

**SERMON TO CELEBRATE
200th ANNIVERSARY**

OF

HMP BRIXTON

MONDAY 21 OCTOBER 2019

The Chapel HMP Brixton

By The Revd Jonathan Aitken

Celebrating a prison has the ring about it of an oxymoron.

Many people on the outside tend to be silent and ambivalent about our prisons.

Their buildings have something of Blake's "Dark Satanic Mills" about them.

Their past histories are filled with tales of the treadmill, the cat o' nine tails and the gallows.

Their present media coverage is largely negative.

Even though these negatives can be true we insiders know that they are only one part of the story.

For there are many positives in a prison journey. But too often they are hidden from view.

This is a paradox highlighted by the Prophet Isaiah in words spoken in Jerusalem 2,500 years ago yet strangely applicable today to any inmate of Brixton or any other contemporary prison.

"I will give you treasures of darkness

Riches hidden in secret places

So that you may know that I am the Lord"

As a prisoner who came to know the Lord in the improbable surroundings of Belmarsh and now tries to serve him as a prison chaplain in Pentonville. I have had many insights into those treasures of darkness.

From my positive memories as a prisoner some 20 years ago I should well remember that.

The milk of human kindness often flows generously and warmly among the inmates of a prison wing.

There I discovered that prison friendships formed in adversity may go far deeper than many superficial friendships built in prosperity

such as:

- golf club friendships,
- saloon bar friendships
- Or even Parliamentary friendships (if any exist these days).

I can illustrate this point about the warmth of friendships made on the wing by telling you that no less than six of my old Belmarsh wing friends and neighbours, headed by the once notorious villain Razor Smith, came to my ordination at St Paul's Cathedral last year.

Razor, now Noel Smith, thanks in no small measure to the therapy he received at HMP Grendon Underwood is now a fully rehabilitated character working as the Commissioning Editor of *Inside Time* – the prisoner's newspaper. This is a shining example of personal rehabilitation.

Razor and I are an odd couple, but together we illustrate that prison life is full of surprises and positives. This service may be one of them.

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Today's Service has been thoughtfully designed by Phil Chadder to have a family feel to it.

That is highly appropriate because it highlights another of the positives that the Prison Service does well – arranging, prioritising and facilitating visits – particularly family visits.

We ex-prisoners all have our own memories of what went well for us while doing our bird.

We probably never thanked anyone, for them but our experiences of good officers, of whom there are many, would probably be high on most ex-cons lists.

Those of us who have seen prison officers at work in this community know that they have a vocation for a range of skills which run from being:

- amateur psychiatrists
- to father figures
- to humourists
- to encouragers
- to problem solvers
- and to being exponents of the old Biblical proverb
 "A soft word turneth away wrath" – which works
 surprisingly well.

As you can gather I'm quite an admirer of the Prison Service and I've always said and written this even in those dark days when I was compulsory guest of Her Majesty.

The big picture here is that prisons only work because of the unspoken, unwritten bond between sensible inmates and sensitive officers. Both know that a prison establishment can only stay stable and bearable when both sides cooperate and consent.

I guess that must have been true for most of Brixton's 200 years and it is something to celebrate as an enduring treasure of darkness.

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There are, however, some areas of prison life where the treasure too often remains buried treasure.

I think particularly of the lost potential of so many prisoners.

Let me tell you a story about this from my time as an inmate in HMP Belmarsh in South London.

- Story of Prisoner asking a letter read to him in a conspiratorial whisper.
- Evicted from Council flat in Lambeth. JA expert in eviction letters.
- Town Crier joke. "MP Geezer's got fantastic joined up writing"
- Thanks to Town Crier from then on queues formed outside my cell of prisoners wanting letters read or written for them, often on the most intimate subjects imaginable.
- Old Lag joke. "Fantastic impact on the Girls of Brixton".

I became so grateful to the Town Crier, because the letter writing business made me deeply immersed in the lives of my fellow prisoners. In those depths I learned so much about them, their hopes, their fears, their habits – often bad drug taking habits – and their humanity.

One conclusion that stands out which is relevant to this Service celebrating 200 years of HMP Brixton is that Prisoners can often be often people of unlocked potential.

Prisoners are often street smart,
quick witted,
energetic, and ingenious (sometimes too ingenious).

And you can see the potential in many of them, even while echoing with regret Shakespeare's words "Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight".

Helping those branches to re-grow and re-graft is the challenge of rehabilitation.

That challenge is being inadequately met at present. It has to be done on both sides of the prison walls. On this side of the wall, some officers and a handful of charities such as Clink a shining example of this do their bit, but Government sponsored rehabilitation schemes are in a shambles at present due to the collapse of Transforming Rehabilitation and the running down of Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs).

The failure of joined up rehabilitation on both sides of the walls is, I know, a source of frustration to many thoughtful prison officers and prison managers.

Some years ago when I was writing a report for the Centre for Social Justice on Prison Reform I spent a couple of days here at Brixton guided by Deputy Governor Amy Reeves.

Several hours of my research were spent with the then Brixton team of the drug officers.

It was quickly clear that they were an impressive, exceptionally hard working and effective team.

They described with justifiable pride, how often they managed to sort out the lives of drug dependent inmates, getting them detoxed, changing their mindsets and preparing them for a drug free life outside.

But then these officers said:

“But most of our good work is completely wasted”.

“Why?” I asked.

“If you want to see why it’s a wasted” they replied: “Just turn up at 7 in the morning and watch what happens every morning here in Jebb Avenue when our prisoners start to be released.

So I did.

Jebb Avenue story

I tell you that story just to illustrate the point that the good work done inside a prison is often undone by the less than good work that is done for rehabilitation outside the prison.

This brings me to another part of buried treasure in prison life.

Prison Officers are too often insufficiently recognised.

As a group they are the least honoured and applauded of our Crown servants (military and police) – and this should change.

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Mentioning that Prison Officers are Crown Servants reminds us that we are not here today holding the Service in Brixton Prison. We are in Her Majesty's Prison Brixton.

And this leads me to conclude this talk from a somewhat unusual perhaps almost mystical angle.

Like one or two fellow ancient mariners here today I am just old enough to remember, as a schoolboy, the last Coronation service in 1953. I watched a film of it quite recently.

Right at the start of the Coronation service, after the entrance of the Sovereign into Westminster Abbey, the Archbishop of Canterbury invites the new monarch to take the solemn Oath, and asks:

“Will you to your power cause Law and Justice, in Mercy,
to be executed in all your judgements?”

Then after receiving of the Sword of State the Sovereign
is sworn to:

“to do justice to stop the growth of iniquity ... and to
punish and reform what is amiss”.

Then just before the most solemn moment of the
Coronation, the service returns to the theme of Justice,
as the Monarch is exhorted: “So execute justice - That
you forget not mercy”. And then the Sovereign is
crowned.

This theme of Justice runs all the way from the throne
to every Crown Servant involved in the administration or
enforcement in justice.

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From the highest Judge of the Supreme Court to the youngest prisoner officer on the wings in Brixton, their authority as Officers of the Crown derives from this exposition of ancient Anglo-Saxon law living on in the liturgy of the Coronation Service.

Today in this anniversary service let us give thanks for the good things that have been achieved in the 200 years of Brixton's history –for those treasures of darkness I have described which are still found here on a daily basis and above all let us give thanks to the dedicated Crown Servants who make Her Majesty's Prison Brixton work today.

God Bless you all. **Amen**