From England

OBSERVING PRISON CONVERSIONS

by Emma Brockes

Sunday nights at St. Mark's Church, Battersea, and the congregation is packed and rapturous. After an interminable hymn, ('Every breath I take, every moment I'm awake, Lord have your way with me!'), some thanksgiving for the new police computer system in the borough, and a prayer for 'flexibility and wisdom' in the probation service, the minister introduces the evening's star guest speaker, Jonathan Aitken. The faithful rustle and inhale – a sinner of such splendid proportions doesn't come along every day – and there he is, that fabulous fishy pout, the half-moon glasses, the air of faint embarrassment, Aitken clears his throat and in a voice made to fill large venues begins. 'In our pain and in our brokenness, we come closest to Christ'.

It is hard to know what to make of Jonathan Aitken; not of his life leading up to the prison sentence, which he summarises as 'the multiple dramas of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail', but of the choices he has made in the four years since. After losing his libel case against the Guardian and serving seven months for perjury, the former defence minister retreated to Wycliffe College, Oxford and is now a writer and professional Christian. Last year he did 74 speaking gigs, served as director of four Christian charities and wrote a book, *Psalms for People Under Pressure*, in which he speculates, 'many people remain, throughout their lives, in a state of denial about their own sinfulness'. Aitken is not one of them. Sinfulness has become his business.

Several days before his appearance at St. Mark's, I meet this 61-yearold in a different church, St. Matthew's in Westminster, where he is posing for photos with the church dog Benjy. It is a timeless scene – a man, his dog, his faith, wanting only a child and couple of wheat sheaves to perfect the tableau: English Gentleman and his Sturdy Foundations. Aitken weathers the irony gracefully, his face a little pink, the unhappy combination of suit jacket and ironed jeans testifying to his new identity as a devout Christian. Photos over, he walks stiffly to the foot of a staircase. 'Shall we go up?' His

office is above the church, an odd choice given that is requires him to walk past the Palace of Westminster every day. But then these days, there are lots of hair shirts hanging in Aitken's Closet.

He shows me the latest edition of Who's Who, a book once described by his great uncle Lord Beaverbrook as 'a strange record of numerous suppressions', but in which Aitken has positively *fought* to get the gag 'Eton and HMP Belmarsh' in his entry under education. 'Yes,' he says chuckling. 'I am rather pleased with that'. Still, it remains hard to imagine him actually enjoying knocking around the Christian speaker circuit. Does he harbour secret unchristian thoughts about his former antagonists? Wouldn't he kill to get his old life back?

Before we begin, some ground rules. 'Let us get them straight,' says Aitken, blushing slightly. 'I may, I hope I don't have to, at any point say, 'Sorry that's territory of old wounds'. And it could be old rows with the Guardian, case material etc. and I hope you'll just accept that without comments'. So I ask an easy one, about the book. Who is it for? 'Honestly, I don't know. I'd be disappointed if it was limited to the usual Christian suspects. I do think the psalms are amazing in terms of their poetry, their ability to speak across generations to all kinds of people. I hope people who'll say, 'Gosh the ancient wisdom of those people of Israel might have something for me." It was the poet Louis MacNeice, who perfectly characterised the cynic's position on the consolations of religion, in lines from his Autumn Journal:

> *None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives,*
>
> *Are self-deceivers, but the worst of all*
>
> *Deceits is to murmur 'Lord I am not worthy'*
>
> *And, lying easy, turn your face to the wall.*

In Aitken's case, of course, 'lying easy' has particular resonance. 'I'm rather sympathetic to anybody who might start out being cynical about me,' he says. 'Because, in a previous incarnation, I would have been cynical about somebody like me. You want to ask questions like, am I replacing political pride with spiritual pride? It's a real danger. I've seen too many people have it blow up in their face not be nervous about it.'

What to make, then, of the high-profile prayer meeting he held at the White House, with friend and fellow-convert Charles 'Chuck' Colson, one of the Watergate conspirators and a man once described by Nixon as having the

'balls of a brass monkey'. In the book, Aitken records how, to his surprise, lots of Bush's 'top staffers' turned up. A lingering sign of vanity, surely? 'No, absolutely not. It happened through the Prison Fellowship connection. I'm trying to remember who recommended me and it may well have been Chuck Colson. But it could have been people who had heard me talk in and around Washington. I'm known over there by a status which doesn't exist in England, 'presidential biographer'. (In 1992, he wrote a wellreceived biography of Nixon). And I do a column for the American Spectator magazine. So, it didn't feel like a great status thing at the time, it was rather fascinating'.

