doors for the last time, and the little twinkly lights went out. The Rainbow Bookshop in Swindon closed in 2023; the Lighthouse Bookshop in Highworth switched off all her lights at the beginning of 2024. And in the same year, in the City of dreaming spires, first the Kidlington Fairtrade Shop closed, and then Headingdon followed. Finally, at the beginning of 2025, even Fairtrade at St Michaels in the Cornmarket could no longer pay the bills – and also had to close. The city now had no fairtrade shops at

all, and the posh people said to one another “what a shame – we liked our little fairtrade shops”. They said this in English because they were sad and they couldn’t be bothered to translate it into latin. And the madrigals that they sang in May were also sad.

All these little beacons of hope and light were now in darkness. Now – the only shop that was still opening its doors to the public was the magical Mustard Seed – the Little Shop full of Big surprises –in the sleepy market town with the tall tower on the hill. It was the last light still twinkling. And what made it even more magical is that in May 2026 it would have celebrated an incredible forty years in business. Over those 40 years, it had also donated more than £50,000 to local charities.

But The Mustard Seed was struggling too. The sleepy market townsfolk still loved their little shop – but they probably thought it was so magical that it could survive without them actually visiting it.

So –inevitably–sadly - finally - the magical Mustard Seed also had to CLO...

BUT STOP! The story doesn’t have to end this way!

We CAN change the ending – if that’s what WE want! Yes – we really are the last shop standing; and yes – we really are struggling; and yes, over the past 40 years we’ve given away an amazing £54,000 to local charities; and yes – our 40th Anniversary is next May; and yes - it’s crazy that Oxford can’t support a single fairtrade shop. But we’re not Oxford! We’re Faringdon – the first fairtrade town in the south east – and proud of it!

And we want the 40th anniversary in seven months time to be a celebration of everything that the Mustard Seed brings to the community.

And that is where you come in. It’s up to you... Why not make a point of popping in - just once a week. Just for a chat, or a quick look around, and if you also happen to buy something – then so much the better!

We finish with a prayer.

*Lord, on this Harvest Sunday, and in fairtrade fortnight, we celebrate the abundance of Your creation and Your call to **justice**.*

*We pray for **one world**, where every person has enough. Bless the **farmers and producers in developing countries**, whose hard work sustains us all. Through the Mustard Seed’s commitment to **Fair Trade**, help us to ensure they receive a just reward for their labour.*

*We thank You for the 40 years that the Mustard Seed has nourished both soul and body. May it continue to be a source of spiritual light and a powerful example of Your kingdom, In Christ's name. **Amen**.*