

'Nearly 25 years after I was released from jail, I've decided to go back behind bars on Christmas' : Tory Minister Jonathan Aitken tells how he will offer solace to inmates on the toughest day of the year

By [JONATHAN AITKEN](#)

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Over the course of 81 Christmases, I've been many things, from a politician to a perjurer living at Her Majesty's Pleasure, but on my 82nd outing tomorrow, I will be a prison chaplain, and hard at work. To my continuing amazement, I am now a minister, not of the Crown but of the cloth, ordained as a priest in 2019. It is a handbrake turn from my turbulent career in the Commons, but far more fulfilling. Indeed, I can truthfully say that I have never been happier, especially at this demanding time of year.

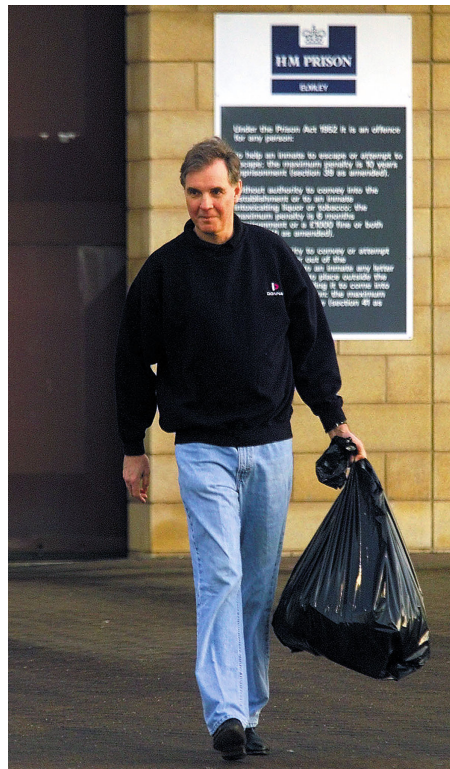
My [Christmas](#) Day will start early tomorrow when I will leave home before dawn to drive to HMP Pentonville, the 185-year-old North [London](#) jail where I have served for over five years as a chaplain. My duties will start by making pastoral visits to men in the Seg (Segregation Unit), concentrating on those with mental health and behavioural problems, sometimes so serious that they have been self-harmers or suicide attempters. A cheerful and prayerful conversation with them is usually appreciated. One of the unexpected bonuses of the Seg and other dark places of jail life is that prison is colour-blind, class deaf and respectful of other faiths. I find it natural to pray with Muslims, who make up about 35 per cent of the population of Pentonville. This praying is done with the full approval of our Muslim chaplain, Imam Tayib Ali. We are good friends.

He invites me occasionally to preach in the prison mosque, where my schoolboy Arabic surprises the congregation as I stumble through the greetings. In response, Imam Tayib eloquently talks about 'the Muslim Jesus' – who makes numerous appearances in the Koran. Between us we do our best to make inter-faith cooperation work.

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After the Seg, I go to celebrate the birth of Jesus in our packed Chapel. In contrast with the cramped cells, it is a light airy space with large windows and a friendly atmosphere. The officers sit unobtrusively on the side in case of trouble, which is extremely rare. However, in one of my early prison sermons, before I had opened my mouth, a burly inmate rose and addressed me in his Caribbean basso profundo: 'Not you! Not you again! You talk such effing b*****s!' Long experience of dealing with hecklers on the hustings helped me to defuse that situation with a joke.

On Christmas morning I do not anticipate any such trouble. For the men are likely to be in a reflective, poignant mood, missing their families and full of regrets. They usually respond well to a message of hope, even though many of them, those on remand, are in despair and deeply frustrated, especially by the gargantuan delays in getting a date for their court hearings.

