

Have you ever felt like the apostles in the upper room? They are locked away, afraid, aware of the consequences of being an apostle, but also perhaps thinking about how they let their best friend down in a time of need. All seems lost. Sin and darkness seem to have one out. Many times I think in life we can be in our own locked room due to a series of decisions; but God has a way of bursting in.

John Pridmore, a former gang member turned Christian international speaker, is a man like many of us, who years ago found himself in a locked room. But today, like the apostles who emerge from it, he speaks around the world on his Catholic faith.

John was born in the East End of London at the Salvation Army Hospital. Though baptized as a Catholic he never went to a Catholic school or to church. At the age of ten he came home on a normal night and his parents told him he had to choose who he wanted to live with because they were getting divorced. John loved his parents so much and he couldn't choose because the two people he loved the most had just crushed him. It was then that deep down inside he made a choice not to love anymore because he thought if he did not love he would not get hurt.

After his parents split up John started stealing. Deep down, he really just wanted someone to take notice of the pain that he was in, but because his dad was a policeman it just added to the beatings. At 15 he was in a detention center which was meant to be a 'short, sharp, shock' but it was there that his anger continued to grow and he was always getting into fights.

John left school at this same age and the only thing he seemed good at was stealing, so that is what he did. Since he had no love in his life he took painkillers to go along with drinking and drugs anything he could find to kill the pain within. At 19 John was in prison again and the way he dealt with all of the anger that was within was by lashing out and fighting. He was put on 24 hour solitary confinement and it was during this time that he considered taking God's greatest gift, his own life. But looking back at this moment, he realizes God must have been there because he did not take his own life, but he did come out of the prison more bitter and violent then ever.

He thought what he wanted from this world, he would have to take, because no one gives you anything. And so he started working as a

bouncer around the East-End of London, and at West-End clubs in London; He thought he liked fighting so he might as well get paid for it. It was there that he met some of the guys who ran most of the organized crime in London, so he started working for them. Not long after this, he stopped working for them and began to work with them. John lived the classic gangster lifestyle with plenty of money, drugs and women. He had a penthouse flat in St. John's Wood, a 7 series BMW, Sport Mercedes Convertible and he couldn't spend the money he got fast enough because from the protection rackets and drug dealing cash kept pouring in. His designer leather jacket had a sewn in inside pocket so he could have a machete with him for when he went to collect debts and punish those who failed to pay.

John truly believed what the world told him was true, that having all of the possessions, relationships and drugs would make him happy, but he felt sick inside because this life was slowly destroying him. Nothing satisfied him; nothing fulfilled him. At the same time, he was trying to destroy his conscience because with the people he was involved with, the more vicious and brutal he could be, the more respect he got and he wanted that respect. He wanted people to walk into a club and when people saw him

they would know who he was and what he was involved in. He wanted power, and to evoke fear.

One night he was working at one of the clubs they ran in the West-End and he hit a guy with a knuckleduster, but when John hit him he fell straight back and smashed his head on the curb. He could see blood everywhere and people around started screaming, so he left the scene and remembers being in his car on the way home thinking, 'I could get ten years for this.' Slowly it came to him that he might have just killed someone. But the thing of it was, he did not even care. He used to care. He used to want to make a difference but here he was just taking and destroying everyone around him. The only person he cared about was himself and he didn't think that would ever change.

John came home and he heard a voice speaking to him in his heart, it is a voice we all know, our conscience, God within us. Up to this point, he felt God was just a nice little story to keep us from being bad, but now he was faced with the fact that God was real and it didn't matter what he thought.

Though John was never aware of God's love or presence in his life up to this point, in one moment he felt Him withdraw Himself from him. John reflects that people say that separation from God is hell, and if that was hell he prays that no one ever goes there because it was the most terrifying experience in his life. He had people put guns to his head, he had been stabbed, but this was terrifying because he was fully aware of the choices he had made. He cried out to God for another chance not because he was sorry, but because he did not want to stay in the desolation he was experiencing. Right then he felt lifted up. He walked out of his flat and said the first prayer he had ever said in his life. John said, 'Up to now all I have done is taken from you God, now I want to give.' As he said that prayer that emptiness within his heart which the drugs, power and relationships could not satisfy was filled with the love of God, divine mercy. He could not believe God could love someone like him with all the terrible things he had done, but He kept showing him that God loved him and accepted him. All throughout his life he had felt useless and it didn't matter if he lived or died, but God showed him that it did matter because He loved him and created him.

