

JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

SUNDAY, 1ST JULY, 2018

ST. MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

Trinity 5
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 8:36 – end
Mark 5: 21 to end

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen

Our God is a God of Surprises.

And on one level, nobody here today is more surprised than I am to find myself standing before you preaching my first sermon as an Ordained Deacon in the new creation of Father Jonathan. Thank you God of Surprises!.

Yet on another level perhaps those of you who are regular members of our congregation will not be so surprised - for reasons that have little to do with me.

I say this because it is in the DNA of this small church that we frequently and regularly inspire, encourage, guide and prepare candidates for ordination.

It is a rather too well-kept secret that since Father Philip became our Priest in Charge, 38 men and women from St Matthew's have become ordained clergy- all of them significantly younger than the 39th - myself!

Yesterday in Cathedrals around the country no less than six members of our community who trained and worshipped here were ordained.

This steady flow of ordinations is a record unequalled by any other church in London — with the exception of the multi-site megachurch Holy Trinity Brompton.

No wonder the previous Bishop of London, Bishop Richard Chartres liked to describe St Matthew's in his basso profundo as

“the stable of the Church of England”.

Now a good stable requires good teamwork.

Unlike my previous profession of politics there is, or should be, no room at the inn of the ordained ministry for tall poppies, high voltage egos, and grandstanding over pointless debates and disputes.

Joining the team that takes up His Cross and follows Him can be a hard road. But there are also times when it is a joyful road, and this is one of them.

Right now my problem is to temper my joyful enthusiasm with a proper sense of Christian humility.

No doubt the trainers of the stable will soon help me solve this problem!

As many of you know I love St Matthew's and so does my wife Elizabeth. We were married by Father Philip at this altar in 2003. When we celebrated our 15th Wedding Anniversary last Monday it was a double dose of joy in ordination week.

Fifteen years ago I do not think that, even in her wildest dreams, Elizabeth would have imagined herself married to a clergyman!

Yet she has been a tower of support and spiritual strength to me on the journey to ordination.

So thank you Elizabeth of Surprises for making my joy complete!

When I first joined the congregation of St. Matthews 21 years ago, in 1997, my life was far from joyful!

I was trapped in a self-inflicted downward spiral of disasters which I have described as disgrace, defeat, divorce, bankruptcy and jail.

I was clinging by my fingertips to faith and occasionally to life itself.

But the love and shared faith I found here helped me to steer through the encircling gloom.

Father Philip visited me six times in seven months in prison.

My family supported me with regular loving visits.

And many of you here today remembered me in your prayers.

These prayers were well answered because after coming out of prison I made another interesting career change and set off to the only establishment in Britain which had worse food and worse plumbing than a prison – this was an Anglican Theological College, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

I spent two wonderful years at Wycliffe as a residential student under inspiring tutors, among them the acclaimed Luther Scholar Dr Graham Tomlin who is now the Bishop of Kensington and who has been my sponsoring Bishop for ordination.

From Bishop Graham I have learned that the main traditions of Anglicanism which used to divide our church into two camps – Evangelicals and Catholics – can work harmoniously together in the pioneering new spirit of what he calls: Generous Orthodoxy.

Now one place where Generous Orthodoxy works particularly well is in prison ministry.

As a Deacon I am being licensed and trained here at St Matthew's and of course I will gladly play my part as the junior member of our strong team of clergy.

But as most of you know the deepest purpose of my ordination is to become a Prison Chaplain.

For why?

The most profound reasons for my vocation are by some serendipitous God – incidence to be found in this Sunday's readings - in the appointed Psalm and in the Gospel.

Psalm 130 which the choir sang so beautifully is known as the *De Profundis* or *Out of the Depths* Psalm.

It is also sometimes called "The Prisoners' Psalm" because when Oscar Wilde wrote his prison memoir he titled it *De Profundis*.

But while Wilde wrote movingly about the sufferings he endured in his depths, the point of the Psalm is that it guides us on how to climb out of life's depths with God's help.

The 19th century Baptist preacher CH Spurgeon once said that Psalm 130 "contains the essence of all Scripture".

And he was right because the eight brief verses of this Psalm tell, in beautiful poetry, of prayer, pain, penitence, repentance, the need to wait patiently for The Lord and the joy of receiving his unfailing love and plenteous redemption.

This Psalm spoke powerfully to me while I was in my depths. I think I read it at least twice every day of my sentence. But I don't believe I would have done anything concrete about following it up, had it not been for an unusual and rather amusing prison episode.

I will tell you the story - partly because we enjoy a touch of humour in sermons at St Matthew's. And partly because the story came to have profound consequences for my journey towards yesterday's ordination.

Towards the end of my sentence when I was only a week or so away from my release date, my prison chaplain asked me an unexpected question.

"How would you like to preach in the chapel on your last Sunday in here?"

Now it's unusual for a prisoner to be asked to preach a sermon.

Nevertheless, unaccustomed though I had become to public speaking the old trooper in me made me say "OK, I'll give it a go".

And then I asked "But what shall I preach about?"

And the chaplain replied:

"How about giving your sermon on that Psalm you say has meant so much to you.

So I agreed and an announcement went up on all the prison noticeboards.

Sunday Evening 6.30pm. In the chapel Jonathan Aitken will give a talk on Psalm 130.

Now this advertising had the effect of enlarging the congregation far beyond the usual Christian suspects.

When I got to the chapel it was as jam packed as a tube train at rush hour.

And the congregation, whom the late P.G. Wodehouse might have described as "distinctly tough eggs", were not in a reverential mood.

Indeed so boisterous were their pre-service cat calls that I thought for a moment that I was back at Prime Minister's Questions!

