



FROM PRISONER TO PASTOR –TESTIMONIAL BY REVD DR ROSS OLIVIER

I have been asked to tell my story, the story that has shaped my ethics, nurtured my values, and formed my conduct. My story is rooted in a deeply spiritual event. That is not to say I think that being religious guarantees moral behaviour. I have been in the church long enough to know that you get good believers and bad believers in every religion. The prophet Isaiah puts it plainly: “*The Lord says ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’.*” We need to guard that there is no credibility gap between our creed and our conduct; no dissonance between the beliefs we proclaim and the behaviour we exhibit.

That said, my moral conversion was profoundly spiritual; it relates my journey, from darkness to light, from self to God.

I did not have a religious upbringing. We never went to church as a family. Apart from weddings and funerals, the first occasion I was in church with my parents was the Sunday I was ordained. Certainly they never spoke to my siblings or me about God or religion. I grew up without any conscious spiritual awareness. I do recall a brief interlude when a wonderful couple, Mr and Mrs Banks, moved into a house up the road from us. They were obviously devoted to God and as part of their mission invited the un-churched parents in the neighbourhood to allow them to take their children to Sunday school each week. A little embarrassed, most parents agreed and so, each Sunday morning, Mr and Mrs Banks would arrive at our door to fetch my brother and me, all spic and span in our Sunday morning clothes, hair slicked down with liberal doses of ‘brylcreem’, shoes brightly shining, the two of us freshly washed and scrubbed for the occasion. So it was that for a brief period I attended the small Methodist Church in Brakpan. I remember enjoying this weekly outing but cannot report that anything of a faith nature got through to me. Or so I thought. Then, as is typical on mining villages, either our or the Banks family moved away and my tenuous connection with church ended. By and large, I grew up without any real sense of what are termed ‘spiritual or moral values’.

I finished high school and was conscripted for two years of military service. By my 18th birthday I was in a neighbouring country involved in a war that in later years I discovered to be unjust. But we

were young and impressionable, too ignorant to know that we were cannon fodder in the senseless battles being waged by the Apartheid regime. I do not know how to express this any other way except to say I emerged from the army a seriously messed up person.

I started work at a finance company. Driven by an obsession to make lots of money as quickly as possible, I worked hard and was quickly rewarded. By my 22nd birthday I had been promoted several times, owned a smart car and had bought a house. During this period, Shayne and I married. We had started dating at the age of 16 and thankfully she forgot to break up with me. She remains the love of my life.

Then things began to unravel. I started drinking too much. I was driven by greed and had no moral conscience. I soon started to make Shayne's life a misery. Looking back, I believe my behaviour at that time contributed largely to the fact that she suffered a miscarriage. I had also begun to defraud the company for which I worked. Having discovered a loophole in the system, I became a thief. I got away with it for quite a while. Eventually however, things began to fall apart. Our marriage deteriorated to the point where one day Shayne on essence said to me, "You've become a horrible person. I do not like who you've become – you're not the person I thought you were." In typical male fashion, I refused to accept any blame. In a huff I angrily grabbed a suitcase, threw in some stuff and with spinning tyres raced off in my car. I drove into downtown Johannesburg and booked into the New Library hotel, one of my drinking spots.

I remember sitting on the bed, my case on the floor, overwhelmed by a sense that my life was at a crossroad. Somehow I realised that my next choices could be determinative for the future course of my life. I recall sitting in the silent loneliness of that hotel room with a fearful sense that I was on the brink of losing someone precious. With a deep sense of pending loss, I booked out of the hotel, drove to the nearest police station, and confessed my crimes. Rather naively I thought the police would say something like: "*What a good boy you are, coming to tell us. Go home and we will sort this out later.*" Instead I was arrested there and then and put into a cell in John Vorster Square Police Station. Subsequently I was transferred to The Fort Prison. Weeks later I was tried, convicted and sentenced to three and a half years in prison. You can imagine the shock and shame I caused Shayne, our parents, my employers, and our friends.

After sentencing I was transferred to Pretoria Central Prison to serve my sentence.

I have some free advice to offer. Don't do anything that will land you in prison. It is no fun.

Prison life was harsh, sometimes brutal. I was brought face to face with the limits of my courage and endurance. I felt ashamed and a failure. I was sustained only by the incredibly forgiving love shown me by my wife. Resisting great pressure to be rid of me, she resolved instead to stand by me through the thick and thin of it all. Her love made me determined to turn my life around, but I didn't know how.