Wasn't it difficult, dipping back into the political world with such vastly reduced status? 'It's more surprising than difficult. I mean, life is a journey. And mine has been a rather strange one, but I find it if anything rather exhilarating to be back in a completely different capacity. I suppose I might have … imagined a different reason to be asked back to the White House, to talk about defence or something.' He chuckles. 'But I'd much rather talk about Psalm 130.' Doesn't he catch himself looking at his audience and thinking, I used to address kings and presidents, now I'm talking to losers? 'No, I think, isn't it amazing that roughly speaking, this audience is five times bigger than any political audience I ever addressed.'

Psalm 130 is Aitken's favourite, the one he turned to on his first night in Belmarsh to block out the sound of the other prisoners loudly detailing what they would like to do to him. A toff inside, he expected to be bullied. But, in fact, he says, people were very kind. 'The following morning, some of the guys came up and said, 'Sorry about last night, nothing personal ... you're one of us now, come and have a 'rosie' – cup of tea.' It's surprising no newspaper has signed him up to write a column, Aitken's Rhyming Slang. 'There is a rather marvellous expression, old so-and-so over there, he's 'doing his Richard twice' (Richard III rhymes with 'bird', prisoners' slang for a jail sentence). And that meant he was doing his sentence twice over, because he was in denial.' He beams.

Coming out of denial, says Aitken, is the hardest part of the process. He compares it to 'peeling an onion', the most painful layer of which is 'stubborn pride – that takes a lot of cracking. And then not blaming other people is tough.' He still has a long way to go. 'All kinds of minor failures and dishonesties of characters – and maybe some major ones.'

Such as?

'Um, women; wrong values. The list is endless. Plenty to work on. I haven't got it all right yet.' *In Pride and Perjury*, the memoir he wrote on his release, he declared an intention 'to launch the battered ship of my soul into the deeper waters of the sea of faith', but not three pages later was name-dropping his 'automatic winding Platinum Rolex', and speculating elsewhere that 'journalistic enmity' towards him was a result of 'social or sexual jealousy'. Would it be fair, I ask to characterise his life before prison as having followed a pattern of deceit?

> *'I was the author of my own misfortune, but it all stemmed from the same source, which was pride – I thought I could get away with it'*

'Yes, I had all sorts of failings; I was the author of my own misfortune. But it really all stemmed from the same source, which was pride. I thought I could cut corners, slug it out, tough it out, get away with it. I've always said to myself that I am the one, first and foremost, to blame.'

Aitken served as a cabinet minister in a government famously intolerant towards prisoners. Under Michael Howard, prison sentences lengthened and a policy of 'three strikes and out' for burglary was introduced. Aitken insists that he wasn't snobbish towards his fellow prisoners – 'I thought, I've made a Horlicks of my life and they've made a Horlicks of theirs and we're all in this together' – but his experience caused him to question his political stance on crime and punishment. 'I haven't become a sort of Marxist, or even a supporter of New Labour,' he says. 'But my political attitudes have changed.'

While inside Aitken won the role of prison letter writer and through it learned the secrets of his fellow inmates, many of whom had grown up in care homes and been abused. He says it shocked him. 'It would be difficult not to soften some of your attitudes. I cringe now to read some of my young, Tory MP speeches. I haven't gone soft on crime just because I've been a prisoner – I think some people need to be locked up – but I've got a much better understanding of my fellow human beings. In that sense it was an enriching and a … heartsoftening experience.'

Howard was one of the old faithfuls who came to visit him inside and Aitken supports his leadership: 'He seems to be striking all the right notes.' A flick through Hello magazine at the photos of Aitken's wedding last year to Elizabeth Harris, first wife of the late Richard Harris, reveals, along with Howard, Norman Tebbit, Malcolm Rifkind, Nicholas Soames and Norman

Lamont hanging on in there. On his release, old friend Frank Williams, the motor racing chief, sold him a Renault Laguna for a pound. But some of Aitken's other friends find his new spirituality 'uncomfortable', and can't understand why he doesn't go back into business.

