
(Adapted from a presentation prepared originally for Chesham Men's Breakfast, 24th November 2018)

I cannot claim to have had a very auspicious start in life. My mother, who lived in Highbury at the time of my birth, was an unmarried Irish Barmaid. She had come to England to work. As far as I can work out, there was an understanding between her and a man called Paddy that they would marry but Paddy was away in Canada, working in construction. She met a blonde Dubliner called John and I was the outcome.

Although John was in love with her and wanted to marry and set up a home with her, he was obviously not the love of her life. The owner of the house in which she rented a room made it clear that she had to choose between her baby or her room – she couldn't keep both.

I was not her first child. My older half-brother, Louis, had lived happily with her in Ireland until he was five. When she came to England, she committed him to the care of a Catholic Childrens' home, responding to his deeply unhappy protests – and scarring him mentally for life - by telling him 'You'll have to look after yourself'.

She was not happy with the way Louis was 'looking after himself' so she determined in my case to keep me away from Catholicism and chose to have me adopted through a specifically protestant adoption agency.

(Obviously, I wasn't aware of any of this at the time but, as an adult, I have spent one day with her and have met Louis on several occasions – so I'm piecing this together from what I've been told.)

I grew up a few miles downriver from the Dartford River Crossing, as the adopted son and only child of a local couple who had met and married some time after the Second World War, had tried unsuccessfully to have a child of their own and, by the time I came along, were sick of the sight of each other! It was a recipe for disaster and for nearly twenty years that's what my life turned out to be.

My father was, emotionally, a remote figure. He had spent most of the War, not unhappily, as a PoW, deep in Germany. He had the ability to completely insulate himself emotionally from whatever was going on around him and to live his life one day at a time. He expected – and received – very little from life except to be able to pay his way, come home to a hot meal and somewhere to sleep, which was usually the meal table after he had pushed his empty plate back, then one of the armchairs until he went bed, where he slept until 4.30am, when his day started again.

My mother was extremely unhappy! She was convinced she had allowed herself to be trapped in a marriage below her true status in life and although she showed me kindness, there was no love to spare and probably, at some level, she viewed my arrival and presence in the home as one more impediment to her freedom.

As I grew, I developed relationships with other local boys and spent as much time as I could with them, rather than indoors. By today's standards, from a very young age we were given an amazing amount of freedom by our parents, who were content to see us at mealtimes and bedtime only and for us to amuse ourselves in whatever way we could in between.

So, we did what boys, left to themselves and with no-one giving us a moral compass to steer by, do. (Read Angela's Ashes if you want more detail.) There was a lot of boredom, a lot of mischief, some downright anti-social behaviour and, as we got older, not a little vandalism. With the onset of teenage, the vandalism continued, got more serious, and evolved into crime, particularly theft.

I am particularly ashamed of this part of my life because I never for one moment even thought about the unhappiness other people were experiencing because of the things I was doing.

When I was 16, I was 'befriended' by an older man whose life was literally a life of crime. He had spent periods in prison and survived financially on benefits and the proceeds of theft. I became associated with him and spent hours every night mainly but not exclusively breaking into holiday homes and caravans on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, stealing other people's hard-earned holiday cash and whatever items we thought we might be able to sell. I was so thoughtless that when it was later brought home to me by the Police that people reacted to what had happened by cancelling their holiday and going back home, I couldn't understand why!

My life had already gone downhill but could have gone even more seriously downhill further at this point. I truly believe that, although I was not a Christian, God had his hand on me and prevented Satan getting me even further in his clutches than he had managed to do already. I found myself mixing not only with criminals but noticed also that a lot of them seemed to be openly homosexual or bisexual. Thankfully, I never participated in homosexuality, but I think if I had spent longer in that environment, almost certainly I would have come under pressure to do so. Romans 1 maps out the stages by which people become further and further estranged from God. After a hard-hitting list of anti-God behaviours, the author concludes with: *...knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.* (v32)

Rewinding a couple of years, to age 14, I made my first appearance in a juvenile court, for involvement in the theft of 24 bottles of rum from a parked-up lorry. I was put on probation for two years. This involved weekly visits to a Probation Officer and, looking for a relationship as usual, these were occasions I looked forward to. I was sad when, after a few months, the man I had become used to seeing told me he was moving on and introduced me to a tall Yorkshireman called Richard Harrison. Richard Harrison took over from the following week and seemed to feel an urge to talk to me about the possibility of my forming a relationship with Jesus.

