

What Daylight means to me

A message to all at the Daylight Conferences (from Ed)

In a world as confusing, daunting and lonely as mine was at that time, I was desperate to understand the situation I had found myself in. I had been in prison for just over four months; initially in local prisons relatively close to family and loved ones whilst attending court but then further afield in a training prison a couple of counties away. The journey there was as uncomfortable as any in a tightly confined space, sliding around on a plastic moulded seat trying to block out the taunts of my fellow travellers in the prison transport van. Flowers in pots outside the Reception block did little to lift my spirits.

Having dragged my plastic bag of belongings (toiletries, trainers, paperwork and precious letters and photographs from home) to my wing, I was the new guy yet again. New staff, new procedures, new prisoners, even a new food ordering system to confuse me. The only constant was my quiet, tentative prayer: 'Please help me get through this, Lord.' I was scared, not knowing whether I would be able to endure this experience, whether my faith was strong enough to survive this place, whether I was abandoning myself to the onslaught of doubts and fears. I continued to learn, as I had done for months, how to give my fear to God – or at least how to acknowledge that he was with me when I was feeling scared. That felt an important first step during a steep learning curve of a weekend.

I struggle now to recall that first Sunday service, although I do remember feeling welcomed. The chapel was much better attended than in my previous prisons and I was impressed by the range of activities mid-week for Christians. On that following Tuesday I attended the evening Bible study, led by Phil. I had assumed that he was a member of chaplaincy staff; it was a few months before I learned he was a Daylight volunteer. That hour or so of fellowship and hearing from God's word was a profoundly comforting experience for me. I was welcomed into a community of men who were passionate about God, his purposes in our lives and living for his glory. Phil taught with enthusiasm and clarity, clearly concerned not only for the guys surrounding him but for his faithful exposition of scripture. I was delighted to see him not shy away from the gospel in all its challenging and multi-faceted glory and answer questions full of truth and grace.

I thanked God that night for such amazing providence in providing a context where I could be built up in my faith, share experiences with Christian brothers and be accepted without scrutiny of my recently acquired criminal record. Phil cultivated a culture of mutual concern which fostered our love for one another within the group. His knowledge of the system, borne out of many years at the coal face of prison ministry, allowed him to apply scriptural truth to our daily prison experiences. Speakers in services would often allude to our life inside the walls, but he could speak with the experience and insight which could only come from being there, on the wings, with the guys in all the messy reality of life behind bars. We all respected him immensely for the commitment which underpinned that deep reservoir of pastoral and penal experience.

Phil and I became closer as the weeks went by, sharing time together on the wing. Prison news, funny anecdotes, poignant sharing of struggles – all had a place in an extremely welcome friendship. His concern was evident for all the men in the prison, as well as the staff. He was (and presumably still is!) held in very high esteem by the establishment and rightly so. He made such a tangible difference to my days, lifting my spirits, praying with me and being a light in an otherwise occasionally gloomy place.

Phil's colleague John was my second contact with Daylight. He preached in chapel at services every 1 – 2 months throughout my time in the prison. Having become accustomed to what could generously be deemed a 'range' of styles and giftings in the prison's pulpit, John spoke with an authority and clarity which was invigorating to my spirit. Most of his sermons have stayed with me and continue to provoke my thoughts, prayers and worship. One of the first sermons of his I heard discussed sin using the analogy of leprosy. As John unpacked his message, God pointed precisely to the things I

needed to hear, deepening my awareness of the numbness to sin I had experienced and the challenge of living in a world which would be unlikely to forgive my failings.

John's sermons were good on Sundays, but I felt that their real efficacy showed itself mid-week, when his challenges would still be ringing in my ears as I faced an awkward situation, a potential conflict or a personal crisis. I was spiritually nourished and encouraged in my walk with God.

Having reached the end of my time inside (April 2013), I hadn't expected Daylight to figure much, if at all, in what would come next. However, through asking Chris, another volunteer, to come and see me, Daylight has continued to support me in marvellous ways. Chris and I have met up on many occasions, accruing coffee shop loyalty points aplenty. Even if he hadn't had anything interesting to say or we hadn't developed a good relationship, just the gesture of his travel to visit me would have been a channel of God's grace to me. Leaving prison is profoundly daunting for myriad reasons, but having someone who knows me, knows my offences and yet is still prepared to give up so much time to encourage me, draw alongside me through life's challenges and share muffins with is a faithful witness to Christ.

I have appreciated our chats, especially as they have enabled me to think through many challenges which have come up whilst on licence. My wife's severe mental health problems, my struggle to find a church which could welcome me, my own coming to terms with my offending and what the future holds: all these aspects of my life have received a welcome perspective from a mature Christian who knows me and cares. That level of support and concern is inestimable in value and a humbling reality.

Now almost a year into my licence period, I am able to look back upon my time in the justice system and see a tiny bit of where God has been amongst it. He has surprised me in many ways, blessing me when I felt unworthy of anything, challenging me when I took anything for granted or lost perspective of the truth, being alongside me when I thought I was alone. Daylight has been a constant throughout much of that journey and I thank God for Phil, John and Chris and all their colleagues who have contributed to supporting me. I know how much of a difference they have made in my life and the lives of many with whom I served time. Thank you for caring.

March 2014

Please continue to pray for Ed & Emily.