

'Faith in the World' Prize 2011

Highly Commended: Middle Category (ages 16-17)

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Why have chaplains in prisons?

Let's call him Tony. He's twenty two years old, short, flabby with severe acne spreading across his cheeks. Tony is serving a five year sentence for burning down his old school. During his first six months, Tony attempted to take his own life twice. He first met the chaplain after his second attempt. Their first meeting did not go so well. After ten minutes pleasantries were exchanged and the chaplain left. However, he felt there was unfinished business with Tony. So after this first meeting he greeted Tony by name when he next saw him around.

After a few weeks the Chaplain noticed Tony walking alone around the exercise ground. He approached Tony and found him holding a letter. The Chaplain politely questioned him about the letter. Tony was reluctant at first, but felt a sense of companionship from the Chaplain, so he told him it was from a friend. This friend had just written to Tony to inform him that he was very ill. Yet the chaplain sensed he wasn't getting the whole truth from Tony. He did not pry so they spoke for a while before tea time.

The next week, he saw Tony again and expressed a concern for his friend. He probed further and asked what illness he had and how he was doing. He sensed that Tony was emotional, possibly on the verge of tears, so invited him into his office. Tony talked of how he felt ashamed, and was reluctant to talk about the letter. The chaplain told him that he wouldn't force him to tell him anything he didn't want to, but whatever he did say would be confidential. He assured Tony that he was safe from judgment, and would be accepted no matter what. Tony felt more comfortable and agreed to talk to the Chaplain about his friend.

"His name is Peter and he is not really ill, but actually perfectly well. He is in fact my boyfriend. Well ex-boyfriend now, he has found someone else and was dumping me in the letter." Tony spoke softly, barely above a whisper. He was shaky and crying. There was a long pause before Tony spoke again. He wasn't used to talking, and having someone who listened so closely and acceptingly as the chaplain was doing now. "I've never described him as my boyfriend to anyone before. I've never actually told anyone before," Tony admitted.

John is forty six years old. He was brought up a Christian and went to church with his mother every week until he was fifteen. At this time his mother was brutally murdered and he lost his faith. He has had problems with the law and been in and out of jail ever since. He is back, serving his longest sentence for robbery. A few weeks into his sentence, John noticed many of the inmates in his wing attending a communion service every Sunday at 10am. John himself hadn't been back in church since his mother's death, but watched the men around him leave their cells on a Sunday morning. One day, when John was sick of the monotonous routine of prison life, he decided to go along to a communion service and sit in the back. He noticed he was singing along to the hymns he remembered from his boyhood, and realised he was enjoying himself. He felt a real sense of feeling at home he hadn't felt in a long time. He decided to give a few more Sundays a try, and found himself enjoying the singing and services more and more as the weeks progressed. After one Sunday communion he approached the chaplain, and expressed an interest in being confirmed. It was something he had been preparing to do, before his mother's death. The chaplain was happy to arrange the confirmation and started preparing John for his confirmation.

They agreed to meet once a week after the communion service. Within the context of the meetings John grew more comfortable and found himself trusting the chaplain more. A few sessions in, John felt at ease enough to communicate with the Chaplain about his issues with his faith and with God. He admitted he felt rejected and unloved by God. He didn't understand why God had let this happen to his mother. He felt abandoned and betrayed. And after many years of contemplating he had concluded God must really hate him. With this, the chaplain stepped in to offer some explanation and reassurance. He explained how God loves everyone, especially John. God has a plan for all of us, whether they believe or not and John is a child of God. He is special and loved. John found these weren't empty words. The chaplain lived a life of love for others and slowly John came to accept his mother's murder. John received this love after so many years of rejecting it and completed his confirmation classes with the Chaplain.

John was confirmed a few Sundays later.

The "Blue Boys Gang" has terrorized communities for years. Their leader, Billy Foal has been in the gang since he was an eight year old. He's notorious for being a tough guy, and is feared by many of the inmates, especially those from rival gangs. He was harshly beaten by his step dad from an early age. This made a vulnerable Billy seek comfort within the brutal gang. Violence is all he has ever known.

Billy often sees the chaplain visiting the inmate next to him and admires his perseverance with the 'nutcase' next door. One day, he notices the chaplain arriving again next door and decides to talk to the chaplain to see what he's about. He was curious as to why someone would choose to come and work inside the prison. The chaplain explained that he is here for the prisoners to offer care and to share God's love to everyone, whoever they are.

After that, Billy watched the chaplain visit the 'nutcase' for weeks, talking to him with such patience and understanding. The chaplain was there every week without fail. Billy recognised how consistent and reliable the chaplain was with this difficult man. As time passed, Billy started to notice a real change in the 'nutcase'; he seemed calmer and less erratic. He appeared less paranoid and more normal. The chaplain's influence was really visible; this man was an illustration of his the good work he was doing. Billy found the chaplain to be the first positive male role model he had ever met in his life. The chaplain was a walking example of goodness from the outside on the inside and encouraged Billy to be a good role model. The chaplain highlighted Billy's gifts of leadership skills and charisma and how he should put them to positive use. The chaplain influenced Billy to use his gifts to do good and to strive to be a better man, leaving his unpleasant and violent streak behind him.

So why do prisons need Chaplains? Let us learn from Tony, John and Billy. We all need someone who listens but does not judge; a spiritual guide who helps us find faith, even in times of struggle; a person who demonstrates love, acceptance and makes us feel safe. We all need someone who is a positive role model, a walking example of goodness and care; a person who shows us our gifts, and makes us aspire to be a better person, irrespective of who we are, or where we are. Even if we are in prison, we need someone like this. Prisons need chaplains.