

DAVID'S STORY



Elizabeth Gowans

David

David, aged 49, was a prisoner I had the privilege of mentoring prior to and after release. His parents had died before he was eleven. He'd been sent to a children's home in North Wales where he was regularly beaten and locked in a container to break his spirit. He told me he'd decided to become a criminal in much the same way a child might decide to become a train driver. He'd received little education and left school, a nobody that nobody cared about, got a gun and embarked on his career of choice: a bank robber. But it had not been much fun, he had done 'terrible things'.

"Like what?"

"You don't want to know," he answered, looking troubled.

"What do you want now?" I asked.

"To know ordinary people. I only know criminals."

He explained that having spent half his life in prison, he had done two prison Alpha (religious) Courses and admitted, sheepishly, that he now believed in "God an' Jesus an' all that" adding: "Don' get me wrong. I still tell lies. And that's the truth."

Now, to David, God was The Law Maker. "E can do what 'E wants, can't 'E. E's God." And having switched firms, his commitment was total. "When bad thoughts come, I tell Satan: 'You 'ad 30 years of my life. You ain't 'avvin any more. I'm wiv Jesus now.'" He tried to explain the wonder of the dark cloud, that had hung over him all his adult life, lifting.

As a serious offender, David was to be 'managed' back into society through

(Background photo by Tomáš Gal on Unsplash)

MAPPA (Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements) probation hostels which help individuals access services and treatments and move into the wider society. The downside is that they thrust together the very men the individual prisoner might need to avoid.

On the day he came out clutching his £46 Prison Release Grant (meant to last three plus weeks until his benefits kicked in) he was taken aback to find in the car, gifts from the parish: tinned and dried food, cash for fresh milk, bread and groceries for the first two weeks, toiletries, underwear, tobacco, rolling papers, razors, shaving cream, a phone card and an Oyster

travel card with credit on them, a pair of size 11 trainers, a child had even sent him a small Christmas tree.... he couldn't speak. His voice broke as he asked for paper and wrote to the parishioners: "I am totally overwhelmed with gratitude and love for what you've done for me and I'd just like to say thank you from the bottom of my heart and God bless you all."

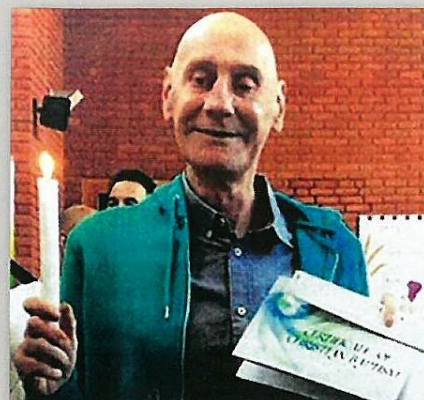
But he was back inside four days later, his ear almost hanging off, his scalp hacked. As a Christian, he wouldn't press charges against the men who had attacked him and have them sent back to jail, he wasn't a "grass".

After a few false starts, David finally came out for good and God continued to answer his prayers. "My body was in the room but my head was already in the shop buying drink," he said. "Then God took over and made me walk down to Reception and say 'I want to go to the nearest AA right now.'"

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“ The words were those of Baptism, but also the Last Rites, preparing David for the journey. We all knew the meaning of what he was softly saying. David fell back under the water and was raised up again, his face shining. ”



David Slingsby, 1963-2019. RIP.

By the time he left the probation hostel, he had established faltering relationships with the two daughters he had had with different women; with neighbouring people from his childhood, even with his ex-wife. He was doing well.

He moved accommodations as rents rose and I scouted churches in the new locales, looking for that mix of warmth and intimacy he needed. He would try them all, assessing them as “Stuck up!” or “Too far on the bus,” but finally picked a ‘forever church’ which became his family. He flowered. He ran stalls at fêtes, volunteered at food banks, spoke to youth groups, joined in ‘Dunk the Vicar’, witnessed at Alpha Courses, proudly introduced me as “my friend Elizabuf”. And for two Christmases, spent Christmas Day in the pastor’s family home.

Before that, however, life for David was hard. He struggled with poverty, drink, difficult feelings and landlords who threw out his belongings and his treasured Bible. He would call, struggling to control his voice and leave desperate incoherent messages. “I couldn’t handle it. I had to get out and buy a drink.” I’d wait for him. Finally he’d come weaving along the pavement. We’d sit. “I love you so much,” he said one time, loudly. Then repeated it. I assured him my husband did too but he persisted: “You don’t know how much I love you.” He got a can of high-strength lager out of his pocket, showed me and zipped it up again. Said: “I don’t know what to do”. I said: “You could give it to me”. Which he did, murmuring “I love you Lizabuf”. But he did return to Camden Alcohol Services who arranged a psychotherapist to go into his past and work through it.

To David, Jesus was an incarnate presence. “I just passed a car with its window down,” he said, “an’ a bag on the front seat. In the old days I woulda taken it. I did fink of it. Then I fort, Jesus wooden like that. So I didden.” Thoughts of Jesus stopped him “re-arranging people’s faces” as at his daughter’s twenty-first, when his ex-wife’s current man made things difficult for his

daughter. “At one time I woulda taken ‘im outside and ironed ‘im out,” he nodded sagely.

Not long after, a challenging time came to David. He was diagnosed with terminal and spreading cancers. But he struggled on, confident God “had his back.”

Although he’d already been baptised (see photo), he wanted to go through the ceremony of total immersion. This was done in groups as the pool belonged to a neighbouring denomination and had to be prepared. One by one the candidates stepped down the steps into the water, turned and fell backwards into and under the water, where the arms of the catcher lifted them up again. As they broke water, they gasped for air, their faces radiant! When David’s turn came, frail and in a wheelchair, there was concern, but he insisted. His thin arms were held as he carefully trod down the steps into the water, a church member at each side and one behind and his good friend, the Pastor, standing alongside him in the water, an arm around his waist, a hand on his head, praying. The words were those of Baptism, but also the Last Rites, preparing David for the journey. We all knew the meaning of what he was softly saying. David fell back under the water and was raised up again, his face shining.

David was 56 when he died, having found a pearl of great worth. His funeral was a testament to what he had achieved since submitting his life to God, “... in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.” (St Paul, 2 Corinthians 5:17-19). The hymns centred on the faithfulness of God: “All I have needed Thy hand hath provided” and “You have pulled me from the ashes, brought me out of darkness, I will rest in Your promises.”

Sometimes even now, I miss his cheerful voice on my voice mail: “allo Lizabuf! David ‘ere!” ■

Elizabeth Gowans is retired and lives in London with her husband and three cats. She spent much of her life travelling and writing and currently volunteers with refugees, prisoners and the homeless.