This was not a brand-new idea to me. I had started attending a youth club in Greenhithe run by the vicar and members of the St Mary's Parish Church. They had introduced me to the idea of 'giving my life to Jesus', getting to *know* him as my *personal* Saviour and Lord. I didn't believe in God at all but, thanks to my mother's decision to have me adopted into a protestant family, I had some Church connection and knew that there were people who did believe in him. But I had certainly got the impression that, even for those people, God was distant and certainly not somebody to be *known*. This possibility was a radical suggestion to me.

Not only was it radical – it was *offensive*! Was I really such a failure that I needed to ask Jesus to take over control of my life? The answer, of course, was 'Yes', but, at the tender age of 14, I

hadn't faced up to harsh reality of the damage I was doing to myself or given up on myself as the answer to my problems.

When, at the age of 16, I stood in front of yet another magistrates' bench in Sheerness, on the Isle of Sheppey, the reality was dawning on me that I was a total failure. I had thrown away so many opportunities. I had been expelled from Grammar School, my prospects were not bright and although I had been accompanied to the court by my father, I knew he would be going back on the train on his own. I had been put on probation, fined, been given hours of community service and now, with 22 burglaries on the charge sheet, there was only one outcome – a custodial sentence.

It was felt that I was more likely to respond to a short, sharp, shock, so I was conveyed to Send in Surrey to spend three months in a Detention Centre, with the potential of it being shortened to two if I behaved myself.

I found that behaving myself in such a highly-structured environment was actually a walk in the park. When I left, one of the senior wardens ('screws', as we referred to them) gave me his assessment of my prospects. It went something like: 'You've done well here, Jemmett, but you will spend a lot of your life in penal institutions because you enjoy the security it gives.' I disagreed with him, of course, but I knew, deep down in my heart, that every word he said was true.

So that was what I had become. By the age of 16. I was already institutionalised and that was the kind of loser's life that stretched before me.

I was released from HMDC Send in the Autumn of 1969, determined to prove the prediction wrong that I would spend a lot of my life in penal institutions. I wouldn't burgle any more – and I never have. Going forward, I would confine myself to nothing more serious than motoring offences! I got a steady job in a paper mill and with the money I earned I bought a string of cars and spent time when I wasn't working with my friends driving around Kent, Surrey and Sussex and, quite regularly, up to central London. I was still 16 at the time and did all of this without licence, insurance or road tax. I even became the proud owner of a very well maintained 3.4 litre Mk VIII Jaguar! It cost me £25 and met its end when, with a friend, I was being chased by a Police Land-Rover, took a corner too fast and wrote it off.

Needless to say, I soon amassed a string of court appearances for various motoring offences. As I approached the second half of 1970 Richard Harrison, my probation officer, who hadn't quite pulled all his blonde hair out in despair at my antics, was confidently predicting that I was headed back inside again – this time quite possibly for a long time.

I mentioned previously the Christians I knew and the one thing they kept stressing to me – that I needed to receive Jesus into my own life as my Lord and Saviour. Obviously, what I was hearing from them was not overcoming my own self-destructive tendencies but, over time and as I observed that they seemed to have something about them that set them apart from others, my original dismissive attitude was gradually replaced by more and more respect.

June 1970 was the time God had appointed (from eternity, the Bible teaches) to stop me in my tracks. I took a friend with me to a meeting the vicar at Greenhithe was holding and it had a profound effect on him. He had never heard the gospel message before and we came back to my house and sat up talking about it all night. We were still there when my dad got up to go to

work at 4.30 the following morning. My friend, on the strength of that one gospel exposure, was determined to follow Christ and by the time the morning came, I was too.

So much in my life needed sorting out but I had placed my life in the hands of Jesus, the one person who doesn't just give us a set of rules to follow and tell us to do our best. The Bible tells us that he writes those laws *on our hearts!* In other words, when somebody becomes a Christian, we start to experience changes that take place inside ourselves. We still struggle with many things all of our lives and sometimes fall grievously but, inwardly, sin's hold on us has been broken. Crucially, Jesus never turns his back on us, no matter how much we feel that's what we deserve. He becomes our elder brother and our father, who takes us in hand to make us more and more like him.

