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A WORD FROM PRISONER NUMBER 1425

An article by Rev. Ivan Foster

(Written for a 'pre-digital' edition of The Burning Bush shortly after a third spell in jail in April 1986)



Rev. Ivan Foster was arrested at his church in Kilskeery in Co. Tyrone on Monday 21 April (1986) and taken to Crumlin Road Jail to serve a sentence of 14 days for refusing to pay a fine imposed upon him for his part in a protest against the R.U.C. carrying out Dublin's orders to ban the Protestant parade in Castlewellan last July (1985). With full remission of sentence, and, because the Prison does not have weekend releases, Mr. Foster was set free on Friday 25 April.

To have a prison record was not exactly the main ambition of my life. Yet it has now happened to me three times. Of course I could have avoided all three imprisonments but only at the cost of grieving my conscience. In 1966, 1969 and now in 1986 I chose to go to prison rather than

willingly comply with the punishment meted out to me by the courts. Each time I forced the authorities to imprison me as a protest against the betrayal of our civil and religious heritage.

Going to prison as a matter of conscience in this country is not a hard thing for a Christian to do. There is the abiding presence of The LORD to comfort you and His Word to strengthen and bless you. There are, nevertheless, things about prison which vex a Christian more than any other person. I think the most serious is the foul language that predominates every conversation. It was bad on my two previous imprisonments but nothing in comparison to this time. The most striking thing was that the foulest of language was used by nearly all the inmates even in conversations with the warders. Most upsetting was the fact that the majority of warders used the same foul language when addressing the prisoners. To have to abide in an atmosphere of corrupt conversation at that level is grievous to the Christian. The natural instinct is to withdraw (Psalm 1:1) but that is not possible. The Christian must unceasingly look to The LORD for the cleansing and sheltering power of the shed blood to be applied to his heart. Prison society is not one that lends itself to the indignant rebuking of the transgressor. Many of the men have long ago abandoned any concern about right and wrong on such matters as foul language. The Christian must establish his credentials before he can hope to begin to exercise a restraining Influence.

I must say I did have many opportunities of witnessing. A minister in prison is still a novel event! I had many a secret smile to myself whenever some young 'hard man' came over to me bent on a bit of fun at the preacher's expense. A preacher would be expected to be in a state of near collapse and ready to send for his 'mammy' at finding himself in this world of toughs! 'Well, Reverence, I suppose you find this hard going?' 'Not really Sonny. Its more like Butlin's Holiday Camp compared to what it was when I was in before.' Consternation! 'You've been in jail before?' I immediately went to the top of the social ladder in that would-be joker's estimation and he readily listened to what we had to say. Please pray for the word spoken during such conversations.

The work done by the Free Presbyterian chaplains deserves much praise. I heard the name of Rev. David McIlveen mentioned many times by the prisoners. They appreciated the plainness of his gospel messages and the old fashioned hymns. I can assure David that should he find himself in prison on a more permanent basis than that of chaplain he will be well looked after by the inmates.



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Even though I was in prison for only a brief few days I very much appreciated the kindness shown to my family especially from friends in the Dungannon area. The letters I received were likewise a blessing and I would like to thank those who took the time to write to me. Perhaps I should mention in particular the children of Ballymoney Independent Christian School and The Ladies Fellowship of Calvary Free Presbyterian Church in Magherafelt. The children's letters came to my home when I was out of prison and I will always treasure them. I would appeal to Christians to correspond with any member of their family who may be in prison. That quiet time of reading a letter in the cell is often a time of heart-searching and reflection. There are men in prison who receive less than the number of visits they are eligible for. How glad I was to see my wife Ann and four of the children. The other two had to stay outside because of the restriction on the number of visitors. (They have claimed first choice next time!) Christians who know of relations in prison should make sure they do receive regular visits. Prison visitation was one of the virtues mentioned by Christ in Matthew 25:37-40.

I was pleased to have the privilege of bowing in prayer again with Dr. Paisley in a prison cell. He came and visited me and we had a happy and indeed often uproarious time of fellowship together talking about such things as '8 ouncers' and . . . well such things are not for the ears of the uninitiated so I will say no more!

Will there be a next time? Remembering that we are in the 'last days' and bearing in mind the bitter determination of our religious and political enemies, yes, I think there will be a next time. I am writing this in the wake of the 'siege of Parliament Buildings' where I was amongst those who took over the Telephone Exchange in Stormont as a protest against the Anglo/Irish Agreement. I anticipate a visit from 'you know who' regarding that matter. The next time I do not expect to be given the choice of paying a fine or going to prison. That choice will be made for me.

'Why do it?' you say. I cannot do otherwise. Jeremiah wanted to stop protesting and so avoid the hurt that came upon him as a result and just lead 'a normal quiet life.' Here is what happened when he tried to stop. "I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me. For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the LORD was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily. Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay," Jeremiah 20:7-9.

I, like you Christian, would like to finish my course and end my days without shame. That is the substance of our duty. To the end of our days then we must fight the good fight of faith.