His four children, one of whom, William, is studying philosophy and theology at Edinburgh University, tolerate his religiosity. 'I think my children prefer a father who is vulnerable to a father who was powerful.' After the trial they went through a period of not wanting to talk to him – Aitken had persuaded his teenage daughter Victoria to give him a false alibi in what he calls 'my most shameful mistake'. But they got over it. Victoria's twin sister, Alexandra, came to visit him in prison on 'the Toms' Bus – Tom is slang for prisoner's wife or girlfriend, where she picked up some very interesting lessons about life. And after the visit she said, 'Daddy, Daddy, thank you – do you realise we've never had two and three-quarter hours just talking one on one?"

Aitken has made mistakes since his release. Going on *Have I Got News for You* might, he concedes, have been 'a misjudgement', but he doesn't want to get pigeon-holed as 'some sort of saintly Christian'. This seems unlikely, given the level of cynicism in this world, and in its spirit I ask whether going on telly might not be interpreted as an act of pride? 'I'm grateful for the money', says Aitken ruefully. Of his old life, he says, he doesn't miss much – 'I'm happy travelling light' – except perhaps, 'going to the opera, or going to the theatre, or going to nice restaurants. Nothing serious. I don't crave anything.'

He and Elizabeth aren't exactly out in the cold – they honeymooned at her house in the Bahamas. Meanwhile, Aitken is working on four more books: a sequel to his memoir, *Prison and Preach*; a sequel to the Psalms book, *Prayers for People Under Pressure*; a biography of Chuck Colson; and a loose follow-up to the 1967 book *The Young Meteors*, entitled *Heroes and Contemporaries*, in which he will profile all the great men he has met: Churchill, Nixon, Kissinger, Beaverbrook and so on, heroes from the life before. Does he ever wake up in the middle of the night and return to a single moment, the point at which he could have done things differently? There is a long pause.

'Well, I think if there was a moment, it was getting angry and making the Sword of Truth speech. Sometimes I'll see a clip of that speech on telly and I'll say to myself – 'Who is that arrogant berk up there?' – and then I'll say,

'Why on earth didn't I have a sense of humour about this?' Because how many people would really, *really* have thought I was a pimp or an arms dealer?'

Four days later at the church in Battersea, the congregation is busy smothering Aitken in forgiveness. A man in a green jumper has his hands in the air and other have moved to the front to be individually prayed over. From the pulpit, the minister says, 'Let us pray for Jonathan Aitken, for his continued written and spoken mission …' It is hard to imagine putting up with this if you didn't, genuinely, believe in it, like a Christian trying to enjoy himself at a Marilyn Manson concert. Aitken's reading and interpretation of Psalm 130 has gone down well, the jokes about the 'double Richard' raising a laugh and thoughtful nods accompanying his observation that 'there is no quick fix after sinning against God'.

After the service, I approach several people to see what they made of it. Some are Guardian readers, one a former employee of the Labour Party, but all are impressed by Aitken's sincerity. 'Gravitas coupled with humility … not his fault he's got a proud manner … deserves a second chance … much nicer than the Hamiltons'. One of them, Simon, a 23-year-old actor, came ready to dislike Aitken after seeing his performance on *Have I Got News For You*. Yet he has come away convinced, 'I thought what he said was heartfelt, the bit about self-reliance'. He seems surprised by his own reaction and doubles back to examine it. 'But then we're an easy audience to please, aren't we?'

The ultimate test, of course, is Aitken's attitude towards the Guardian, specifically the journalist David Leigh, whom he said before the trial was personally responsible for 'the cancer of bent and twisted journalism'. Before the tape recorder goes off (and with it, any illusion of conviviality – the temperature notably plunges when business is done), I ask Aitken what he would do were he to encounter Leigh today. Would he say sorry? He looks appalled. 'Yes', he mumbles, casting his eyes downward. 'I would. I'd absolutely shake hands, apologies, everything.'

Emma Brockes is a journalist. She wrote this article for The Guardian. *It was originally published on 2nd February 2004 and is reproduced with permission.*

AFTER THE FALL

by Jonathan Aitken

On 8th June 1999, I was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment on charges of perjury arising out of a lie I had told on oath in a civil libel case. After being driven away from the Central Criminal Court through jeering crowds in a 'sweat box' or prison van, the next few hours were a non-stop nightmare of grim experiences. They were part of my 'Induction', the name for the initiation and registration procedures all new arrivals in British prisons have to go through.