Just as the situation seemed to be getting completely out of hand, suddenly the whole chapel fell to pin drop silence.

This was because of the unexpected arrival of one prominent prisoner. Accompanied by his burly minders he barrelled his way into the front pew with everyone jumping aside to make space for him.

Now this was a man known as "The Big Face".

I should explain that every prison has a "Big Face".

The name goes back to the days when big time criminals had their faces on big *Wanted Posters*.

And this particular Big Face was the head honcho of our jail. He was a former gangland boss coming to the end of a 33 year stint behind bars.

He was known in prison jargon as "A man of respect" —which meant everyone was afraid of him. His arrival in the chapel made everyone else quieten down and made my nervousness rise.

So I thought I had better begin my sermon by saying something that might strengthen my street credibility as an interpreter of Scripture.

So I said that Psalm 130 had become my favourite Psalm. But not just my favourite. It was also the favourite Psalm of Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Bunyan.

Now the Big Face nodded gravely at this information. By the time I got to the end of my sermon, far from making any trouble the Big Face was visibly moved. There were tears in his eyes. And at the end of the Service he came up to me and gave me a bone cracking handshake and said with some emotion:

"Oh Jonno that was really beautiful that there Psalm of yours"

(I think he thought I had written it!)

"Now I want to ask you a favour" he went on. "There are one or two of my best mates who couldn't be here tonight. But if you'd come over to my Peter on B wing tomorrow and say your piece all over again I know you'd get to their hearts, just like you got to mine."

Now when the Big Face asks you a favour you don't refuse.

Nevertheless there may have been something in my body language which suggested that I wasn't entirely enamoured by the prospect of having to spend an evening with him and his group of gangland cronies.

But the Big Face, who was an intuitive guy, sensed my hesitation and sought to reassure me.

So he said:

"And to make yourself feel at home, why don't you bring with you a couple of your best mates from A Wing.

How about bringing with you those geezers you said liked the Psalm so much: Augustus and Wots his name"

Needless to say I was not able to produce Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Bunyan as my companions!

But nevertheless in the Big Face's cell we had a deeply moving evening.

Stuff happened, as it often does when you listen and engage pastorally with those in prison; particularly with those who have never really heard the good news of Christ's teachings.

So tears, sharings and prayers were part of the stuff that happened.

When the evening ended I remember walking back to my own cell in "A" Wing and saying to myself "I would love to do more of this".

Perhaps that was the first whisper of God's call. And gradually I did respond to it.

From Wycliffe I volunteered to go on one or two prison missions.

Then, for complicated reasons, I did most of my early layman's prison ministry training with Prison Fellowship Ministries in the United States.

Remembering this gives me the chance to say how pleased and how touched I am that in this church today and at St Paul's Cathedral yesterday there are one or two American friends who have crossed the Atlantic to be present.

They know about this period in my life and about the huge debt of gratitude I owe to the founder of Prison Fellowship, Charles Colson, who inspired me and trained me to follow in his calling.

Chuck Colson was the one-time Watergate defendant and Senior White House Aide. He served seven months in jail, and came out to create the leading Worldwide Christian Prison Ministry of Prison Fellowship whose London office is our next door neighbour in this street and with whom St. Matthew's has a good and growing relationship.

Why I am moving from lay prison ministry to becoming an ordained prison chaplain is a mystery, perhaps explained by the opening line of our gradual hymn:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform*

I might also try to explain it by quoting a verse of doggerel from an early 20th century Prison Chaplain, C.T Studd, whom I greatly admire. He wrote these lines:

*"Some want to live within the sound
Of church or chapel bell;
I want to run a rescue shop,
Within a yard of hell."*

These lines bring us to today's Gospel because:

Jesus was a divine one man rescue shop
During his brief earthly ministry
He was often rescuing
Despairing, untouchable, broken people in the most loving and practical ways.

Two examples of this are recorded in today's Gospel.

To understand them fully we need to remember that in first century Israel, long before the age of modern hygiene,

public health fears, paranoia about infectious diseases

and purity taboos were high on the Pharisees agenda.

Two of the most powerful taboos were against touching corpses or women with internal haemorrhages.

Jesus smashed through these taboos. As our reading reminds us, He touched the dead daughter of Jairus. He was touched by the woman who was bleeding. He healed both of them.

Our prisons are full of the spiritually dead.

They are also full of people who are bleeding.

Sometimes literally and visibly bleeding. There were over 30,000 serious assaults in our jails last year, 44,000 self-harming incidents, and 201 suicides – all record figures.

A far greater number are emotionally bleeding – sometimes because they are in denial about what they've done to their victims, sometimes because of their remorse, or for other reasons, such as family breakdowns or mental illness problems.

Pondering on these pools of despair, perhaps, if I was a charismatic preacher from a black church, I might echo the cry of Jeremiah that was quoted at the recent Royal Wedding:

'Is there no balm in Gilead?'

Sadly, there is far too little spiritual balm offered in our prison Gilead.

In our jails, hard pressed chaplains are too often overloaded, marginalised and demoralised. Prison Chaplaincy has become the Cinderella of Christian Ministry. A gap has opened up between God's churches and God's chaplains.

Work needs to be done to bridge this gap, to bring more balm to the stressed out world of prison and rehabilitation ministry. This is, of course, God's work.

In the most challenging of his parables, the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus calls us to reach out to the people he describes as "the least of these my brothers and sisters" – the hungry, the homeless, the excluded, the refugees – and the prisoners.

That's the vocation I now want to follow.

Please pray that, by God's grace, I may be worthy of this calling.

Amen