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ACT 38: Behind Bars

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an initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Prior to this, Brian and his wife, Tracy, pioneered the work of 24-7 Prayer in the party area of Ibiza, Spain, where they lived for eight years, developing rhythms of prayer and mission. His book, Gatecrashing, tells the story of 24-7 Prayer in Ibiza.

Behind bars for good reason or not, people in prison are often locked out of experiencing basic human kindnesses – the simple joys of community life. Today, offer generosity to people who might feel locked out from ever receiving it, and who might never be able to pay it back: prisoners, young offenders, young people in pupil referral units, and so on.

Green: Write a letter to a prisoner. Tell them you wanted to get in touch just to say that someone was thinking of them.

Amber: Send a gift to a prisoner, or help prisoners send a gift to their children.

Red: Visit a prisoner.

'Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.' (Hebrews 13:3 NIV)

When I was in prison, many years ago, one of my greatest fears was that people would forget about me. An incredible sense of isolation comes with incarceration: contact with the outside world is minimal and time to think is ample. Often this time for reflection causes your mind to wander down a bunny trail of imagined negative scenarios taking place on the outside world. In prison your mind can become the devil's playground. He takes your fears, anxieties, regrets, desires, lusts and dreams and spins them out of control to the point where you feel like a child on a merry-go-round in the playground, desperately clinging on whilst a cruel older child spins it faster and faster.

For me there were a number of things that could stop this spinning cycle of inward turmoil. The first was visitors: every time someone came to see me, they grounded me. They slowed the spinning and reminded me that the world was still out there, that people cared and that I wasn't forgotten.

The second thing was letters – I know this is almost a lost art. One of the things prisoners can't receive is emails, but they can receive letters. My friend Sally wrote me letters and put little brightly coloured spots on them with the message 'a bright spot for your day'. And believe me, they were bright spots. They shone into my cell and gave me something else to hold on to, something to help me keep it all together and not lose my grip.

Finally, the third thing: prayer. People prayed – they prayed long and hard for me, and at my darkest moments I often felt comforted or helped by some unseen force. I would receive an unexpected good night's sleep or feel better and brighter than usual; moments of hope arose in me and I can only put that down to prayer. People prayed, and I knew that I wasn't forgotten.