At HMP Belmarsh, one of London's largest and toughest jails, Induction is a gruelling routine. Its rituals include strip-searching, mug-shot photography, fingerprinting, confiscation of personal items of property, issue of ill-fitting prison uniform, psychiatric interviews, medical investigations and cell allocations. All these processes take place amid a great deal of noise and shouting, with your fellow occupants of 'the cage'. This is an appropriately animalistic and ironbarred enclosure in which all newly sentenced prisoners arriving from the courts are held for their first few hours of incarceration.

Business was brisk in the Belmarsh cage on the evening of 8th June. About 35 men were being inducted into the prison in visible states of distress that ranged from the despondent to the desperate. In the last category was a young black prisoner who kept charging into the bars of the cage like a frenzied bull until he split his head open and had to be restrained in a straitjacket, blood streaming over the prison officers. Another excitable young man tried to escape, which was an enterprise doomed to failure in the heart of one of Britain's highest security prisons.

Elsewhere in the cage several members of a robbery gang were fighting among themselves, kicking and punching one of their number for getting the script of his evidence wrong in a way that had allegedly brought all the gangsters guilty verdicts. In various corners, several heavily tattooed characters were sitting with heads buried in their hands. One or two of them were weeping. I was feeling pretty low myself, but at least I had already come to terms with the inevitable consequences of my decision to plead guilty. It also helped that I felt my sentence was fair and in line with expectations.

Eventually, my hours in the cage ended when a prison officer handed me a slip of paper and said: 'Aitken, you're going to Beirut'. I had no idea what

he meant but I followed him to House Block 3, which I later discovered is nicknamed after the capital of war-torn Lebanon because its cells house so many 'toolmen' (gunmen).

My hope was to get my head down and sleep at the end of an exhausting and testing day. No such luck. My arrival at Belmarsh had been reported on the evening television news bulletins. So, within minutes of getting to Beirut, I was the target of a cat-calling exercise known as 'doing a quizzie'. This consisted of bellowing questions and answers, quiz-style, from one house block to another across the exercise yards. Over the next few weeks, I heard many quizzies on the theme of what the participants would like to do to various unpopular prisoners or prison officers. It was just a nightly opportunity for hotheads to let off hot air, much of it fuelled by drug-taking.

However, on my first evening as a prisoner I had no experience of Belmarsh's sound and fury. So my heart froze as I realised that the raucous dialogue of that quizzie was entirely directed at me. 'Where's (expletive deleted) Aitken?' 'What are we going to do with (expletive deleted) Aitken?' 'How do we (expletive deleted) give Aitken a good (expletive deleted) up his (expletive deleted)?' were among the politer questions in the chant. The gist of the answers was that tomorrow morning they would (expletive deleted) well give this or that type of (expletive deleted) beating to this or that part of my (expletive deleted) body.

The morning newspapers had not been backward in suggesting that a cabinet minister who becomes a convict might expect to have one or two difficult moments during his sentence. But nothing had prepared me for the viciousness, the venom and the violence of that quizzie. I was terrified. I felt utterly helpless and totally vulnerable. The fear inflamed my already ragged nerves. But what on earth could I do about it?

For some months before my sentencing, I had been travelling on a spiritual journey. It was largely the pressures of adversity that had set me on this voyage of exploration. Those pressures had included defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and now jail – a royal flush of crises by anyone's standards. Yet pressure can be a making as well as a breaking experience. For after several false starts, stumbles, doubts and back-slidings, my voyage of exploration evolved into a committed quest for a right relationship with God. On the evening of the Belmarsh quizzie, it therefore seemed natural to turn to His divine power which was capable of offering me protection. So I knelt down on the concrete floor and tried to say a prayer.