I still had many court appearances lined up and I had no reason or right to expect leniency. Christians I knew prayed for the appropriate outcome and the vicar of the Church at Greenhithe gave me a letter on each occasion. I presented this to the magistrates when they asked me if there was anything I wanted to say before they passed sentence. The final appearance was the big one – a whole string of charges arising out of the chase that ended with the writing off of the Jag. Richard Harrison, who was confidently predicting there was no way I would walk away this time, was called to add his testimony to what was in the letter and he affirmed it was all true. To my immense relief, I did walk away on that occasion and have never been back in a courtroom since, except once as a witness to a collision.

I paid what felt like a large amount of money in fines by weekly instalments over the next couple of years. The accumulation of endorsements on my licence meant that I was banned for something like a year and when I received it back, it had enough extra pages sewn into it to hold 24 endorsement stamps! I didn't own a car for a number of years after that – until I could afford the insurance.

I started to attend Church and to enjoy meeting Christians and sharing with them the discoveries we were each making as Christ led us on. With help, I started to find the Bible understandable and interesting and – through being invited into other Christians' homes, I saw a different kind of marriage and family life than the failures that I had been familiar with in my own home and some others. The Christian people I knew were willing to give me their time, to open their homes to me whenever I turned up on their doorstep, to help me in whatever way they could and to treat me with genuine love.

I started to want what I was now coming to regard as a 'normal' life and, thank God, I've had one. I married an incredibly tolerant woman when I was 21 and she was 20. 44 years later, we're still together, having had four children, who, between them, have given us five grandchildren with one more on the way.

In 1973, I arrived in Belfast, to begin a three-year course of study to prepare me to become a Baptist Minister. My first job after graduation was with what is now Grace Baptist Chapel at Tottenham, in its planting phase. I have had one other full-time pastorate but have now spent more time in secular employment than in full-time ministry. I serve in my local Church as secretary and elder and am very grateful for the Pastor God has given to us, for the example he sets us and for the way he feeds us from the Bible three times a week.

I have learned so many things about God and about myself as my understanding of the Bible has grown. Throughout my life, God has often undertaken for me financially. I spent the first 18 months of my three-year college course without a grant. I believed God wanted me there, so I went and prayed about finance as I went along. I resolved that if I got to the end of a term owing money to the college, that I wouldn't go back. That never happened, although at the end of the first year, exactly what I needed was given to me by a fellow believer, virtually on the last day.

Obviously, as life has gone on, my responsibilities have grown. One item I have had to pray about for several years is the payment of my £100k+ interest-only mortgage capital. (The due date was the 16th November 2018.) Between 2006 and 2012, I had a well-paid job and was saving hard but in 2012, following a company re-structure, I found myself faced with a choice between a reduced salary or redundancy. Before the formal offer of the new, but lower-paid, role came through, I was expecting to accept it but when I held it in my hands, I felt completely unable to do so – so I found myself out of work for about three months and wondering how we would get by.

The company moved on without me as these things do – but not successfully. The owner started coming under pressure from certain clients to get me back and I started receiving offers from him designed to tempt me to return. Various offers were made, about once every six months but I always turned them down.

In September 2015 the owner contacted me again, this time with an offer that he thought I would not turn down. Would I return to the company for three years as a partner? I would be paid throughout that period + share profits annually and build a 10% partnership share. At the end, he would buy my partnership share back for a minimum sum of £200,000! In other words, exactly when my mortgage capital repayment was due, in November 2018, I would have the money I needed to pay it off + some left over for retirement income.

My wife had always been less happy than I was about having a mortgage so, just before the final repayment date, I set everything up on my computer to transfer the full outstanding balance and very happily gave her the pleasure of pressing the button!

Going forward, I now must grow old gracefully and die at peace and with confidence. I can't say either of those things is a welcome prospect and I know I cannot do them unaided. What gives me confidence to face the future? Only one thing – the words of the Lord Jesus *I will never leave you nor forsake you*. He has proved his presence and demonstrated his commitment to me on so many occasions throughout the last 48 years, I know I can rely on him to do exactly the same throughout the remainder of my earthly life and, when, after death, I find myself, as we all must, as alive and awake as we are now – but facing judgment, he will welcome me home to the place where life will be lived as he originally intended it to be.