

Fingerprints, DNA and the Black Dog

In 1996 I was in prison in Wandsworth jail. I should say that it wasn't the first time either, prior to that I had been in Risley Prison near Liverpool and Oxford Jail.

In 1988 I was in Oxford jail visiting a neighbour who had been jailed for domestic abuse, beating up his wife and as part of my training for being a vicar conducting weekly classes in the chapel with the inmates.

In 1992 I was in Risley visiting the son of a member of our church jailed for fraud.

In 1996 I visited Wandsworth jail at the invitation of the Chaplain to gain some insight into prison life and to see what a difference the Alpha course was making to some of those who were long-term offenders.

It was in Wandsworth that I met Mark.

Mark told me some of the story of what has led him to be there in Wandsworth

How his family and his upbringing, his choices and circumstances has led to petty crime and now he was here for more serious drug related offences and burglary.

He told me of an incident that had recently transformed his life.

He found the experience of being in jail very traumatic and in the first few months had considered ending his life on a number of occasions. The prison authorities had put him on suicide watch and on one occasion called him in to a multidisciplinary team meeting with the medical staff, wardens, the governor and a chaplain.

At the end of meeting the chaplain said that she felt prompted by God to say to Mark.

"Mark when you go back to your cell I think you should take a good look at your hands and think about what you have done with them in the past and what good you could do with them in the future".

Mark said he went back to his cell unmoved and still just as depressed as ever but over the next few hours the words of the Chaplain played on his mind and he looked at his hands and noticed for the first time how intricately they were made.

And in particular he noticed his fingerprints. Then he started to think these are the fingerprints that got him into trouble. That was how the police had found him. The fingerprints he had left at the scene of the crime were unique to him.

The more he thought about it began to realise the reason he been caught was because his fingerprints are unique and it was as if a voice in his head seemed to speak to him

“Mark, your fingerprints are unique because I made you to be unique. You are different to anyone else. Your DNA is different to anyone else in the world, indeed to anyone else in history and that makes you special and I love you”.

Mark said that he began to feel tears welling up in his eyes as he experienced a new sense of being loved and accepted by God that he had never experienced before.

The next day Mark asked to see the Chaplain and together they talked about what this meant and the Chaplain introduced Mark to Jesus.

Mark told me how he had begun to read the Bible, attended the Alpha course and was quite changed by the experience and the depression had been exchanged for a new hope and desire for life. He had discovered that he was loved by God and that Jesus had come to bring him life and a new hope. He was uniquely made and uniquely loved.

Most of us do not ever get to that very dark place where hope seems to have left us and depression seems to be so dark and so long lasting that life becomes unbearable.

But almost all of us at some time in our lives will struggle with seasons of depression of one sort or another and mental health is as important to talk about as going to the gym or dieting.

With this pandemic of Covid-19 there are many people and many homes where Domestic Abuse and depression has become an issue and we should not be afraid to talk about it. Find a safe friend or seek help from one of the many support groups around.

Mental health can be very fragile and it is very common among our young people in particular to suffer from anxiety, and struggle with self-harm and even thoughts of suicide. Pray for your children and grandchildren and tell them, whenever you can, how special they are, how much they are loved by you and by God.

SANE is a charity which believes that no-one affected by mental illness should face crisis, distress or despair completely alone.

On their website SANE.org they write:

The image of the Black Dog has been used from classical mythology through medieval folklore to modern times as a universal metaphor for depression and other mental illnesses. Sir Winston Churchill famously used it to describe his darker moods. Today the image represents the commitment of our campaign to raise awareness of mental illness. By encapsulating mental illness through the physical manifestation of the Black Dog, we enable people to visualise just how powerful, dominating and unpredictable it can be, whilst simultaneously affording them hope: dogs, like mental health conditions, can be tamed.

Although our previous SANEline number cannot operate at the moment, you can leave a message on 07984 967 708 giving your first name and a contact number, and one of our professionals or senior volunteers will call you back as soon as practicable.
Sane.org.uk

Brother Lawrence was a monk who lived in France between 1605 – 1691. His insights into the value of daily “Practising the Presence of God” has been a help to untold numbers of Christians for nearly 400 years.

It has been my experience that for many people the setting aside a few moments of the day to pray and read a passage from the Bible, especially the Gospels or the Psalms can be quite transformational. In previous generations this was called contemplation, others use the term “A Quiet Time”. Today some call it a form of mindfulness or focussed meditation.

Alvin Toffler in his seminal book “Future Shock” explained it in this way. In the future the rate of change will become so hugely increased that one might describe it as a psychological phenomenon every bit as disorientating as culture shock can be travelling from Devon to Delhi. In order to stay sane in such a world one needs to remain grounded in what he described as “A Personal Stability Zone”. An old pair of slippers, a familiar set of photographs on the shelf or a familiar routine in the morning or a contemplation of faith and spiritual well-being.

I reflected in one of these talks a few weeks ago about how God speaking through Isaiah the Prophet 2800 years ago said that he would never forget us nor forsake us.

Isaiah 49:14-16

In the day of your despair you cry out “The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.”

But listen carefully as the Lord replies: ¹⁵“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;

I finish this talk with an encouragement to daily reflect upon your value and uniqueness in the eyes of Jesus and the incomprehensible vastness of his love for you. Let it become an inspiration to your day and a source of hope, challenge and adventure.

Many years ago this song by a singer song-writer Graham Kendrick spoke to my imagination and I share it with you today in the hope that you will find it just as though provoking and helpful. It contains some beautiful but haunting lyrics which I hope will be helpful to you as you ground and secure yourself and your sense of worth and value in the Father’s love expressed through Jesus. It is entitled ‘Paid on the Nail’.

Is a rich man worth more than a poor man?

A stranger worth less than a friend?

Is a baby worth more than an old man?

Your beginning worth more than your end?

Is a president worth more than his assassin?
Does your value decrease with your crime?
Like when Christ took the place of Barabbas
Would you say he was wasting his time?

Well, how much do you think you are worth, boy?
Will anyone stand up and say?
Would you say that a man is worth nothing
Until someone is willing to pay?

I suppose that you think you matter
Well, how much do you matter to whom?
It's much easier at night when with friends and bright lights
Than much later alone in your room

Do you think they'll miss one in a billion
When you finish this old human race?
Does it really make much of a difference
When your friends have forgotten your face?

If you heard that your life had been valued
That a price had been paid on the nail
Would you ask what was traded,
How much and who paid it
Who was He and what was His name?

If you heard that His name was called Jesus
Would you say that the price was too dear?
Held to the cross not by nails but by love
It was you broke His heart, not the spear!
Would you say you are worth what it cost Him?
You say 'no', but the price stays the same.
If it don't make you cry, laugh it off, pass Him by,
But just remember the day when you throw it away
That He paid what He thought you were worth.

How much do you think He is worth, boy?
Will anyone stand up and say?
Tell me, what are you willing to give Him
In return for the price that He paid?

Graham Kendrick
Copyright © 1974 Make Way Music,
www.grahamkendrick.co.uk

Scriptures:

Matthew 26:6-13, Luke 14:3-9, John 12:1-11