I remembered that just before going off to the Old Bailey to be sentenced a friend had put into my pocket a calendar-style booklet entitled *Praying the Psalms.* I turned to the page for 8th June. It recommended Psalm 130, which began:

Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord
O Lord hear my voice
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

As I studied its eight short verses, a warm and comforting wave of reassurance flooded over me. Suddenly, I realised that I was not as lonely, scared, helpless or vulnerable as I had thought. The author of the psalm had been there before me. Some 3000 years earlier, he had experienced very similar emotions of despair to mine. He had found a route to climb out of his depths, with God's help, and he had signposted that route in beautiful poetry recorded for posterity in the 19th book of the Bible known simply as *The Psalms.*

One of the unexpected benefits of my prison sentence was that, for the first time in a life led on fast tracks at high stress levels, I had plenty of time at my disposal for reflection and reading. I soon discovered, like monks in past centuries, that a cell can be a great place to pray in. I made it a regular part of my routine to ponder and pray over two or three psalms each day. The results of this discipline were amazing.

While in jail I found myself continuously grappling with an onslaught of problems. They came in three categories: immediate, external and spiritual. The most immediate one was simply survival. I had to avoid trouble and get to know the ropes of prison life. Although I was met with much kindness and gentle humour from my fellow inmates, nevertheless the ever-lurking challenge was coping with threats or acts of aggression. So I had to discover how to tell the difference between 'real men' and 'plastics', and how to keep my head well below the parapet with the prisoners and occasional prison officers who wanted to give me a hard time.

Although the difficulties of life in the prison community had their moments of high pressure, they were, in con-speak, 'easy gravy' compared to my external difficulties. Theses included a constant barrage of media attacks and intrusions, family worries, financial ruin, communication failure, and defending myself in new litigation battles launched by old adversaries.

The third and hardest to define category of problem could be described as ‘spiritual difficulties’. To put it simply, my problem was: how to stay calm and centred spiritually when outside temporal forces are battering you with blows and disasters? Prison is one of those environments in which small problems enlarge into big ones, and serious problems expand in the mind into catastrophes. For a time, I was brought close to breaking point by a combination of pressures, but gradually I moved into quieter waters – thanks, in no small measure, to the psalms.

To give one example of how a psalm lifted me out of a quagmire of despair: just about the worst moment of my external troubles arrived in September 1999 when my trustee in bankruptcy, Colin Haig, of Baker Tilly, took legal action against me. Among my creditors were The Guardian and Granada Television. Having used his powers under insolvency law to seize all my files of personal correspondence on the basis of searching for hidden financial assets, he changed course and asserted that the contents of these files were ‘an asset’, which should be sold off for the benefit of my estate in bankruptcy. A firm of auctioneers was engaged to peruse my personal letters and to discuss their market value with various newspapers. On this basis, a valuation of not less than £100,000 was placed on my correspondence which ranged from ancient love letters to letters of political and historical interest to up-to-date personal letters full of potentially exciting grist to the tabloid mills.

The notion that such private correspondence could be deemed an asset and sold to benefit my creditors was a novel development in the law of bankruptcy. Advised that the courts would have to sanction it, the trustee in bankruptcy duly launched the litigation of Haig v Aitken, the purpose of which was to legitimise the proposed sale of these alleged ‘assets’. When the case was set down for trial my despairing spirits hit rock bottom. I could not possibly afford the cost of being represented by counsel in the High Court. The prison governor refused my application for a leave pass which would have allowed me to go to court to defend the case in person. So it seemed certain that my opponent would win his auction by default, with the end result that my most intimate and private letters would be sold to the highest bidder, inevitably triggering a new round of highly embarrassing and negative publicity for me. In the middle of my gloom about this unfolding drama, I came across Psalm 37, which opens with the line ‘Do not fret …’ In essence the message of the psalm is: don’t worry, put your trust in the Lord, commit yourself to him and he will give your cause justice.

At this time in my prison journey, I had formed a friendship with a young Irish prisoner of great charm and vitality. He shared my new found interest in 'praying the psalms' and was full of solicitude for my worries over the attempt to sell my personal letters. He decided that our two-man prayer partnership needed reinforcements to help in this crisis. So in double-quick time he persuaded a blagger (armed robber), a dipper (pickpocket), a kiter (fraudster) and a lifer (murderer) to join us. The group was marvellously effective in getting prayers answered. For, soon after we had all prayed about the impending court case over my letters and read Psalm 37 together, a remarkable chain of events began to unfold.

A young barrister unknown to me heard about the impending case of Haig v Aitken and was so outraged by the issues it raised that he volunteered to defend me free of charge. A lawyer who offers to fight a case in the High Court *pro bono* was a miracle. A second was having the trial presided over by a judge with no sympathy whatever for the case the trustee in bankruptcy tried to argue. 'I find the plaintiff's action morally repugnant', declared My Justice Rattee, as he refused to allow the sale of my letters. Back in our prison prayer group we agreed that Psalm 37, which says that the Lord will make the justice of your cause shine like the noonday sun, had come gloriously true.