The only person he knew who had a faith was his mom. John didn't see a lot of her in those days, but he went round to her and told her what had happened. She told him she had prayed for him every day of his life, but two weeks before this she had prayed to let Jesus take him. If that meant let him die then to let him die, just don't let him hurt himself or anyone else anymore. John knew how much his mom loved him and for her to pray that prayer must have broke her heart but she could see the monster he was becoming; he will never forget the tears rolling down her face as he told her how he had found God.

Those tears probably washed away all the pain and misery he had caused her in her life. His step-dad gave him his first Bible, he had never had one before and one of the first stories he read in it was the Prodigal Son. How a father gave his two sons his whole livelihood and property and one of them went and squandered all his Father's money on a life of sin and debauchery. As the son who had sinned is walking to his father's house, his father is out searching for him and when he sees him he runs up to embrace him, placing a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet, clothing him with the finest cloak and sets a feast for him and his friends. He would

always be His son and came back to the family where he was always loved, even after years in the wilderness.

He was there and John saw in that story how God was always out looking for him and He never tired of searching or trying to fix his heart which had been broken by life. Since John had never gone to church he started looking for a place to meet God and he met an old priest who told him about a retreat.

It was then that he heard a talk and it was called 'Give me your wounded heart' and as he heard this priest speaking how every sin we commit is like a wound on our heart he was looking at a crucifix and for the first time John knew why Jesus died on that cross, because the darkest most terrible sins John had ever committed in his life Jesus gladly carried in His heart to that crucifixion. And John felt an incredible sorrow for what he had done, but more than that sorrow was this incredible joy, he felt Jesus saying to him 'John I love you so much I would go through this all again just for you.'

John started crying, crying for the first time since he was ten because he couldn't believe that anyone could love me him much as to die for him in that agony. He walked out of that talk and said a prayer to Mary the mother of Jesus, and he just said 'What is it your Son wants me to do?' He felt a

whisper in his heart, go to confession. He had never been to confession before and he was 27 and he knew he had committed every sin there was possible to commit and he was afraid. But Mary gave him the courage. And as he was confessing all of those most terrible sins, the priest was crying because he was Jesus to him. He was showing John the mercy of God, which he could feel in his heart. When he received absolution John knew it was Jesus forgiving him and setting him free. All of his sins had been tipped out at the foot of the cross and he was alive again, and could feel the wind on his face, he could hear the birds singing. His sins had killed him but confession had brought him back to life.

Along with meeting Jesus through confession John received Him into his heart during the mass at that same retreat. When he went forward and received Holy Communion, every good feeling he had ever had in his life, including how he felt when he walked out of that flat, including how he felt after confession, was magnified a million times. His heart had been opened in confession to feel and know His presence in the Eucharist and it fulfilled his heart completely.

When he left that retreat he wanted to help others so he began working on in London trying to help young kids stay away from the life of crime and pain that he had chosen. A few years later, he went to the Bronx and it was there that he met Mother Teresa, she taught him how to love again, to love himself and others. She inspired John to give and since then he has been sharing his story in schools, parishes and prisons around the U.K. and Ireland. In 2007, at World Youth Day in Sydney, he had the privilege to speak to more than half a million young people and the greatest gift in his life is to share with them that there is a God who loves them, who cherishes them and rejoices in them. Since that talk in Sydney his ministry has become more and more international. He's given retreats, talks and seminars all around the world, talking about love and forgiveness. For the past 18 years John has worked full-time to bring hope to others and show them that if God can love someone like him, he can love anyone.

Of course, we know that God does indeed care. That's what we've been celebrating throughout the Easter Octave, and during Holy Week we pondered how deeply God does care as we thought about how far God is willing to go for us. But as John's story illustrates, in life it can still be easy to get lost, because such is the power of sin. Whether it's our sin or the sin

of others, we can get trapped. But Jesus is there to liberate us, and gives us the power to help liberate one another too from the power of darkness.