Christmas was drawing near. Then one day, out of nowhere, I recalled the Sunday School lessons that Mr and Mrs Banks had taken me to. I began to wonder whether there really was a God, as we had been taught. Without really knowing how, I started praying at night. It was a simple prayer: "*God - I need help. I don't know what to do. If you're there, can you help me?*" Praying even that small uneducated prayer gave me daily strength. I drew courage after praying. I felt hopeful. But I wasn't yet convinced. It took an extraordinary event to dispel my doubt.

It's closing on thirty years since then but I still recall with vivid detail the night my life was utterly transformed. It happened in the solitude of a single-person prison cell, lying on my bunk, staring at the naked light bulb fixed into the high ceiling. The light remained on throughout the night; I guess so that the guards could check on us through the small peep-hole in the thick metal doors that faced inwardly onto the rectangle corridor of D Block.

On that particular night I was thinking about God, wondering if there really was some divine power from which I was drawing strength, or whether it was just some trick of the mind, a mental crutch that I was leaning on for survival sake. It's always been difficult for me to explain the sequence that then occurred. It all happened so fast. The thought in my mind was: "*if God is real then surely He can reveal Himself to me.*" The next thought was, "*How? How can He let me know that He's real?*" Then a thought flashed into my mind, "*He can switch off the light*". In that instant, while the thought was still in my head, the prison block was plunged into total darkness.

But that wasn't it! That can be rationalised as one of those inexplicable coincidences that happen from time to time. No, it was more than that; it was much, much more than that. In the instant

that the prison plunged into darkness, I was enfolded, like a baby being wrapped in a warm blanket, within a tangible, real, embracing, transcendent experience of acceptance, forgiveness, and exquisite love. I just lay there breathless as I felt myself being enveloped within the tender embrace of an unseen presence. I was unable to think, move, or comprehend, yet I knew my questions had been answered. Deep in the spirit of my humanity, within a consciousness I never even knew existed, I had a sense of ultimate assurance. In that moment my life changed forever. All doubt was removed and I knew with certainty that my life had extrinsic value. I had encountered John Newton's *Amazing Grace: I had been blind, but now could see; I had been lost, but now was found.*

At that juncture of my sentence I was permitted one visit, by one person, of 30 minutes duration per month. Shayne always came to visit me. We would look at each other through a small thick glass window, and speak to each other through a wire grill, separated by a three foot divide. At her first visit to me after my 'God moment', I asked her to bring me a bible. She looked quizzically at but the next time she visited, she brought one along. It was a King James Version. I hardly understood its language. But I have it still today, with my prison number 1631/77 on the inside cover, filled with short messages of love and support, in green ink, written by Shayne.

Following my release from prison I began to look for a job. I had determined to always tell the truth about my past. For seven months I received one rebuff after the next. Then the local municipality gave me work as a meter reader. Armed with a big book and a pencil, I walked the streets of our town, reading the electricity and water meters, recording the details of usage. Some might say it wasn't much of a job, but I embraced it with joy. A year later, I was promoted into the treasury department. It was as if I had travelled a full circle of restoration. It was as if God was saying: "*You were a thief, but now you can be trusted with money again.*" Who could have imagined that years later I would be appointed the Ministerial General Treasurer for the entire Methodist Church, one of the many responsibilities that were part of my duties as General Secretary of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa?

My life has been a journey of shaping and changing, of learning new values and deeper morals, a journey that could not be made without the incredible support of a loving wife, a journey with many failures and lessons to be learnt along the way, a journey that has taken me

from a prison cell in Pretoria to the top rungs of denominational leadership to a significant ministry in the United States. I never cease to be amazed by my journey from prison to parish. I thank God for the power to have come clean, and to have stayed clean.

I must end but there is one small part of the unfinished story that I would like to tell. A few years ago, I was invited to preach at the centenary service of the Kensington Methodist Church in Johannesburg. After the service I stood at the door shaking hands with the departing worshippers. I noticed an elderly couple were holding themselves back until everyone else had left. Then they approached me. *"You won't remember us", they said, "but we are Mr and Mrs Banks. We used to take you to Sunday School."* I felt the tears well up in me as I said to them, *"Your faithfulness helped change my life."*

I hope that we will be as faithful to others.

You see – that is the thing about right living – it bestows blessings beyond any reward.