There was an incident right at the end of my prison sentence that served as a good illustration of the universality of appeal in the psalms. My friends in our prayer of fellowship group, as it became known (by then about 20 strong), asked me to give a valedictory talk on Psalm 130 two weeks before my release date. The event was advertised on various notice-boards. As a result, the attendance swelled beyond the usual (Christian) suspects. Indeed, there was general astonishment when, just before I got up to speak, we were joined in the prison chapel by no less a personage than 'The Big Face'.

Every prison has among its inmates a head honcho called 'The Big Face'. The term originally derives from the time when notorious criminals had their faces plastered on 'Wanted' posters. Nowadays, it is reserved for the most feared and ferocious prisoners in a jail. Our Big Face was an old-style gangland boss coming towards the end of a lifer's tariff for a string of revenge killings. As the old Wild West saying had it, he was not a man to go to the well with. His unexpected arrival at our fellowship group made several people distinctly nervous, not least the speaker.

I began my address by saying that this psalm made a great impact on me throughout my prison journey. I had come to believe that it might have a

great message for anyone suffering ‘in the depths’. I mentioned that it was not only my favourite psalm; it also happened to be the favourite psalm of Augustine, Luther and Calvin. The Big Face nodded gravely at this.

Towards the end of my exegesis, I noticed that The Big Face was visibly moved. Tears were trickling down his cheeks as he listened in deep concentration. As I finished with a prayer, he joined in with a booming ‘Amen’. A few moments later, he drew me aside. ‘Jonno, that there psalm was beautiful, real beautiful. Go to me ‘eart, it did’, he said. ‘And I want to ask you a favour. Do you think you could come over to me peter (cell) on A wing tomorrow night and say your piece over again? I got of couple of me best mates it would mean a real lot to’.

I may have looked a little anxious at the prospect of spending an evening the company of the The Big Face and two of his closest associates. Sensing my hesitation, he enlarged his invitation: ‘And Jonno, to make yourself feel comfortable, why don’t you bring a couple of your mates along with you? I mean, ‘ow about bringing those geezers you said liked the psalm so much – Augustus and wotsits, too, if they’re friends of yours on B wing’.

Although I was unable to produce St. Augustine, Calvin and Luther as my companions, Psalm 130 went down well second time round in The Big Face’s cell. Although this surprised me at the time, the more I have come to know the psalms, the less they surprise me in their power to speak to a wide variety of people and situations. How I wish I had discovered their spiritual riches earlier in life.

After my release from prison, I spent two years at Oxford studying theology at Wycliffe Hall. Towards the end of my first year, I had to satisfy the university examiners in an Old Testament paper, with the Psalms as my special subject. The level of scholarship required by this examination compelled me to acquire a wider and deeper knowledge of the Psalter, but it is the lessons of real life, rather than of academic life, that have made me venture into the role of amateur commentator on the Psalms. Because a love of the psalms helped me to liberate and quieten my soul, I hope that these thoughts will encourage others to journey down the same road in hope of finding and strengthening their own relationship with God.

Jonathan Aitken was a Member of Parliament and a Cabinet Minister. This article was first published in the Guardian *on 2nd February 2004 and is reproduced with permission.*

From the USA

IN THE COMPANY OF SCOUNDRELS

by Ronald W. Nikkel

How many jailhouse conversions are genuine? Can you really trust criminals who turn to God just because they find themselves in prison and their backs are up against the wall? Aren't they just taking an easy way out, trying to get themselves off the hook?

I often find myself confronting questions posed by journalists and people who are sceptical, and sometimes very cynical about the religious experience of imprisoned criminals. From almost any angle one looks at it, something seems patently improper and out of balance when killers, rapists, child molesters, drug pushers, and other scoundrels suddenly turn to God in their time of trouble after a lifetime of causing havoc and misery for others. These questions always touch a nerve and although I have an answer it is an answer that seldom satisfies.

