



Our Faithful God

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Good morning everyone, it is a great honour and a great pleasure to be taking part in this National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast.

Just after my flight from London touched down, the first word that came into my mind was the word “godfather.” Nothing to do with Marlin Brando or “an offer I couldn’t refuse.” It was because the Toronto Airport is named after my godfather Lester. B. Pearson, or uncle Mike as I grew up calling him.

How, you might ask, did this Prime Minister come to be my godfather? The answer is that he and my father were best friends. As young men they shared an apartment together at Toronto University and they also shared a passion for politics.

My Canadian father, born in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, volunteered from his position as a reconnaissance pilot for the Toronto Scottish Highlanders to join the REF in Britain in 1938. He served there as a fighter pilot for the Battle of Britain and married my mother straight on and served nearly 20 years in the UK House of Commons.

Uncle Mike, of course, served in your Parliament and ended up at 24 Sussex Drive, where I cherish the memory of visiting him.

I mention these ancestral links just as a roundabout way of saying that I do not feel as much of a stranger here as I might perhaps sound, if judged only by my English accent. I am proud of my Canadian heritage which, in a way, all started with God.

I say this because the founding father of the Aitken family, the Reverend William Aitken, emigrated to Canada in 1872, straight from divinity school at Edinburgh University and became the Church of Scotland minister in Newcastle, New Brunswick.

The Reverend William stayed as the incumbent there for the next 47 years. He became well known for the length of his sermons, which averaged over 60 minutes – don’t worry, I’m

not going to emulate him today – and for the interesting careers of his children and grandchildren. His descendents included 5 members of Parliament, of which, perhaps the most interesting was the runt of the litter as he liked to call himself, William Maxwell Aitken, who became the first Lord Beaverbrook.

This rebellious son of the mance grew up to be a great Anglo-Canadian success story. First as a financier, then as a newspaper earner, then as a parliamentarian. He was in fact the only political figure besides Winston Churchill to serve in the war cabinets of both World War 1 and World War 2.

Like many people who climb somewhat near the top of the greasy pole of politics, my great uncle Max was not immune to the temptations of hubris. Indeed as a teenager when visiting his home, I remember vividly hearing him dictate, in his raspy New Brunswick accent, a telegram addressed to a Mr. G. B. White, whose initials he modestly spelled out as G for god, B for Beaverbrook.

Well, my great uncle may have had exceptional problems in his wrestlings with “the great sin” as C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* calls pride. Yet, all of us who have had even walk-on parts in the passion play of politics will know how vulnerable we parliamentarians can sometimes be to this particular weakness.

And this is perhaps my cue, this morning, for I suspect that if my Canadian forebears were to look down from their celestial clouds on this breakfast today they would be amazed. They might clang their harps in a chorus of astonishment at the paradox that young Jonathan, at last - or not so young now - should have been invited to be your keynote speaker at this parliamentary prayer breakfast.

The paradox is that I’m at this podium this morning not because of my career successes, but because of my career failures.

And the paradox here is that I’m at this podium this morning, not because of my career successes, but because of my career failures. These were delicately edited out of Bob’s introduction. But I think I have to mention that, even though I have a long career - 24 years in Parliament and some cabinet portfolios. Nevertheless despite all those external pluses, internally my career was going wrong. And that’s why, as a result of my own failings, I spiraled down with a trajectory which I sometimes describe as defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail, which is a pretty good royal flush of crisis by anyone’s standards.

“The tightrope walk between triumph and disaster can be a surprisingly narrow one.”

Well I have no time this morning to go into any of those dramas, or into my 18 month prison sentence through perjury. But as Rudyard Kipling’s poem *If* reminds us, and as many people in

parliamentary life will secretly know, “the tightrope walk between triumph and disaster can be a surprisingly narrow one.”

And therefore my theme today is how should parliamentarians - we parliamentarians - cope in a godly way with what Kipling calls his two imposters of triumph and disaster. Of course we politicians tend to think coping with triumph is dead easy. After all, when you're miles ahead of the polls, or scoring basic triumphs in the house, or winning election victories, it is only human for us naturally egotistical politicians to start to feel as though we can walk on water. But that is just in the good times. And as we all know the good times and the triumphs don't last. They certainly don't last for ever and all too often, hubris can be followed by nemesis.

In our first reading today or earliest reading today from the prophet Isaiah, it reminded us that there are times in life when we all pass through rivers and floods, which threaten to sweep us away, or we walk through fires which are about to burn us. And you, of course, don't need to be reminded of Fort McMurray, that these terrors can hit us quite literally, but much more likely they will hit us metaphorically and situations will arise, such as broken relationships, rejections, career disappointments, or serious illnesses, or bereavements and we are in the depths.

Disasters can be more challenging, more character building and more life transforming, particularly, if during them we encounter the mysterious ways and purposes of God.

