

# IN PRISON WITH JESUS

**CLIVE MCKIE** talks about his work as a prison chaplain.

**T**aketime meditations started in 2006 when a prisoner, with no faith background, asked me, 'How do you pray?' I said, 'You just talk to God in your mind.' She replied that she had tried that and it did not work. I explained that St Ignatius would say that she would find it easier if she pictured herself with Jesus. To my surprise, she asked if I could help her do this. I asked her to picture herself watching as Jesus healed a leper (Matthew 8). Then I said, 'Now visualise Jesus approaching you and hear him as he invites you to share with him whatever is on your mind.' Having given her a few moments, I said, 'And now listen as Jesus responds to what you have shared with him.' She opened her eyes and said that she had met Jesus and asked him into her life.

Over the following weeks, she reported how her behaviour was changing. One day, she explained that she could no longer lie. She said, 'As an addict, I have always lied. In fact my whole life has been one big lie! But now if I lie, I feel so

bad that I have to go straight back and put it right.'

As someone who had taken heroin for over 20 years, this lady struggles with her physical, mental and emotional health and has, like many prisoners, been through traumas that have taken their toll on her. Yet, after some time she reached a point where she wanted to formalise her relationship with Jesus and was baptised in the prison.

## Religion or relationship

Religion is something that is supposed to help us grow in our relationship with God. Some aspects of religion we may find helpful – others we may not. Variety in religious approaches means that hopefully we can all find a religion that helps us get closer to God. However, it is the relationship with God that matters, not the religion. Sadly, there are plenty of people who have grown up in a religion but who have never encountered God.

One young prisoner who started speaking to Jesus through meditative prayer explained how her life had changed since developing this relationship: 'I feel loved, secure, safe, held, not judged or criticised. If I do something wrong, there is no punishment because God knows I am trying. I am not being told "You must

do this." If I mess up and talk to God about it there is a sense of relief. I am no longer a failure.'

Such encounters with Jesus are truly transformative.

## A way out of the downward spiral

Whereas every person in prison has a different story to tell, many have experienced some kind of abuse early in life. This has often led to addiction to alcohol or drugs as a way of managing the overwhelming emotions of shame, anger and fear. Addiction then often leads to crime, ranging from shoplifting to prostitution or drug dealing. The effect of the early trauma is to make a person more vulnerable and more likely to experience new traumas through abusive relationships as an adult. This is a downward spiral and becomes extremely difficult to break. But my experience is that having the space to talk to and listen to Jesus can change everything. ■

**Reverend Clive McKie is CEO of Taketime, an organisation that empowers people to develop a relationship with Jesus through accessible meditations, and trains Taketime practitioners so that they may empower others.**

**Curriculum links:** GCSE units on crime and punishment, the work of prison chaplains, worship and prayer. A-level: religious experience.



### 'That was better than drugs!'

The prisoner was new and, as a prison chaplain, I welcomed her and asked how she was. She said she was fine but had no faith background, though she did pray. She agreed to let me lead her in a prayer in the form of a meditation, which gave her space to speak to, and then listen to, Jesus. Afterwards, she exclaimed, 'That was better than drugs! And it was free! And it was good for me!'

She continued, 'All my life I have been in the wrong place, and Jesus just said to me, "Today you are in the right place!"'

As a prison chaplain, I have many opportunities to talk to prisoners about faith.

Many say that they not interested in religion, although they pray. So, if I create space in which they can talk to Jesus and be open to his response, then God is able to do amazing things.

This particular woman moved from not knowing if Jesus was real to encountering him and knowing that he understood her completely. Because she was transferred to another prison soon after this experience, I can only pray that this was the beginning of a transformational faith – as it has been for many others.

### CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

#### FOR 14–19s

Read the printed article in *REtoday* and the examples of Revd McKie's work here online.

From these sources, write a job description, in no more than 200 words, for a prison chaplain.

Revd McKie's work shows examples of reform. What are your own views on reform? Can criminals – even those who have committed the very worst of crimes, be reformed? Does faith have a role to play?

What does Revd McKie's work say on the issue of prayer and religious experience? What are your thoughts on this?

### Angel wings

A few years ago, one prisoner was so overwhelmed with anxiety when she arrived that she curled up on the floor in the corner of her cell and would not move.

I went to see her, but she was barely able to speak. I left her with a CD that contained meditative prayers. These meditations lead you into a story from the Gospels and then give you an opportunity to speak and to listen to Jesus. (Visit [www.taketime.org.uk](http://www.taketime.org.uk) to try one.)

When I next met her, she explained how she had found herself sitting with Jesus, whom she did not know, but whom she felt at peace with. Despite having no Christian faith, she had a fascination with angels, and Jesus told her he was asking the Archangel Gabriel to look after her. She described how she experienced the Archangel standing beside her and enfolding her in his wings. This was the beginning of her faith journey as a Christian.

I recently heard that she is really doing well following her release, has started her own business and is still doing the *Taketime* meditations.

Saying a prayer for people after they have shared their struggles with you may be really helpful, but it is not the same as enabling someone to hear Jesus speak to them directly.

### Who's Jesus?

One day, I spoke to a 21-year-old prisoner who felt weighed down by fear and had no faith background. She asked me, 'Who's Jesus? He's big in America, isn't he?'

I explained who Christians believe Jesus is, and asked if she would like to do a meditative prayer and talk to Jesus. She replied, 'Let's do it!' I guided her in her imagination to a place beside the Sea of Galilee and gave her space to talk and listen to Jesus. Afterwards, she said, 'The weird thing was that although I didn't know him, he has always known me.'

When her friend arrived, she told her, 'I've just met Jesus, and he's cool!'

A few years later she emailed me to say, 'I remember very well when we first did the meditation, and it was very powerful for me. I remember feeling all the world's burdens being lifted from me, and all the fear.'

Most prisoners have very low self-esteem and believe themselves to be worthless. Praying with people and asking God to help them is one thing, but when they talk to Jesus directly and experience his acceptance – that is something they never forget.

A prisoner who was always in trouble with officers for breaking rules was brought to me by her friend to do a meditation. At the end the prisoner said, 'When you said that I was now alone with Jesus, I thought "Uh oh – I'm in trouble now!"'

I asked what happened. She said that Jesus had simply explained to her why she behaved the way she did. There was no condemnation, only acceptance, explanation, and the challenge to understand and change direction.

Another prisoner described how in Jesus' presence she had felt as though she were standing under a waterfall and all the dirt in her life was washed away by the water.