Jonathan Aitken: I prayed in jail with blaggers, dippers and kiters. Now I’m going to be God’s man inside

His conviction for perjury brought the ex-Tory minister Jonathan Aitken notoriety. It also inspired his new calling as a prison chaplain

**Laura Pullman**

June 3 2018, 12:01am, The Sunday Times



Jonathan Aitken, who served seven months in prison for perjury in 1999, says jail cells can be ‘great places to pray’TOM STOCKILL

Jonathan Aitken is buzzing. The day after we meet, he will be heading to Wippell’s in Westminster. This is not some watering hole popular with former politicians still wanting in on the gossip. Far from it. J Wippell & Co (established 1789) is where the former Conservative cabinet minister and ex-con will buy his dog collar and church robes.

Then, this week, Aitken will meet Sarah Mullally, the new Bishop of London, before — hallelujahs all round — he is ordained at St Paul’s Cathedral, no less, on June 30. “I am having a slight struggle tempering my enthusiasm with proper Christian humility,” says Aitken, in his layperson’s navy suit, beaming like an overeager Bible salesman.

Last August, after feeling persistent “stirrings”, he pitched to become an Anglican prison chaplain. After a rigorous “journey of discernment”, during which various churchmen quizzed him about his sins (“I don’t know if they went through the press cuttings”), he passed the test. So, the plan for after his ordi–nation, which he hopes will be attended by a nice mix of his old cabinet chums and former prisoner mates, is to work unpaid for three or four days a week.

Sitting in his smart Kensington flat, Aitken ponders whether he is the first prison chaplain to have been behind bars. There’s another chap who spent time at “Grisly Risley” borstal. Perhaps he counts, too. Anyway, there’s not a crucifix in sight in his drawing room but there is a large portrait of Aitken himself looming above us. This was painted during his pre-prison days, around the time he worked as an investment banker and had a butler. “It’s by Emma Sergeant. She became a great favourite of the Prince of Wales.”

Aitken, 75, found God while serving seven months in prison for perjury in 1999 after he sued The Guardian for libel. (He has described persuading his then teenage daughter to give him a false alibi as his “most shameful mistake”.) Today he recalls how “cells can be great places to pray”.

“Jono”, as he was known inside, soon found himself part of a motley prayer group cobbled together by an Irish burglar. “There was a blagger, an armed robber, a blower (someone who cracks safes for a living), a kiter (a cheque forger), a couple of murderers and a dipper (a pickpocket).” He fondly remembers the big dipper of Brixton: “His party trick was taking my watch off without me noticing. He was excellent at his art.”

After his release Aitken headed to “the only place in Britain that had worse food and plumbing than a prison” — Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, to study theology. Surrounded by “eager beaver” fellow students, he considered joining a monastery but then met his wife, Elizabeth Rees-Williams, a three-times-married former actress, and changed his mind.

Ah yes, family. What do his children make of his new career move? “They’re definitely supportive and I expect three of the four will come [to the ordination].” There’s been no falling-out, but it’s tricky for them all to get together, as three of them live abroad. From his marriage to Lolicia Aitken, there are twins, Victoria and Alexandra, and William. Then there’s Petrina, who was his love child with Soraya Khashoggi.

As one-time It-girls, it’s the twins, now 37, who are the best known of the bunch. Aitken isn’t quite sure what Victoria, a former rapper, does for work, describing it as “a sort of portfolio life”. Alexandra goes by the name Uttrang Kaur Khalsa, having run off to India to marry a Sikh warrior. The relationship didn’t last but, Aitken says, she is still a “rather mystical Sikh lady” who lives a nun-like existence. Prison ministry is very inter-faith, so he’s grateful to have had the excuse to study Sikhism.

Meanwhile, his wife, Elizabeth, 82, who is disabled after suffering a brain haemorrhage in 2013, is his “nearest, dearest and closest prayer partner”. It seems she also loves spending life going between pews and prisons. Returning from their honeymoon in the Bahamas 15 years ago, they took a detour to visit death row in a Texan prison, where they spent time with a woman who was due to be executed two weeks later.

Aitken recalls: “She was the most charming, gracious woman I’d met for some time. We prayed with her and it was quite an emotional experience.” Later the couple discovered her crime: she had taken out life insurance on her three children, put them in a car, set fire to it and killed them all. “So that was quite a shock, that one,” he says, sounding more like a boarding-school housemaster than ever.

Their tour guide for that trip was Charles “Chuck” Colson, a Christian leader and prison reformer who was jailed for seven months in the Watergate scandal. With rather a lot in common, Chuck and Jono became good friends. “I thought he was a brigand, but a marvellous brigand,” says Aitken, smiling.

Obviously some people are sceptical about the Damascene conversions of high-profile sinners. However, Aitken no longer gets upset about the “bucketfuls of cynicism poured over my head” and appreciates the doubters. “In a different era, I’d have been one of the cynics myself. If I’d had a parliamentary colleague who’d got into trouble, gone to jail and come out saying, ‘I’ve found God’, I’d have said, ‘Oh, how very convenient for him.’”

Isn’t he a bit old to be taking on such a challenging job? “I feel I’ve got the energy for it and, above all, I’ve got the calling for it.” Initially, Aitken confesses, he tried to get God to stop calling, but the “nagging insistence” continued and now he’s raring to go. “I’m every bit as excited as I was on my first day on the East Anglian Daily Times as the assistant tennis and funerals correspondent,” he says. Still handsome, he certainly looks well and goes running in Richmond Park four times a week “if I’m lucky”. Usually he does four miles: six make him “creak a bit”.

And when it comes to age, he says, prisoners typically respond well to someone who’s been “knocked round the world a bit”. Nevertheless, the new gig sounds gruelling. As a “pie” — the prisoners use rhyming slang for chaplain (pie and liquor = vicar) — Aitken will start each morning with reports from the wings. “For example, it will be attempted suicide, a couple of self-harmers, someone that’s just had the news that his son’s died, and these are the guys who want to see a chaplain. It’s really pastoral ministry in the raw.”

Having worked with prison charities for years, Aitken could talk prisons, prisoners and rehabilitation for ever. In some jails he can sense immediately that things aren’t right: “An old lag can sniff the wind and feel it.” He talks about geriatric prisoners (he recently met a 103-year-old inmate) and ways we could improve the crumbling system.

The justice secretary, David Gauke, and prisons minister, Rory Stewart, could be successful, he says, “if they are left long enough to get something done”.

Jacob Rees-Mogg comes in for great praise, not least for his ability to win attention. “I’ve never known any backbencher to get so much prominence,” he says incredulously. As the great-nephew of the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook, the self-confessed news junkie Aitken has at least six papers delivered each day — including The Guardian.

When I ask whether he daydreams about what life might have held if he hadn’t been locked up, he quotes the musical Salad Days: “If you should happen to find me with an outlook dreary and black. / I’ll remind you to remind me we said we wouldn’t look back.” Right-o.

We discuss the American bishop Michael Curry’s performance at the recent royal wedding. “He had rather bad luck, in one sense. If you are in a black church, the audience gets rather steamed up and joins in.” He adds: “I love going to black churches and riding the hecklers”, which sounds rather unholy.

As a young boy, Aitken had tuberculosis. At first his case was thought to be terminal, and from the ages of four to seven he was in an iron lung in a hospital in Dublin. He recalls being wheeled outside in all weathers and told to breathe deeply. His saving grace was Mary Finbar, a nun who cared for him and taught him to read.

“She used to say to me, ‘You are being saved for some higher purpose.’” It seems Sister Mary was right.