Some years ago many people in America were outraged when a notorious killer, who murdered and dismembered seventeen victims, claimed conversion to Christ after being imprisoned. Convicted of the most heinous offences in recent memory, Jeffrey Dahmer seemed to be a monster without a conscience. Not only were his killings gruesome, but he was so morally twisted that he cooked and ate his victims' body parts. On the day of his arrest, police made the gruesome discovery of a human heart and several skulls in the refrigerator of his home.

Throughout his subsequent trial Jeffrey remained impassive, never once showing any sign of remorse or regard for the deep pain he caused his victims' families. He was found guilty on all charges and the judge sentenced him to sixteen consecutive life sentences for a total of 1,070 years in prison. Officers in the prison assigned Jeffrey to the most demeaning prison chore of all, cleaning toilets. Reviled and hated by his fellow prisoners, they regarded Jeffrey as being the lowest kind of human scum. Eventually two of the prisoners brutally killed him inside a prison toilet. But in the meantime Jeffrey had turned to Jesus, claiming to have become a Christian. He was even baptized in a prison tub.

People in the community were totally outraged by Jeffrey's jailhouse conversion. Their attitude was typified in an article by a prominent journalist who expressed it only too well. 'Dahmer is dead…good riddance…Did you hear he got religion? He made peace with his maker. Lucky for him we have different makers. I think mine requires a little more than a prison conversion and a dunk in the pool to make up for butchering a dozen and a half innocent people…why is it these dogs never get religion before they slaughter people? Why does it always come too late to do anybody any good? Whose side would God be on? Who does he welcome with open arms on judgment day? Are we supposed to believe that God embraces the murderer and sends the victim to hell? — Not in any heaven I want to be part of.'[1]

I too am bothered by such jailhouse conversions. However, what bothers me is not that horrific scoundrels turn to Christ in the last moments of their lives and are embraced by Him — forgiven. What nags at me is the implication of this in terms of my own conversion. Unlike the Jeffrey Dahmers of the world, when I come to the cross of Christ, I come with a latent sense of goodness. I've served God for many years, I've lived a pretty upright life, the good I do far outweighs the bad, I've tried to make amends for the hurts I've caused – and so it seems only natural that Christ would welcome a guy like me into His kingdom. It's like I've paid some dues by believing and being able to serve Him most of my life. By sheer comparison it does not seem fair that a guy like Jeffrey comes knocking on heaven's back door after having lived like hell, producing zero goodness, with nothing to offer . . . and Christ is there with open arms to receive him.

I think of this as I meditate on the poignant image of the thief who was crucified next to Jesus. As a condemned man stripped of dignity and life itself, he had nothing to give to Jesus except his horrible past and ironically nothing left to lose except the same horrible past. Only moments before turning to Jesus, he and the other crucified bandit were deriding, insulting, and cursing Jesus along with a mob of gawking, bloodthirsty spectators. But then at the very last moment, with his dying breath, he deliberately turned to Jesus and thereupon found himself in the embrace of a heavenly grace – no conditions and no questions asked.

It is a story that unsettles me because if God doesn't require any deposit or guarantee of goodness from the most heinous of scoundrels who turn to Him when there is nothing left of their lives, it means that my accumulated

goodness is absolutely meaningless and worthless, counting for nothing. If Jesus welcomes those who have squandered their lives and who come to the dead end of human life totally destitute of everything, even of time itself, you and I for all our apparent goodness are no more fit or deserving of grace than scoundrels.

It is at this point that a realization sinks in – what makes me think that I am any better than Jeffrey Dahmer or the condemned bandit on the cross? Are you and I any less the scoundrels for thinking that our goodness is actually good and that it merits grace? Isn't grace always for the undeserving? Whether we are hanging helpless on the cross next to Jesus, or languishing in a miserably stinking and overcrowded prison cell, or kneeling in the cavernous silence of a magnificent cathedral, or looking up at the suffering of the Lord from the foot of the cross – the bottom line is that we can only turn to Him as scoundrels in the company of scoundrels, stripped of all spiritual trophies and any sense of goodness. Jesus Christ lived and died only for the salvation of scoundrels.

Salvation by grace through simple faith in Jesus is such a holy scandal that it challenges every notion I have of life's fairness and the relative merits of my own goodness compared to the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer or the thief on the cross.

Lord, remember this poor scoundrel when You come into Your kingdom!

Note

1. Lonsberry, Bob. (1995) The Early Years (New York Canisteo Free Press,)

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