

From Parliament to Prison.

The prison door slammed shut and Jonathan Aitken was cut off from the outside world – defeated – disgraced – divorced – bankrupted and imprisoned. Prisoners around him began an expletive filled chant – giving great detail as to how they were going to crush and destroy every part of the anatomy of this “tall poppy” – the man tipped to be a future Prime Minister of Britain.

Recently my wife and I had the privilege of attending the recent Melbourne Prayer Breakfast in the Convention Centre with 800 other people. The special guest was Jonathan Aitken – former Minister in the British Government. He had graduated in law from Oxford and became a Fleet Street journalist writing for prominent papers. He became a Member of Parliament and was appointed Minister for Defence in 1992. His political career ended when he told a lie under oath in a libel action. He pleaded guilty to charges of perjury and served a 7 month gaol term in 1999.

Now in gaol for this first night Jonathan Aitken was very much out of his comfort zone. He listened to the words of the expletive filled chant coming from many prisoners around him. He was scared – there wasn't going to be much sleep. He knew the threats were real. Gaol could be a very dangerous place for people from his privileged background.

Jonathan Aitken got down on his knees and prayed using these words from the Bible. *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* (Psalm 130). His prayer was heard and Jonathan slept soundly for seven hours.

Amazingly in the morning things were much different. A nearby prisoner apologized for his behaviour the night before. “Sorry” he said for the stuff we were singing. This prisoner went on to say that he could do with some help and held up a letter in his hand. “Can you read this?” Jonathan read what proved to be an eviction notice. This prisoner was distressed that his wife and children were about to lose their home. Jonathan as a politician had had much experience in helping people through these tough circumstances. He helped the prisoner format a letter of reply. The prisoner appreciated the help given by Jonathan.

As this story spread a queue of prisoners started to build up outside Jonathan's cell. Many of the prisoners were illiterate and enjoyed someone who could help them read and write. Soon wives and girl friends of these mostly male prisoners gave feedback that they enjoyed the improvement in the love letters they received!

After a number of weeks one of the prisoners, Paddy was his name, visited Jonathan to express his appreciation for the help many of them had received. He offered a gift – a pile of pornographic magazines. Jonathan on seeing what the magazines were said, “Thanks, but no thanks”. “Why?” asked Paddy. Jonathan replied “I'm on a different path these days”. Paddy asked “What path is that?” Jonathan hesitantly replied “I'm wanting to follow Jesus”. He expected derision and sarcasm from Paddy. But surprisingly Paddy replied “You know, I would like to follow that path myself”. Paddy went on to say that life was pretty miserable and lacked any sense of purpose.

Jonathan was staggered when Paddy asked “How do I get on this path?” Jonathan – the highly educated and high achieving former Member of Parliament struggled to answer. He had attended church much of his life – only a “Sunday Christian” but it was only in recent times that he was wanting to get serious with Jesus Christ and follow His pathway. Jonathan told Paddy

to pray a prayer – and Paddy did Telling Jesus how sorry he was for the wrong things he had done and that now he wanted to follow the Jesus pathway.

Again Paddy surprised Jonathan and said “This news is too good for us not to share it”. So over the next few nights Paddy started to collect other prisoners – lifers, murderers, a bank note forger, thieves and armed robbers. They all gathered at Jonathan’s cell and had Bible studies and prayer times together. Lives were slowly being transformed. Amazing stuff!

Jonathan was released from prison after 7 months and has kept in touch with many of these prisoners. Fourteen of the men who were part of this “following Jesus” group have since been released from gaol and have not re-offended. Following Jesus has really changed their direction in life and eternity.

Jonathan himself is now a fulltime writer and Prison Fellowship worker. He has been helping to set up faith based ministry in prisons around the world. It has been documented that Christian faith based prisons where many people genuinely commit their lives to Jesus have about an 8% re-offence rate on release into the community compared to approximately 65% in secular gaols.

Following Jesus genuinely leads to transformed lives. Might each of us consider the “following Jesus” pathway and experience the transformation only He can bring if we genuinely follow Him.

Bruce Stewart.