The author of Psalm 130, which Barbara read to us quite hauntingly about his out of the depths experiences, and these are obviously more painful than our triumphs. But on the other hand, disasters can be more challenging, more character building and more life transforming, particularly, if during them we encounter the mysterious ways and purposes of God.

As I hinted earlier, I became all too well acquainted with failure and disaster myself. But when those calamities were crashing on me, they were made all the harder by the fact that I did not have at that time a well built faith foundation in my life. However, curiously the individual who gave me most help about climbing out of the depths was a most improbable spiritual messenger.

A fellow inmate on my wing in Her Majesty's prison, Belmarsh. He was an Irish burglar, not surprisingly called Patty. And because he was unable to read or write himself, I helped him and indeed many other fellow prisoners with the reading and writing of their letters, which were more often in the most intimate subject imaginable.

Well Patty and I built a bit of a relationship and one evening we were talking about the usual conversational subjects, when suddenly he changed conversational geer. And being an old politician I immediately recognized the geer he changed into, which was the vote of thanks type speech.

And he began - rather formally - clearing his throat and said, “Jono, on behalf of the lads, I would really like to thank you for all these letters you've been writing for me. And to show you

how much I've appreciated it, I've decided to give you a present. The present I'm going to give you is that you can have, free of charge, my dear, anything you like to pick from me library."

And then he dived underneath the left side of his bed and he rummaged around his tatty old cardboard box and eventually he brought up and he spread them in front of me the remarkable selection of hard core porn magazines. Well after a fleeting moment of temptation, I managed to say, "Thanks, but no thanks."

And but I must have said it in a way that was reverting to my old persona of being a pompous politician, because Patty flared up in great anger and started shouting at me, "Oh judging are you? Oh snaring at me are you? Looking down on me are you?"

Before I had a chance to intervene, he suddenly stopped and had the most ingenious idea of his own as to why I might have said no thank you. And he said, diving under the other side of his bed and said, "Oh if it's boys you're after..."

I said, "Oh well, no Patty it's not boys. I used to like those kinds of magazines."

"Why did you say no thank you then?"

I said rather hesitantly, "Well you really want to know Patty? I used to like those first kinds of magazines, but these days I'm trying a different path in life."

"Oh what kind of path would that be then?"

I didn't want to answer that question either, but I said, "Well Patty, I'm really spiritually searching, I'm trying to change direction in my life. I'm reading the Bible. That's the path I'm on these days."

"How do I get onto that path?"

Well suddenly there was a silence that fell in that cell. One of life's rather deep meaningful silences and Patty broke in by saying something completely unexpected. He said, "You know I'd really like to try that path myself. How do I get onto that path?"

I can not tell you how much I did not wish to answer that question. I was no sort of preacher man. I just wanted to just get through my sentence as quickly as possible. Keep my head down, but I was hearing a sort of precursor from Patty. So I said, "Well I think you pray. That's how you do it."

And he said, "Well how do we pray then?"

Well Patty and I started to pray together. First night, second night, third night, fourth night and then Patty started to say things like, "Oh this stuff's too good to keep to just the two of us."

And I thought he meant that he would go and find another Irish burglar to make our twosome a threesome. Patty had loads of energy and loads of charm and also the qualities of good

recruiting. So he shot around the jail saying, “Anyone want to come and pray with me and Jono tonight?”

And that evening, there turned up a rather unusual collection of prayer givers. I remember there was an armed robber, a forger, a pickpocket, a fraudster, a couple more Irish burglars, an arsonist and a couple of lifers – who of course are murderers. This certainly gave a new meaning to the Christian term a “cell group.”

But there we were all unexpectedly together. And I’d like to spend a moment or two telling you what happened in that prayer group or cell group instead of belonging to a small group, was completely alien to me. But I now know that it’s one of the great roots to finding and deepening your faith. Now I was very pleased to take part in the parliamentary prayer group yesterday morning here.

But at the time all this was new to me. But I remember what happened in the prison prayer group because of a certain number of milestones. And I’m going to tell you about them just because I think these milestones are every bit as relevant to a group of politicians, as they were to a group of prisoners. They’re not new milestones. Incidentally they’re to be found in many places, scripture including, perhaps the most eloquently, Psalm 130.

The first milestone was pain.

The first milestone was pain. Almost all of us have pain at certain moments in our lives. But having once been a respectable person myself, I think that the way respectful people particularly, perhaps people of public life, deal with pain in a very strange way. They immediately start putting up defence mechanisms. They pretend it’s not happening at all. They deny it, they bury it, they suppress it. They do the kind of things our culture teaches us all to do, especially when a prominent. Keep a stiff upper lip. Pack up your troubles in oil kit bags and smile, smile, smile,

And we prisoners, I think in retrospect, were rather more fortunate, because the one thing we couldn’t do was to get into the let’s pretend it’s not happening game. Why? Because there’s nothing more obviously in pain – and for all the bad things we have all done – than a whole lot of men dressed up in prison uniform going through the misery of incarceration. So of course we could more easily open up to each other and indeed open up to God in prayer.

