

ANOTHER PERSONAL NOTE FROM BRO BEN TO FRIENDS IN PRISON

7 August, 2020

To the men I know (and those I don't yet know) in Strangeways,

Well, it's been almost five months since I was last inside the walls of Manchester Prison. It was St. Patrick's Day (17 March), and I had no idea that I would soon be "locked out" of my regular twice-a-week visits. Even when I heard a few days later that volunteers would temporarily not be allowed into any of the prisons in the country, I never imagined that it would be for this long. I know that by now some of the men I was seeing regularly have moved on to other prisons, and some have been released (I have seen a few of them out here.) And I know there have also been some new arrivals. Though it's not the best time to start in a new location, I'll say "Welcome" anyway, and I hope to meet you before too long! I really hope I will be able to come in soon. I really miss you guys. And my occasional bicycle ride around the walls, praying for you all, just makes me more homesick. My Chaplaincy boss, James, says I am the only person he knows who would try to dig a tunnel to get into a prison.

Sometimes people ask me why I love my prison work so much. I even hesitate to call it work because I enjoy it that much. And when I try to answer that question, I come up with a few good answers. First, I value my freedom a lot and can't imagine the frustration I would feel being locked up myself. I had to do two years in the (US) Army, and that was as close to incarceration as I ever hope to get. So, that being the case, if my faith tells me that I should "do unto others what you would want done unto you," then I think, if I were locked up, I would want someone to bring me in a little whiff of fresh air now and then. So, I hope we chaplains do that, bring a bit of care, respect and hope to you while you're in a tight situation, a breath of freedom and human affection.

Then, a second reason why I enjoy my prison work is that I can identify with many of the men I know well. I have the same kinds of fears, anger, hopes, frustrations, temptations, longings, loneliness, addictiveness, impatience, and all that other human stuff, as you do. And as I watch you struggle with all that, and as I see some of you growing in your own self-understanding and maturity, it helps me to accept myself and move forward in my own struggles. Also, being old, I have learned some lessons from my many mistakes, and I believe some of my experience may be helpful to you. As the old saying goes, "Sharing with a friend cuts the troubles in half and doubles the delights."

And a third reason: strange as it may seem, the level of honesty I find in conversations with men in prison is much deeper than you would find, say, if you were talking to the same person in a pub or in a family setting. Some of you have heard me say that, in my opinion, the one good thing about prison is that it gives you a pause, a time to think about where you've come from, how you've got here and where you want to go. I know, it is hard to decide, in prison, who you can trust, who you can speak to honestly. So many people are "on the make". But one of the main purposes of chaplains is precisely that, to listen respectfully and compassionately, to be there for people when they are ready to start thinking about "the big questions". I am not here to judge anybody, or even to offer advice. I am here because I believe that we are all on a journey, and that my journey only makes sense when I share it with others.

And that brings me to the final reason, the main reason, the reason that includes all the others. I love my prison work because it is my call, my vocation. Some of you have heard me say in chapel, or read in the notes I have written before, my understanding of what life is all about. I believe that God creates each of us with a purpose, that there is a seed of potential in every human soul, and that we will only really find deep joy and meaning in discovering what we are here for and then giving ourselves to that purpose whole-heartedly.

God has a plan for each of us, but it is not a programme that is fixed and fated, it is something living in our hearts that wants to express itself through us. It is a song that yearns to use our lungs, our lips,

our voices to reach the skies. It is a dance that longs to use our bodies to spin and whirl, to leap and lunge. It is a sport that will consume our energy, a project that will stimulate our mind, a skill we can proudly teach our children. As an acorn, a pine cone seed, a peach stone and an olive pit each fall into the ground and bring forth a new and particular kind of life, a unique and special tree with its own shape and form, its own flowers and fruit – so each of us has something waiting within us – waiting for the moment when we say yes to the God who created us, that we may begin to fulfil that purpose for which we were created. A screw-driver will not be happy when it is used as a chisel. A joiner's hammer will not find fulfilment in breaking rocks.

And it is never too late to say that yes. It is true, we may have wasted years chasing the things that offer meaning but don't give it and only leave us craving more – drugs, money, power, celebrity, sex, etc. – but in my experience, once I'm willing to open my heart and mind to the possibility of the unexpected, in other words, to God's creative Spirit, my depression lifts, my energy returns, and I have hope again. Things won't fall into place all at once, I may have to wait patiently (or impatiently, if you are at all like me), until things begin to unfold – but you will know there's something within you, something alive and waiting to grow.

And that leads to a final reason I love this work: I see people come alive. I know an enormous number of men from my thirty years working in prisons, and I still have contact or know what's up with a good number of them. Some of them have found their purpose and are singing their song, bringing blessings to their families and friends, bearing all kinds of good fruit. They are the fortunate ones. I don't love or respect them more than others who continue to make a mess of their lives, because I have hope that someday they too will wake up to their own possibilities. I even know a couple of men on death row (in California), who have found peace in their hearts being a friend and support to their families outside and their companions inside.

Yesterday I got an email from a man I met on Cat A's around 2004. He served more than half of a twenty-five-year sentence, during which he did a lot of studying and reading. He has been out for a couple of years now and is unleashing his creativity in writing, art, music and other interesting ways. He sent me this poem yesterday, and gave me permission to use it here, because it says in poetic form what I have been trying to say in my own way.

*Does a rose choose to be a rose, tended in a bed?
A dandelion his dandelion shape: his grassy homestead?
Does the lotus flower choose to take his chance in sour ground,
to burst through expectation, king of flowers to be crowned?
Do starlings choose to be starlings, hiding in formation?
Following the crowd and its noisy murmuration.
Do sparrows choose to be sparrows? The wren to be a wren?
Do hawks choose to soar so high and free above the glen?*

JD Magwitch, August 2020

To my mind, the point of that is that we do not choose to be who or how we are, we do not choose our nature or our circumstances, but once we accept ourselves as we are, we can express the life and love within us fully and passionately, with all the freedom and creativity our hearts contain. I pray that that will be your story, and that this time will be a time of germination and incubation for the potentials of life and love hidden in your heart.

God's blessings. I hope to see you soon.

(Bro) Ben (Chaplaincy volunteer)

PS Thanks to those of you who have sent me notes through the chaplaincy. I think I have responded to all of those messages. I'd love to hear from you again, or from those I haven't heard from yet.