



A VIEW BEHIND BARS – HARVEST FESTIVAL

I hope the people using the Foodbank like noodles. Packs of dried (plain or curried) noodles are cheap and easy to buy for the men in prison on their weekly 'canteen' order. They are often to be seen stacked on windowsills as a handy top-up if they're hungry after a training session or if the prison kitchen fare (which some say is the best they've had in their tour of UK jails) doesn't seem to be appetising enough.

Noodles are also, therefore, the item to hand when the chaplains ask for donations for harvest that will go to the Foodbanks. This year we gathered five bin-bag sized loads of food (soup, tinned goods and vast quantities of biscuits – another 'filler' food- as well) to hand over. The workers at the distribution centres last year were touched. My guess is that they were compelled to consider that *'Even prisoners want to give something'*. Yes, because a lot of them have know what it is to be homeless and hungry.

At least we managed to hold a Harvest service this year. COVID put a stop to that in 2020. It's a logistical exercise and a half. At church we put out adverts and invite people to turn up; plan a service and open the door. But this is prison.

We're still in a semi-restricted COVID-safe set-up. Men can only come from two Wings at a time to chapel and we have four Wings. Harvest has usually been an occasion when some celebratory meal is provided so whilst we've been alternating our Wing 'bubbles' over the last couple of months since services re-started, this would be plainly unfair if the bubble whose turn didn't fall on the Sunday of Harvest celebrations, also missed out on the food.

We requested permission to hold two services back to back. That's feasible, said the 'Detail' officers who plan the staffing duties, but if there's an emergency on the day or if we're short-staffed (as we have been throughout the COVID season) we may not have Ground Patrol people to bring them, return them and collect the next lot. As chaplains, we're not normally meant to escort prisoners ourselves, as part of a safety protocol, despite the fact that we regularly see men on a one to one basis. If something kicks off, the trained Operational staff are supposed to be the ones to deal with it. We took a chance and booked our two services.

Next, we speak to kitchen manager, Dave. He agrees that there are two ways of delivering the food: in individual boxes to cells or (his preference and ours) in a heated trolley to the chapel. We negotiate on the menu. I suggest hotpot and apple pie. He tells me that this should be fine, depending on the deliveries, which are currently erratic due to the country's general shortage of HGV drivers. He might manage some red cabbage with the hotpot, too.

We discuss, delicately, with the chaplain manager who is anxious about getting things wrong and having all services stopped for all faiths, how we will keep things safe and

undertake a meal for two groups, despite not having even been permitted to serve cups of tea for over a year.

Our service 'slot' has been a sparse thirty minutes up till now. For this celebration we were granted an extension to a strict forty-five minutes. How to conduct a service of meaning and allow for eating as well? The service would last half an hour. We primed our chapel Orderly about his role – to receive the food trolley during this time and start dishing up, pouring drinks and being ready to serve the moment we had said the last 'Amen'.

Whilst we would have liked to have an open invitation to all those registered 'Christian' to come, another compromise was needed and our maximum number of invites was capped at thirty. Invitation slips were individually delivered and attendance lists produced so that officers knew who was expected to be let out for the event.

I've generally found that the prison population is no different to the community outside when it comes to charitable giving. Some don't care. Some want to give but can't. Some give, with little cost, what they don't want or need themselves. Some are as generous and supportive as they can be when a cause touches their hearts.

So we appointed a rep on each side of each Wing to advertise that we were collecting gifts for the Foodbank and advised the Wing staff that we'd authorised these collections, in order to prevent anyone alleging that they'd been pushed into giving food to boost the private stocks of a few chapel-going men. Prisons are suspicious places.

Gardens produce some fabulous vegetables. Some go to the Kitchens, some to the lads who grow them. I asked if we could have a few items for display. They were duly wheelbarrowed down to chapel a couple of days in advance – carrots, tomatoes, swede, pumpkin, beetroot and an enormous cabbage.

After that little test of organisational skill, creating and conducting a service of worship was the easy bit.

Would it all come off? Around ninety-five bags of noodles says it did. They came. Our Ground Patrol officer was helpfulness personified. They behaved. The food arrived. All served. They ate. They went. They were boosted, uplifted. The food was good (I can confirm, since there were enough foil-contained portions to take some home). I'm not quite sure how red cabbage became beetroot or how apple pie metamorphosed into rhubarb crumble, but it didn't matter. The generosity and work of God and man were celebrated and gratitude passed on. I just hope they like noodles.