

SERMON ST PETER'S NOTTING HILL
By Jonathan Aitken

25 November 2018

ST PETER'S, NOTTING HILL

Hebrews 13 1-3 AND 7 - 8

SERMON

25TH NOVEMBER 2018

It is a great joy to come back to St Peter's. I was last here for Pat's Induction Service.

I sensed then, as I sense again today, that he and you, his congregation here at St Peter's, would bond together to build a prayerful, purposeful and growing Worshipping Community. Let's hope we can together encourage this mission today.

As a novice Deacon and visiting preacher, I asked Senior Vicar, Peter, what I should talk about today.

"Oh, just tell them your story" he said. Well, I'll follow his riding instructions, up to a point, with jokes, warts and all. But with an important qualification:

After I came out of prison, I made another interesting career change and headed towards the only institution in Britain which had worse food, worse plumbing and more uncomfortable beds than a prison

This institution was an Anglican theological college – Wycliffe Hall, Oxford where I then spent two of the happiest years of my life studying theology.

While I was there wrestling with tutorials in Greek, Hebrew, Doctrine Hermeneutics, and so on, the Wycliffe tutors often said to us students.

'Whenever you go to a church to preach, make sure that your talk or sermon is firmly rooted in a passage of scripture'.

And that is why today we read those opening verses from Hebrews chapter 13 which I chose for two rather challenging reasons.

The first challenge is to ask why do most people just listen politely to the Hebrews exhortation to:

“Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners”. And then don't lift a finger, or give a thought or offer a prayer about it.

This is rather surprising since the teachings of Jesus about prisoners are so clear.

Now, until I became a compulsory guest of Her Majesty, I used to be member of the 'we can ignore prisoners club'.

During my years as an MP I hope I never said about prisoners, “Lock 'em up and throw away the key”. But I am sorry to say that my attitude was not all that far removed from that.

Prisoners are out of sight and out of mind. I used to think.

Prisoners don't have any votes. Prisoners have precious few voices or lobbyists speaking up for them.

So prisoners can safely be marginalised, prisons can be under funded, and for most of the time the prisoner community can be forgotten about.

That I regret to say was more or less my attitude for the first 55 years of my life.

Now, although this is a fairly common 21st century attitude, back in the 1st century when the New Testament was written the general attitude to prisoners among early Christians was rather different.

We know that because there are 58 mentions of prisons or prisoners in the New Testament.

Although there are one or two bad guy prisoners in the Gospel story such as Barabbas or even Satan in the Book of Revelation.

On the whole most of the prisoners who feature in the New Testament are good guys such as John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, Silas and others.

The most surprising good guy prisoner of all was Jesus himself.

He was held the night before his crucifixion in a prison in the High Priest's compound. Also he was imprisoned by the Roman soldiers on the day of his crucifixion.

"When I was in prison why did you not visit me?" was the haunting question Jesus asked his respectable and evidently rather startled audience in the Sheep and the Goats parable recorded in Matthew 25.

It is a metaphorical question that should ring down the millenia all the way to today.

So to help us find answers to the question – let me draw you into some personal testimony material from my own prison journey.

Let me begin on a light hearted note with a true story from my first few hours in prison.

PLEADED GUILTY

THE CAGE

PSYCHIATRIST STORY – HAVE YOU SUFFERED FROM DELUSIONS?

Now this is not a bad question – in prison or in life.

Am I suffering from delusions – or illusions? When I scrutinise my own values and my own ego.

Even in my first few days as a prisoner I deluded myself into thinking that I was a cut above many of my fellow inmates.

It took a little while to learn humility and to realise that all men are equal in a prison uniform.

As my eyes started to become accustomed to the landscape of Prison, after initially being very cautious I saw one or two things that surprised me:

- 1 How young everyone was average age 24 – and they are getting younger now with the growth of gang crime and knife crime.
- 2 The amazing amount of drug abuse – Moroccan souk rather than an English jail.
- 3 I began to see that many of my fellow prisoners were themselves vulnerable people.

I stumble across this as a not unamusing incident:

CONSPIRATORIAL WHISPER

I'VE GOT A PROBLEM – LETTER FROM MY BRIEF

LAMBETH COUNCIL EVICTION

READ THE LETTER – CLIMBING UP THE WALL SHOUTING WHAT SHALL I DO

18TH CENTURY TOWN CRIER

THIS MP GEEZER HAS GOT FANTASTIC JOINED UP WRITING

QUEUE FORMED OUTSIDE MY CELL

OLD LAG HUMOUR – GIRLS OF BRIXTON

PADDY COFFEE IN CELL

PORN MAGAZINE – IF ITS BOYS YER AFTER

FIRST ATTEMPTS AT PRAYER

TOO GOOD TO KEEP TO THE TWO OF US

RECRUITING SARGEANT

BLAGGERES

DIPPER

BLOWER

IRISH BURGLARS

LIFERS/MURDERERS

NEW MEANING TO THERE TERM A CELL GROUP

PAIN – (brings us back to Hebrews 13 – remembers those who are suffering as if you yourselves were suffering).

LUTHER “It is our pain and our brokenness when we come closest to Christ”

Respectable people – dare I suggest Notting Hill people often have rather a strange way of handling their pain.

BURY IT

SUPPRESS IT

DENY IT

KEEP A STIFF UPPER LIP

PACK UP THEIR TROUBLES IN THEIR OLD KIT BAG

THEY DON'T SHARE IT WITH ANYONE ELSE EVEN GOD

PRAYER

PENITENCE

POWER

PEACE

Perhaps it sounds rather surprising that anyone might find peace in a prison.

Peace with God is a great goal but a most elusive one. As Augustine of Hippo said: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you".

Although I myself did find spiritual peace in prison and indeed in Wycliffe, there remained a restless, uncommitted side of me which took me back into the so called real world of business consultancy, writing books, broadcasting, lecturing and so on. But in the end the hound of heaven got me.

Eventually a year or so ago I felt the call to the Ordained Ministry and to Prison Chaplaincy which is where I am now.

But just one footnote to my time in prison.

On the day when I was ordained at St Paul's Cathedral I gave a party afterwards and no less than five old Belmarshians – my fellow prisoners from HMP Belmarsh including Paddy, a notorious villain called Razor Smith and three others. It was a good reminder that prison friendships and shared prayers in a prison prayer group can last and can transform lives.

I daresay some of you may be thinking what has any of this got to do with me? So let's answer that question by going back to Hebrews and taking the three verses read to us from another theological angle asking ourselves who are our prisoners? Perhaps in the same spirit of the questioner who asked Jesus: "Who is my neighbour?" Or in the spirit of Jesus himself asks, "When I was in prison why didn't you visit me?"

Everything I have said so far implies that prisoners are prisoners of the State, prisoners of the Law and Order system.

But these verses from Hebrews does not specifically say that.

Let's ponder for a moment on the realisation that there are many other kinds of prisoners besides prisoners in jails.

And the writer of Hebrews almost implies this when he links in the next verse "those in prison" with "those who are suffering".

For there are indeed prisoners of suffering who are not behind bars.

There are prisoners of broken relationships.

There are prisoners of pain – emotional and physical.

There are prisoners of debts and finances that have gone awry.

There are prisoners of poverty

There are prisoners of pain, sickness and bereavement

There are prisoners of sin, shackled to unhappiness because of their own moral failings.

There are prisoners of many kinds of fears.

None of them are behind bars.

All of them are in invisible chains.