My second milestone [was spiritual discipline].

My second milestone [was spiritual discipline]. At a prayer breakfast I don’t need to say much about the importance of spiritual discipline, except perhaps to add to my prison experiences that the two vital ingredients in the process of prayer I believe to be patience and perseverance.

You know, in our prison prayer group, we had quite a few guys who left after only one gathering because they did not immediately get parole next Monday as a result. But others stuck with it

and stuck with it, because in prison you have the luxury of massive time night after night, seven days a week. And I think they discovered, as certainly I discovered, that there are times – and the Psalmists mentioned this – when you have to wait for the Lord. You have to trust in His word. And prayer is not necessarily a quick fix.

The third milestone on this journey was penitence - a change of heart and mind.

The third milestone on this journey was penitence. An unfashionable topic, even after its surname repentance. But almost everyone who goes on a journey of prayer sooner or later discovers, as the author of Psalm 130 did, that only with the Lord is there forgiveness. And this is a deep discovery, which secular society – like Britain, like Canada – are often reluctant to embrace the concept of repentance. And it's a concept that is often ignored. Or mocked cynically for not being genuine.

I think there is a language difficulty here, but if the French language and the English language both used the word *repentir* or repentance, it has such a negative connotation. It somehow summons up the idea of saying sorry over and over again. Writing out 100 lines. Standing in the corner. Or in the old days, wearing sackcloth and ashes.

But if you go linguistically to the language the Gospels were written in at first, the ancient Greek, the word for repentance is *metánoia* – which is a far richer translation of the word – which means a change of heart and mind. And that of course is really what the deepest form of repentance is about.

People often wonder if people's repentance or *metánoia* is genuine. Luckily, there is a good biblical test for this. John the Baptist talks in Matthew Chapter 3 verse 8 and he says, *"Those who repent will show the fruits of their repentance."*

I remember so well, oh me of little faith, being absolutely astonished by the fruits of the repentance that were shown by the growing numbers of members of the prayer groups. It may not sound all that much in respectable Ottawa, but I can assure you it was a big big deal in the unrespectable Belmarsh prison. When young men started to stop swearing, throw away their porn magazines, become [...] prison officers, reach out to the pologist of their victims.

Patty, for example, gave his life as a commitment to the Lord and is now a law abiding citizen. And if I may mention the word godfather once again, I should tell you that when Patty's infant daughter was baptized in the prison chapel, he invited me to be a godfather of the Christian variety. And she is growing up to be a lovely Christian young lady.

Well what I'm getting at here is that a lot of lives were changed by this process. I hope that I changed my life too. [...] After I came out of prison, I had another unusual career change. I went to the one place in Britain which served worse food and worse plumbing than a prison. This was an anglican theological college and seminary at Oxford, where I went for a degree in theology, but this was a process that has been afterwards an enormous source of fulfillment and joy to me, not in the least to prison ministry.

Of course it wasn't all plain sailing. We all have our moments of lapsing, our moments of failure. And in that prison program people have the biggest troubles, the biggest struggles with those who had problems with drug addiction. Like in Canada, drugs can flow like a river through prisons and it takes a lot to say no to the pushers and the peddlers. But I think those who run Alcoholics Anonymous courses and Narcotics Anonymous courses know something about it when they say our courses consist of 12 steps. And you may not be able to get to step number 12 by your own will power. You may need the help of a higher power.

Who is that higher power and how do we tap into it?

Well, who is that higher power and how do we tap into it? There's two big questions that I will briefly conclude with. Those of you who belong to a small group, or a faith community in Canada, of course will know the answer to the first question. It is the power of the God who has the power to redeem nations and to transform individual human hearts.

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But tapping into and receiving that divine power is difficult, perhaps particularly difficult for those of us who have ever had any control over temporal or secular power through politics. At the risk of ending this talk on an impertinent note, I would delicately like to suggest that in almost every country in the world, there are intriguing similarities between the political community and the prisoner community. Both groups seem to be very set in their ways. Both groups have their own customs, rituals and pecking orders. People who rise in these groups are extraordinarily resistant to change. They certainly don't like embarking on the sort of journey of spiritual exploration that I have been describing: a journey of penance and prayer, change of heart and mind, and that journey from self centeredness to God centeredness.

"You know I'd really like to try that path myself."

And yet in each and every one of us, we think we know that there is a spiritual hunger which sooner or later tells us that we ought to try to get started on that path of spiritual change. Perhaps I can ask you to reflect on the words Patty said to me that day in the cell when we were having coffee, "You know I'd really like to try that path myself."

If you would, perhaps this prayer breakfast might be not a bad place for you to start your journey towards that path.

God bless you all. Amen.