**THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON**

**SUNDAY, July 14**

HMP Pentonville, Caledonian Rd, London N7 8TT

This morning’s reading of the beautiful and powerful story of the *Good Samaritan* started with a really tough question, particularly tough for anyone who knows about prison life.

“Who is my neighbour?”

It was a question I asked myself, rather fearfully, when, 20 years ago this month I was starting my own prison sentence in July 1999 in Belmarsh – incidentally a much tougher nick than “The Ville”!

I was on House Block 3 in Belmarsh, on the wing then nicknamed Beirut because there were so many fighters there.

Who were my neighbours?

Hard men, tool men, wheelmen, gunmen, gang leaders – Big Faces with names like “Razor” Smith and “Killer” Richardson.

At first, I was a little scared as I found out who my neighbours were.

But then I had a bit of luck.

One morning a young prisoner approached me and asked in a conspiratorial whisper:

“Hey I got a problem. I’ve just got a letter from my brief but I can’t read it. I don’t do no reading nor no writing. Can you help me?”

Of course I helped him. But unfortunately the letter gave him bad news. He and his family were going to be evicted from his council flat in Lambeth in South London for non-payment of rent.

He really kicked off, shouting what do I do?! My wife and my kids will be on the street. What shall I do?

Considering we were both prisoners in Belmarsh, his request got an immediate and rather experienced response.

Because my previous was that I had served a 24 year sentence in HMP Westminster i.e. the House of Commons.

Like any other MP I had handled eviction cases every week in my constituency.

So I knew exactly how to write a letter of appeal which would at least get this guy a lot more time for postponing his eviction or perhaps preventing it.

So I wrote this letter of appeal for him.

Then after he had put his moniker on it he did something unusual.

Instead of putting the letter in the post box or his pocket he turned himself into an 18th century Town Crier:

He went down the wing holding the letter aloft shouting at the top of his voice:

“Hey Guys, this MP geezer of ours – he’s got fantastic joined up writing”.

Now this commercial for my graphological skills transformed my prison life.

From that day onwards, every single day of my 18 month sentence for perjury, a queue used to form outside my cell – 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 guys wanting letters read to them or written for them, often on the most intimate subjects imaginable.

This activity because the butt of a certain amount of prison humour.

One old lag told me:

“Hey Jonno. Do you realise, with all this letter writing business of yours – you is making a fantastic impact ─on the girls of Brixton.

They can’t believe the sudden improvement in the love letters they are getting from this place!”

Be that as it may, the letter writing business was improving my own life in Belmarsh.

Instead of being “That effing Tory Cabinet Minister” the guys said “Oh he’s not such a bad bloke. He helped so and so with a letter”.

And meanwhile I was finding that by doing something useful in prison I was becoming more peaceful as a prisoner.

As so often happens the giver gains most from giving.

Now at that time, not for one moment would I ever have thought of myself as a Good Samaritan of letter writing.

But looking back on it I guess in a small way that I was following the example of the Good Samaritan by helping a few guys who needed help when they were in trouble.

Now I mention that in order to put a couple more tough questions to all of you.

Let’s not stop at the first question: “Who is my neighbour?”

Let’s ask two deeper questions:

How I do become a good neighbour while I’m in prison?

How might I even become a Good Samaritan while I am in prison?

As we all know prison is often an unhappy uncomfortable place. It’s rather like being on a long ocean voyage in rough weather with a whole lot of passengers you would probably never have chosen to be with in the first place.

But you can soon suss out who is a snowflake or a plastic.

Or who is a real man or even a diamond geezer?

And in an environment where so many people have problems such as anxieties about their families or financial worries or depressions or mental health problems ─ or worse.

You will soon find out what a big difference can be made by a

* Warm smile
* A kind word
* A few minutes of sympathetic listening
* Or a helping hand.

These small gestures keep the milk of human kindness flowing around a wing.

They are made by the good guys – The Good Samaritans.

I’ve been in Pentonville on the wings as a Chaplain for over a year now, so I know there are plenty of actual and potential Good Samaritans in here.

Thank you for those of you who are:

* Listeners
* Insiders
* Mediators
* Helpers on the Toe by Toe literacy programmes
* Or do the messy jobs like being a wing cleaner.

Incidentally I was a wing cleaner in Belmarsh.

I got quite handy with the Harpic, the scrubbing brush and the regulation six clockwise and six anti-clockwise circular scrubs of the toilet bowls.

One guy joked:

“Now Jonno, you’re really doing the work of a Privy Councillor”

But even jobs like keeping the bogs clean can be in the spirit of the Good Samaritan if they’re done conscientiously, sometimes with a touch of humour and always with a touch of care and kindness for the good of the whole community.

For kindness is the heart of good neighbourliness.

The Scottish poet Adam Lindsay Gordon caught this rather well when he wrote:

*Life is mostly froth and bubble*

*Two things stand like stone*

*Kindness in another’s trouble,*

*Courage in your own.*

Now it does need a little courage to get through a prison sentence. Three O’clock in the morning courage when you are lying awake in your cell when your spirits are falling and your fears are rising.

Perhaps that’s the moment to ask yourself.

When morning comes and you’re in the first free flow or association of the day why don’t I say to myself:

“Is there anything I can do to be a good neighbour?”

“Can I engage with someone who’s had a knockback, or who’s down, or depressed or lonely or unwell?”

Or will I just pass by on the other side ─ as the bad guys in the parable did?”

I’m sorry to say that the bad guys in Jesus’s story included a priest.

But I can promise you that here in our Chaplaincy led by our marvellous and marvellously kind Acting Managing Chaplain, Jo Davies, we priests, chaplains, and chaplaincy volunteers will never pass you by on the other side.

Because our calling is to be Good Neighbours to you.

And we are inspired to our calling by the example of Jesus.

Jesus, the Son of God, who told us the parable of the *Good Samaritan* and who gave us his commandment “Love Your Neighbour”.

Jesus, by the way, knew what it was like to be a prisoner and to have prison neighbours.

Because the night before he was crucified he was held in a Roman prison cell where he was insulted and tortured.

So he understands the pain that many of us prisoners and former prisoners feel in prison.

Jesus longs to hear our prayers and to give us a second chance.

That’s what he did for me.

Open your hearts to him so that he will do the same for you.

In a few moments I am going to invite you to come up and to take Communion.

Perhaps some of you may feel a little hesitant thinking that you should hold back, because you haven’t taken Communion for a long time.

Or because you are shy or nervous.

Or because you are feeling ashamed of something bad that you’ve done.

Please don’t hang back because you are thinking like that.

For it is Jesus who will be calling you to his supper.

He knows everything about you already.

He loves you, just as he loves all sinners ─ those who have been caught and those who have not been caught!

So when you hear the whisper of his call do respond to his invitation and come forward to enjoy his bread ─ the bread of life ─which you will dip into his wine, symbolising his blood which he shed for you and for me.

But before we do that it is my duty to lead you through the most holy and sacred part of this Communion Service.

Please keep a respectful silence as we begin by saying sorry for anything wrong we have done using the words of the Confession in your service sheet.