

## SETTING THE CAPTIVES FREE

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Ros Powell shares her experiences of a visit to one of the largest prisons in Europe.

It all started with an email from Rev Michael, the Catholic Prison Chaplain inviting me to speak to inmates at HMP Oakwood (One of the largest prisons in Europe that provides places for up to 1,605 Category C male prisoners). So after much prayer and intercession we all set off, Freddy, my husband and I, plus two other St Teresa prayer group members: Barbara Davies and Shauna McCue. The prison was huge and we stood in awe at the politeness of each prisoner that we passed as we walked through the many vast gates of the prison to reach the chapel. We were introduced to the chaplains that represented each faith including a Pagan Chaplain, who looked after the needs of those whose religion was Wicca (witchcraft).

The chapel was lovely and was shared by all the different Christian denominations. At 2pm the prisoners began to pour in and take their seats. We sat at the back and chatted to the lads. Three of them told us that they were not happy because on the right of the chapel were V.P.s (vulnerable prisoners: - those prisoners who are at risk of attack from other prisoners). These included sex offenders, police informers and ex-police officers. One man said that he didn't want to be in the same room as them because in his opinion they were scum. The atmosphere became very tense, and we started praying and interceding for peace. We started the service with praise and worship. This was led by some inmates who had formed a worship group in the prison. One of them sang a song he had written himself, which was beautiful. The service included scripture readings and prayers which inmates and chaplains read.

Finally, Rev Michael introduced me and I went up to the front to speak to the congregation, which was ecumenical.

I felt the Lord's compassion and mercy for each of the inmates This was the first time I had ever preached in a prison, and as I began to speak I felt the Lord's compassion and mercy for each of the inmates. I trusted the Lord to use me and anoint me to speak the words that each one of them needed to hear. As I looked over at the lads' faces I realised that inside each of us there is a Godshaped hole which only Jesus can fill. Each of us is made in God's wonderful image and He is a God who forgives and heals us as we call out to him in our poverty.

I shared my testimony and spoke about how, through appropriating the finished work of the cross of Jesus that each of us are set free from sin and death. I went on to speak about the Baptism in the

Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I invited each one to say the sinner's prayer with me and we asked Jesus to forgive us and to come into our hearts. The Holy Spirit's presence was very evident in the room and some men began to weep as the Spirit touched them very powerfully.

I asked if any of them would like the individual laying on of hands. Most of them did, so Shauna, Barbara and I began to pray. Many received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues. I asked one lad if he wanted prayer and he indicated that he was deaf.

Fortunately I knew a little sign language and the Holy Spirit fell upon him and released him in a gift of tongues. The Lord never ceases to amaze me!

Will you hug me again?

As I prayed with one young lad, for a moment I forgot where I was and automatically gave him a holy hug. He looked at me, dazed, and said "Will you hug me again?" As I looked into his eyes I knew that the hug had released a special healing in him because he was so in need of a mother's love. Barbara prayed with one man who had his head bowed low. She felt the Lord wanted him to lift his head up and look Him in the eyes and know that God knew everything about him and He loved him. As he slowly lifted up his head, his eyes filled with tears and a smile spread across his face.

At the end of the service one of the men who had complained about being in the same room as the V.P.s came over to me and apologised saying that before he hadn't understood about forgiveness and he was sorry for what he said. The day was such an amazing experience for us all we all want to go back!

There were 39 prisoners in the chapel. As I pondered on the day I remembered that Jesus was scourged 39 times for our sins. It wasn't the sins of the men that we will remember but the grace of God and the awesome privilege of spending time in their company.