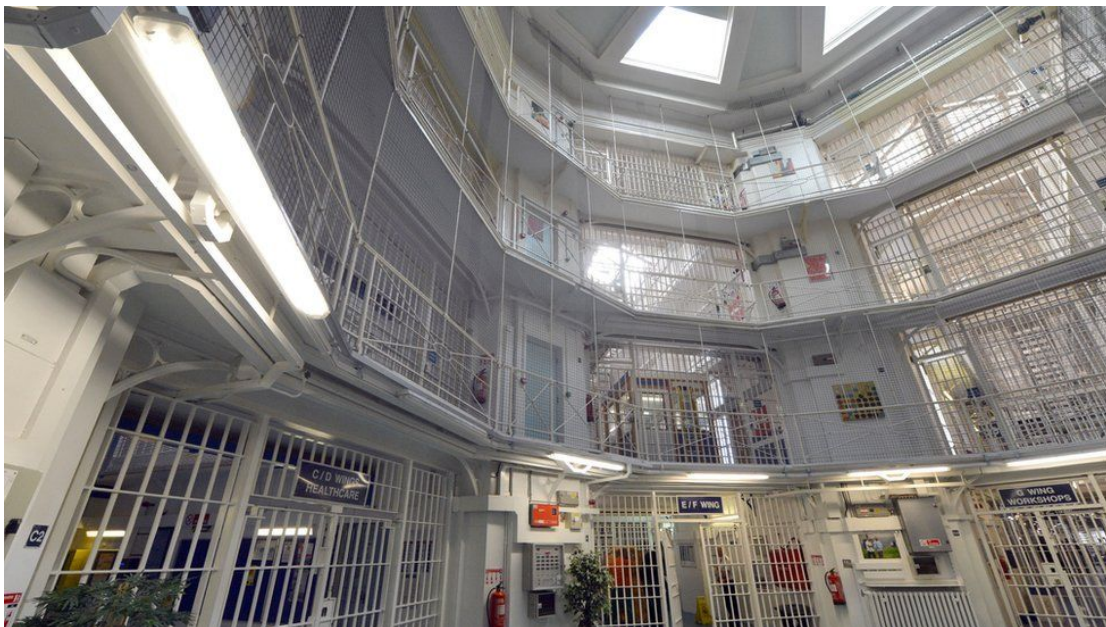
I know many of these men, so I can speak to them from the heart and from the unusual background of having been a prisoner myself. Almost a quarter of a century ago, I pleaded guilty to perjury charges and spent seven months behind bars in HMP Belmarsh and other jails. My life was permanently ruined, the media kept telling the world, as I travelled through a downward spiral of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy, and jail – a royal flush of failures by anyone's standards. But I never quite lost hope, thanks to what I call my '3Fs': family, friends and faith. So, I am able to tell my fellow sinners in Pentonville Chapel that, however badly any of us mess up, nobody falls so low that they are beyond the reach of God's forgiveness, grace and future encouragement. He is the God of second chances, and also the God of healing for victims of crime.

Pentonville is literally a Dickensian establishment. It has the worst physical infrastructure of any jail in Britain and is horrendously overcrowded, bursting at the seams to its legally allowed limit of 1,250 inmates. A new and disturbing development is that more than 1,100 of these prisoners (90 per cent of Pentonville population) are 'on remand' – meaning that they have yet to be convicted and have certainly not been sentenced, instead waiting patiently for their day in court. The average time between charge and trial is around 15 months. But I frequently meet prisoners who have been waiting for two years or more to have their cases heard.

This situation is an unrecognised disaster caused by factors such as a huge backlog of cases since the pandemic almost brought court proceedings to a standstill, and poor management by officials.



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When I was an Oxford law student in the 1960s, one of the axioms we were taught was 'Justice delayed is justice denied'. If I were to repeat it on the wings today it would be greeted by derisive laughter, booing or worse. And 'worse' is the right word because the official statistics show that 40 per cent of all remand prisoners will either be acquitted or have the charges against them dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service or walk free on the grounds of 'time served'.

Why does no one seem to care about this mega failure of the administration of justice?

Yet Pentonville itself is not a failure, for we can point to some remarkable recent successes thanks to our inspirational governor, Ian Blakeman. We have opened a new abstinence wing and a new Neuro-Diverse Unit (NDU) for 40 prisoners with low-spectrum mental health disorders such as autism or ADHD. They are all in single cells. The credit must go to CM Neil Fraser, the officer who runs and founded the unit, who I'll have a cuppa with after the Christmas Day Chapel service.

The CMs (custodial managers) are the backbone of the prison, roughly equivalent to Sergeant Majors in the Army.

Neil Fraser, whose past nicknames were 'Mr Strict' and 'No Nonsense Neil', now deserves to be called 'Mr Gentle' for the sensitive way he has turned his unit into a therapeutic and peaceful part of the prison with a team of specially trained young officers who bring the best out of their charges by treating them more like patients than prisoners. They use innovative methods such as therapy sessions with the much-loved pet dog of the wing, a whippet called Dobbie. Unlike the CM and the chaplain, Dobbie is getting the day off for Christmas!

