

## Jimmy the Jailbird

On a cold, snowy, Sunday morning back in the 1990s a few of my musical friends invited me to jail. They did this on a somewhat regular basis, leading worship services in the prison chapel. We usually met at the front desk and were herded through a maze of echo-like corridors, security checks and steel-barred, electrically operated doorways. After this hazing ritual, we entered the naturally-lit chapel which cozily held about 100 worshippers and was decorated with compelling pieces of contemporary artwork painted by the prisoners.

We would begin each service with a few songs after which Mike, our leader, would invite prisoners to come to the front to lead in a song or two. These were always hilarious events with sometimes 3 or 4 of them sharing the same microphone, each fulfilling a dream of crooning like their favourite musical star. However, on this particular morning nobody came to the front. Mike repeated his invitation, trying to encourage the reticent. After a quiet minute someone shouted “ask Jimmy”. This was picked up by the rest and they began to chant for Jimmy. As the guards anxiously scanned the group, a large, drastically overweight prisoner rose and hesitantly shuffled up to the front. His dark greasy hair was disheveled and his body odour soured the already sweaty atmosphere on the podium. Mike handed him his own guitar and Jimmy sat down on a chair.

He mumbled something about the key of G as he tentatively strummed some chords from strange strings and then began to sing an old vaguely familiar hymn. Mike glanced my way encouraging me to accompany with my harmonica. Well – it turned out that Jimmy could sing pretty good once he got going. Nobody seemed to notice that his body twitched every 30 seconds or so – likely the result of some neglect in his childhood. After a few songs he stopped playing. He looked at his friends and for a few precious minutes told them about Jesus, the Christ child who came to this earth to save ordinary people like all of us seated there that morning. Silence fell upon the chapel. We were mesmerized by Jimmy’s words. As he finished, he turned and thanked me for playing along with him. Then he got up and shuffled back to his seat. The applause was thunderous.

Jeremiah prophesied from a muddy cistern, Ezekiel from the mourning loss of his wife and Jimmy from a jailhouse podium. The message of the Christ child seems to be the most powerful from God’s humblest prophets.

This Christmas there will be many prophets sharing the message of the Christ child. I suspect that the humblest of these will share with the greatest effect. Praise God for his faithful and humble prophets.

On that winter Sunday almost 15 years ago I got to play my harmonica with one of Christ’s greatest prophets, a convicted criminal who did not even own the clothes he was wearing. I will never forget that day.

May your experience of the Christ child this Christmas be unforgettable.

Jack Tacoma

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