In our second reading this weekend from Revelation, John writes: "He touched me with his right hand and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives.

Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever." In a nutshell, that was John's experience. And in the Gospel, Jesus visits the disciples who are still firmly in Good Friday mode, hiding out of fear. And his message to them is simply "Peace." And this peace transforms them; they will burst out of that room with the power of the Holy Spirit and proclaim Jesus boldly through words and actions, paying for that with their lives.

Revelation which is a book that is read a lot during the Easter Season really isn't so much about the end of the world as you might think.

Apocalypse in Greek refers to taking away the veil or an unveiling. This unveiling has to do with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The old world gives way to a new one. And that is the giving away of sin to redemption of darkness to hope.

As a starting point, let's think about the situation in the upper room. Jesus has come back. And it's not payback time. It's not "where were you on Good Friday." Simply, peace. Today is also known as Divine Mercy Sunday, which focuses on how loving and merciful our Lord is. In his appearance to Sister Faustina Kowalska, the Polish Saint, who had a vision of Christ that led to this feast being established. She wrote that Christ told her: "Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet. My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or of angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity." The image you may have seen of it illustrates that beautifully. Jesus is always going to meet us right where we are at like he met John, like he meets us. We see that too in Thomas. Notice that although he is absent at first, when he is there the second time and says he will not believe until he sees the wounds and touches the side, there is no judgment on the part of Jesus. He does not scold Thomas or shame him; rather, as with the others, He meets Thomas where Thomas is at; it's as if He's saying "OK Tom, I know you are skeptical and need some evidence, so let me show you." And so Thomas touches the wounds, and then makes that beautiful leap of faith. I love Thomas because he is so easy to relate to. Like him, we wander (as he was not present with the others, we can wonder from loved ones and from the Church), and like him

sometimes we just need more proof. But because we still have faith in our hearts, even if it's not as strong as it should be, God is still going to work with it. And whenever we come back, God is going to be there to welcome us with open arms. But, like Thomas, like John Pridmore, we also have to make a move towards our Lord. So first, I'd hope that you'd just daily ask yourselves where you are at in your faith life. Maybe you've fallen away, done horrible things, do things you don't tell people about or hide your secrets out of shame. Turn them over to Jesus. Trust in His mercy. Let it set you free as it did for John.

With that though, we too need to unveil for others the truth of God's mercy; "as the Father has sent me so I send you." John went from someone who's life was in the abyss to a liberator. And the author of revelation John the apostle, exiled on a penal colony island, writes down his visions to help people find Jesus. Just last week the parish celebrated the confirmation of a number young women and men at the Basilica; my parish's confirmation, Saint Joseph's, is next week. Jesus will tell them "as the Father has sent me so I also send you." Those confirmed do not just get the chrism placed on their forehead so they can take a picture and go out for lunch or cake and open some cards and then not have to go to faith formation anymore.

They are now sharing in the mission of the apostles, and are called to give what they receive. We are called to share our joy of the faith, and we'll see that throughout the Easter Season as we go through the Acts of the Apostles. With that in mind, ask yourself where Jesus is sending you. God created us all for a reason, and each one of us has such power to do great things. God's mercy frees us from sin, but we also respond to it.

Sometimes we learn from our past mistakes to help others not repeat them or learn how to overcome them. Or sometimes the Holy Spirit will challenge you to try something new; or put someone in your life who you will be called to help. Ask yourselves often where is God sending me? Mercy is a great gift, but we must pass it on too. A kind word, listening, seeing someone who is hurting and giving them comfort, refraining from gossip, so many little things we do add up to make such a huge difference.

Sin is powerful indeed, but far more powerful is love and mercy, something we've seen unfold as we've gone through Holy Week and now the Easter Octave. It illuminates the darkness; it sets us free. May mercy unveil for us the truth that is sometimes hidden: that God loves us more than we can ever imagine, and inspire us to pass on the love we are given.