There are other new hopeful developments at Pentonville. For example, we are in the process of opening a new bicycle repair workshop, which will train about 60 prisoners a year and find jobs for them as certified bicycle mechanics. Having been involved in all such initiatives, which have won golden reports from HM Inspector of Prisons, I am hopeful that these examples will soon be replicated in other prisons as models of rehabilitation.



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Much though I enjoy the demands of prison ministry, I am too old to do them full-time. But I find plenty of other outlets for service.

I am also an assistant priest at St Matthew's Westminster, an Anglo Catholic Church so high up the candle of holy pomp the Pope would blush at our masses! Another role of mine is unofficial deputy minister at St Peter's Notting Hill, a growing evangelical church whose energetic young vicar, Pat Allerton, calls in the crowds with great effectiveness. In the Advent days before Christmas, I attended eight services at these two very different churches, usually preaching, reading or leading prayers.

The highlights were a 600-strong children's carol service last Saturday in the streets of Notting Hill and a beautiful choral evensong at St Matthew's Westminster starring the Bishop of Los Angeles.

Sometimes I feel that our best glimpses of God are not in church ceremonies but in the faces of prisoners, the poor, the broken-hearted, the sick, the dying, the frustrated and the frightened.

They are just as central to Christmas as carols, nativity plays, mince pies and mulled wine. The deepest moments in priestly life are the needs of individuals seeking pastoral care.

Visiting hospitals to see the sick and dying is a particularly delicate duty. This Christmas, I have four friends whose lives may be heading towards their close. Praying with them is not at all a gloomy experience. For 'Time's winged chariot' comes to us all and helping a friend or a parishioner to prepare for it can be profoundly moving.

In this field of ministry, my most remarkable moments in 2023 came from walking the approach road to eternity with a wonderful old lady, Jane Williams, who died in July aged 93. We became friends during the two years in which I gave her Holy Communion in her home.

Jane was a joyful, inspirational character – warm, witty, lovesome, beautiful and young at heart. Her backstory was remarkable. At 18, she became Winston Churchill's typist and then his personal secretary for his last four years as Prime Minister. She charmed the great man and just about everyone else as she paddled on through life's tumbling rapids, which included happy and unhappy marriages, descent into alcoholism and her recovery thereafter. She was a probation officer by profession but her biggest achievement was her only child, the Archbishop Justin Welby, who, it was announced last week, is to be awarded a knighthood by the King in the New Year Honours list.



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Jane would have been proud. A loving matriarch to a clan of 16 Welby descendants and relatives whose achievements and vulnerabilities she prayed for with fervour and humour, Jane's family and faith were foremost.

I learned much from Jane on how to enjoy old age and the art of dying well. 'I am determined to make the most of life's last great adventure' she announced on the day she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Twelve weeks, two hospital stays, and several home Communion later, her last words to her son Justin were: 'I know I will see God.' What an exit line! I shall be remembering Jane with special love in my Christmas prayers.

Spending time with prisoners, the sick, the dying and the fearful may sound a rather dark Christmas. That's not how I see it, particularly when thinking about the difficult challenges in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. Just think how scared Mary must have been when there was no room at the inn as her waters were breaking or when Herod started to slaughter all the newborns in Bethlehem. There was a bleak side to the first Christmas, just as there is to some personal Christmases today.

But enough of darkness! After the prisons, the hospitals and a visit to the grave of my beloved wife Elizabeth, I will head joyfully into the light and light-heartedness of life on Boxing Day. I am hosting a dinner party for friends and family.

Alongside my daughters Alexandra and Victoria will sit the movie star Jared Harris, who is currently playing the lead role in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* at the Young Vic (as Elizabeth's son from her first marriage to Irish actor Richard Harris, Jared is my stepson).

His glamorous wife Allegra will be there, too, as will the author Lady Antonia Fraser, my godson James Abbott-Thompson and his mother Diane Abbott MP (my 'pair' in the House of Commons for 15 years). My goddaughter Sharon Chawda, a student at Greenwich University, is also coming and her mother Jessie Chawda (Elizabeth's carer) who will cook the turkey.

This gathering promises thoughtful conversation with no small hint of laughter – a precious commodity in a troubled world of worries and wars. But 'Do not be afraid', as the angels said to the shepherds. Even in difficult times, surely, we can find some small, personal ways of keeping the Christmas spirit alive.

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