Jonathan Aitken

Russell Brand has asked me to pray with him. But I doubt his faith is genuine

Right now the comedian appears to be on an ego trip about himself rather than on a true journey towards God

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Is Brand being called towards a long Dark Night of the Soul? Credit: Reuters/Olivia Harris



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Published 14 November 2026 6:00am GMT

Could Russell Brand's claim to be walking with God be genuine? 100 to 1 against I'd say. Many would give longer odds of 1,000 to 1 or more,

particularly after his car-crash interview on this subject with Piers Morgan not to mention Brand's arrogance, lack of contrition and zero signs of repentance.

And yet… my recollection of being in much the same boat or prison cell as Brand 27 years ago, in June 1999, makes me more cautious about joining in the chorus of contempt.

Brand has reached out to me in recent days asking to meet for prayer. Of course I will, as an ordained prison chaplain, go and see him in prison if he really means it. Trying to show love to the worst of sinners while hating their sin is my calling – just as it was the command of Jesus.

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But what would I say to Brand in any sort of pastoral conversation? It would be a combination of a soft talk with a tough talk.

Starting softly, I would say: "Russell, I have been where you now are. Whatever you did in the past, your present days of starting a sentence will be emotionally and practically difficult. You have my human sympathy. But if you genuinely want to receive the gift of divine sympathy you will have to go on a massive journey of change. Are you up for this?

"Starting the journey inadequately or incompetently is not the problem it may seem now. Of course, you looked a prize ass on TV with Piers Morgan when you could not find the Biblical Book of Isaiah let alone the verse

which you claimed had transformed your life. I was perhaps more polished than you in such situations. But I still had bucketfuls of cynicism poured over me and so will you for the rest of your life. Don't worry about it. If you are real your only audience that matters is an audience of one and He knows the secrets of all our hearts."

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In the early months of my sentence, I harboured doubts that my own "conversion" (a word that I do not like) was truly genuine. Was I using God as a crutch who would help me out of my fall from grace and one day help me back into another kind of favourable limelight? Some of my old adversaries at *The Guardian* said this although not its editor, Alan Rusbridger, who amazingly became a friend.



Rev Jonathan Aitken initially doubted the sincerity of his own conversion

My critics were not entirely wrong to be suspicious. If Brand has any similar dreams he should put them in the wastepaper basket right now. Walking with God or Allah or Buddha means surrendering to God. And surrendering starts with repentance, prayer and spiritual discipline. These come in long and challenging journeys. Could Brand ever be such a pilgrim? It looks unlikely right now.

Yet as the famous old hymn by William Cowper opens: *"God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."* The much-ignored mystery here is time, not least time spent in a cell. Monks as well as prisoners sometimes discover extraordinary truths in this strange environment if they are truly seeking God. Brand has to do a lot of time behind bars – well over 2,500 days.

Will they turn him towards the experience of a genuine seeker to the lonely, humbling, painful path theologians call the long "Dark Night of the Soul?"

Right now, Brand appears to be on an ego trip about himself rather than on a journey towards God. His Sunday Service broadcasts were a caricature of nonsensical and self-serving vanity. Brand may be a superficially clever

man in terms of his vocabulary, but he is an uneducated novice when it comes to grasping even the simplest basics of a spiritual vocation.

These basics need to include at least the attempt to listen to God's teachings, the study of his scriptures, obedience to His commandments and the acceptance of his disciplines.

In the early months of his sentence, I predict that Brand and his fan club will pretend he is coping well with prison life. Media juice will temporarily make him feel important and influential. But as the months roll by into years, reality will dawn. If his conversion is remotely sincere, he will begin to understand that he is alone and answerable only to God.

When I was at this sort of stage as a prisoner, coincidence (or was it God-incidence?) took my life on an unexpected turn. I went from jail to just about the only institution in Britain with worse food and more uncomfortable beds than a prison. This was an Oxford University Theological College – Wycliffe Hall – where I was tutored and mentored by great and Godly Christian scholars for a longer period than I had spent in HMP Belmarsh and other establishments.



Rev Jonathan Aitken works as a chaplain providing spiritual guidance to prisoners at HMP Pentonville Credit: Graham Guy Barratt

The greatest blessings that I gradually took away into the world were a love of God, an understanding of my own unimportance and a willingness to accept the imperatives of spiritual discipline. These last two words mean to me praying for at least an hour every day, finding routes for service and being guided by mentors.

Grateful though I was to Wycliffe I wanted to explore my faith beyond the horizons of Evangelical Christianity. So I dived deep into Catholic spirituality with the help of a Jesuit leader, Father Gerard Hughes S.J, author of the bestseller: *God of Surprises.*

I also dipped into Sikhism, the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita. I resisted suggestions that I should put myself forward as a candidate for ordination. I knew I would be unworthy and unsuitable for a role of a vicar.

But 15 years later God thought otherwise. He put a stop to my post-prison career as a writer and businessman by calling me, with frightening clarity, to be an ordained prison chaplain at HMP Pentonville where I have served on the wings for the past eight years.

This service has given me enormous late-flowering joy and fulfilment. At the age of 84 I am still a working voluntary chaplain at The Ville. I regularly meet and pray with prisoners who can be nastier, more arrogant and apparently further removed from God than today's Russell Brand or yesterday's Jonathan Aitken.

So why on earth bother with Russell? He has clearly been an evil monster, although less so than Saul of Tarsus who tortured and murdered followers of Jesus before slowly turning into Paul the great Apostle.

Many new "converts" to faith talk ignorantly about it at first. It takes time to discover whether the Sower's seed has fallen on stony ground or good ground. Brand remains bad news now. But if he listens to the good news of the Gospel during his years of incarceration, the fruits of his repentance will emerge. He has gifts of charisma and a platform which may allow him to talk about his authentic relationship with God.

Is he being called towards a long Dark Night of the Soul? The divine jury is now out in his case. Its verdict may yet be surprising. This is because God can indeed move in mysterious ways – even for Russell Brand.

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Published 14 November 2026 6:00am GMT

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