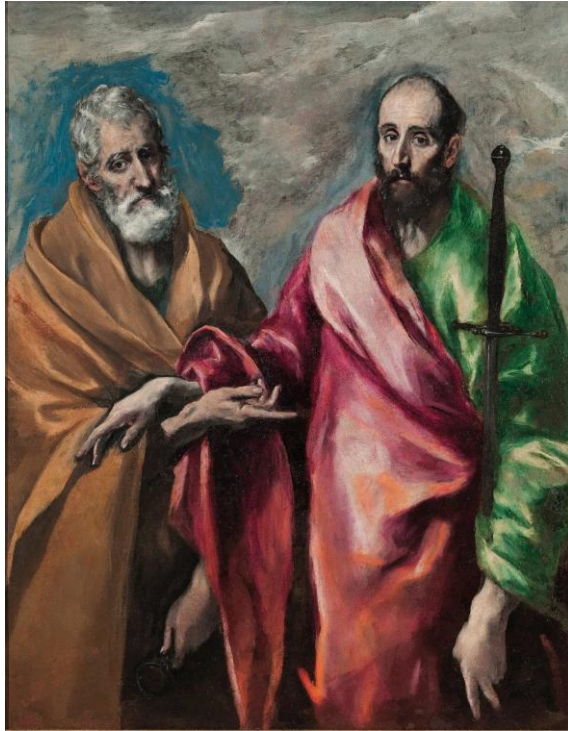


THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Sunday 30 August 2026



HMP PENTONVILLE

Caledonian Rd, London N7 8TT

Matthew 16: 21- end

Today is the last Sunday of August and the last Sunday of summer.

And what an overcooked summer it has been especially for those locked up in the furnace of a London prison.

I really have felt for those of you who have had to do your bird here enduring heatwave after heatwave. It's been tough for you, and I really do sympathise with you. But, along with my sympathies, I want to give you one or two surprises this morning.

Surprise Number One is that I can tell you that enduring a hot summer in prison is an experience that you all know about, And, surprisingly, it's one that I know about too. As some of you are aware I am an ex-con.

27 years ago I was a prisoner in HMP Belmarsh – an even tougher nick than Pentonville. I pleaded guilty at the Old Bailey on June 8 1999 to a charge of perjury, and the judge gave me an 18-month sentence. So off I went in a sweatbox to Belmarsh. I spent that summer, 27 years ago, feeling the heat in more ways than one.

However, there were some silver linings to the clouds. I was lucky to be on a good wing in Belmarsh – HB3 - nicknamed 'Beirut' because so many gunmen were imprisoned there.

But I quickly discovered that my wing neighbours, whatever they had or hadn't done with guns, included many men who in prison language were diamond geezers often with a great sense of humour and many of them had good, warm and compassionate hearts.

So I made some real friends, some of whom I still see regularly like 'Razor' Smith and Paddy 'Fingers' Doyle.

I discovered that friendships made in the adversity of prison can build into strong lifelong friendships. As Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet Act 1 Scene 3:

*"Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel"*

Just note the important word 'soul'.

"Grapple them to thy 'soul' with hoops of steel."

It's a word which has already appeared twice in our Gospel reading as we will see in a moment. However, another surprise is that I am going to suggest to you that a prison sentence, or the experience of being remanded in custody, is not just a journey of: Cell bars, Bang ups And knock backs. It can also be a journey of the soul.

I discovered this myself on a special August day during the summer of 1999 on a date which will immediately strike a chord with you because it is today's date: **August 30.**

And here's another surprise: August 30 today happens to be my birthday – of which more later. Now back in August 1999, the newspapers were writing many articles about me. I was the jailed, disgraced, former MP and Cabinet Minister.

So when August 30 came round, there were articles in the tabloids speculating on how that awful man called Jonathan Aitken who was going to be 57 on August 30 would be spending his birthday in jail?

Would his fellow prisoners be likely to beat him up as a Birthday present? Will they tar and feather him?

Well nothing like that happened. In fact I could not have had a nicer or more enjoyable birthday. A group of fellow prisoners even threw a sort of Birthday party for me! Jelly and biscuits and even a glass of Belmarsh Hooch!

And they all sang "Happy Birthday" in quite an emotional way.

In the afternoon I had a visit from my three teenage children and that was a happy reunion too.

So, at the end of the visit, I remember going back to my cell and saying a little prayer. It was a prayer of thanks and gratitude.

I wasn't much of a religious person in those days, but I did believe in God and felt I should thank Him.

Now here in 2026 it is my Birthday today. I am 84 years old. Phew! But I still feel a sense of joy and gratitude at coming to this chapel and spending this morning in the company of my fellow sinners and to spend time with my fellow followers of Jesus.

You wouldn't be in this chapel today if you were not already a follower of Jesus or perhaps just interested in becoming a follower of Jesus.

So please listen for a moment to what today's Gospel reading says on this subject: *"Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."*

For what good would it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16: 24-26)

What is the soul? It is that secret, private, personal, God channel for our lives. Too many people keep the God channel switched off and yet those who switch it on and keep it switched on will find it quite challenging at first and then they will discover the good and Godly rewards for their souls. What our Gospel tell us is that following Jesus is quite a tough call at first.

You have to deny or stop some of your self-indulgent habits like drug using or lying (which is my problem), or law breaking, or cheating on your wives, or smuggling in porn magazines.

But after getting rid of the bad stuff, start following Jesus and you will discover the good stuff in the life of the soul. How do you get to this good soul stuff? By praying, by repenting and by committing your own life to a soul-centred, Christ-centred life.

Let's look briefly at all three ways of nourishing the soul. Praying is the electrifying, exciting communication channel with God. It is usually not a one-off flash in the pan, or a penny in the slot machine quickly.

No, prayer is a discipline which needs persistence. If you try setting a few minutes aside every morning or evening to pray, you are taking up your cross and following Jesus. Work at it, and you will be amazed what starts to stir in your souls and change in your lives.

One of the first things you need to do in the life of Prayer is to wipe the slate clean with God by saying sorry to him for anything you have done wrong.

You can do that by Repentance. Repentance is a rather stuffy religious word in the English language.

It doesn't just mean saying 'sorry' over and over again, or standing in the corner or in the Old Days, wearing sackcloth and ashes.

To grasp the real meaning of Repentance, you have to go to the language in which the Gospels were originally written – New Testament Greek.

And there, the word for Repentance is *Metanoia*, which means

— *Meta* = A change

— *Noia* = Of mind.

Sometimes better translated as 'A change of heart and mind'. Are you interested in praying and repenting? If you are, you will soon feel ready to make a commitment to following Jesus Christ. Our Gospel reading had a challenging sentence: "*What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?*"

Anyone who has been in prison has had to forfeit some of his freedom. But finding a new life in Christ doesn't mean forfeiting anything. It means gaining a fresh start with the spiritual blessings that come in a life of the soul.

You should try to nourish your soul, by daily prayer, by changing your hearts and minds through *Metanoia* or Repentance and by committing yourselves and your souls to be followers of Jesus.

One last word – and one last surprise. This surprise has nothing much to do with religion, but I hope you like it. When I was a prisoner, I was often quite hungry. Prison cooks do their best. But, even so, a little extra nourishment is what some men on the wings enjoy.

Well, because it's my 84th birthday today! I was allowed by the Governor and the Officers to bring in a birthday cake. It's for you! Help yourself to a slice as you leave the chapel. I've been talking this morning about nourishing your souls. But the body needs nourishing too so enjoy the birthday cake.

God bless you all.

AMEN