

Life can be at times quite challenging. And as it beats us up and we go through valleys, sometimes we can wonder where God is in the midst of it all, and does He even care.

John Pridmore, a former gang member turned Christian international speaker, is a man like many of us, who asked these hard questions.

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 qualification he had 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 than 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 his 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. 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. After he spent it all and because he was starving, he thought to himself. 'How many of my father's servants have all they want to eat and more and here I am starving for food.' He decides to go back to his father and to ask him to take him into his home as a slave. But as he 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 17 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.

Today, we celebrate that truth. The truth that God is in love with us, as we hear once more the greatest love story ever told. As Pope Francis said, "every man is a story of love that God writes on this earth." The problem is as life goes on, we can forget that we are loved. And we can go down the wrong path.

John did not start out life as a criminal. He never really knew God as a child. And when his family broke up, his world fell apart. He then thought he could find happiness through drugs, alcohol, through using other people, or by being part of a gang. In a sense, he was what we heard on Palm Sunday in the Passion, when Mark writes of the young man running away naked in the garden, symbolizing how we run away from truth and love. But what he found was that all these things only led him down the path of emptiness.

But as he says in his story, when he went to the retreat, when he talked to the priest, when He read the Prodigal Son parable, a light went off in his mind. He knew that he was a love story created by God, and finally began to respond to it by asking for the mercy that was always there.

As we hear the Passion read once more, hopefully we are reminded of how much we are loved. Just as the son's father is sitting on the hill, looking for his young son to return, God is looking for us too. Good Friday gives us the chance to be found, but also to help others find their way.

We'll do that in two ways at this liturgy.

We'll venerate the cross shortly, a cross that symbolized how Jesus suffered and died for us, and of God's loyalty to us despite our disloyalty. As we touch the cross or genuflect before it or just spend a moment in silence, we can think about the love that is given to us with no strings attached. Then, we will receive the Body of Jesus, which was broken for us and our salvation as Holy Communion. Without love, we can be like John and become dehumanised. We can sometimes be afraid of love too, because it reveals our insecurities and weaknesses and our sins. Love though is never forced on us; it has to be accepted. So accepting it is that first part. Realizing that when we look at that cross and when we look at the crucifix, we see a man and a God who died because He loved too much, and He would do the same thing again for us all.

But this will also remind us to our link with every other sinner too, as we come up together to venerate the cross, receive Communion, and pray the special intentions for the Church, the Pope, the bishop, and all the people of the world. When John looked at

himself, he received the mercy of God. But he used his experience from sin to become a wounded healer, to help others experience the mercy that he had shut out for so many years. That is our commission too; to do what Jesus did for us to a broken world, to attend to those who are suffering, and not take the attitude of apathy or blindness or thinking we can do nothing, but to be on the front lines to help those in need. The problem is indifference. At Milan's Holocaust Memorial is inscribed in a slab of concrete "Indifferenza," meaning indifference. It's where a train station was that secretly loaded Jews onto the trains to send them to the death camps. Sin muddies our eyes to seeing sin and suffering in our midst; the Cross opens them to do something about it. We pray. We act for others. We listen to others, We defend the unborn, the hungry, the imprisoned, the bullied, the doubtful. We bring light to the darkness that others go through. To quote Saint Maximilian Kolbe: "The most deadly poison of our times is indifference. And this happens, although the praise of God should know no limits. Let us strive, therefore, to praise Him to the greatest extent of our powers."

Just as the daylight fades slowly into darkness, the same can happen in our lives. Sin creeps in, and before long we may have a hard time finding our way out or seeing anything in the darkness that envelops our lives, so we get used to it. Christ though, as we will chant tomorrow night, is our light. So let that light shine on you. Do not doubt for a moment how much you are loved by God. If you've gotten caught up in some habitual sins or addiction, turn them over to God. If you've covered something up, put it out into the open and turn it over to Him. If you've ever thought there is no way out, take the hand of Jesus.

All of this involves pain. It is painful to look at our past, to look at our struggles and acknowledge we too are responsible for driving the nails through our Lord's hands and feet as did the Roman soldiers through our hurtful words and actions, through our sins. It is painful to love and to sacrifice for others. But through the suffering came the glory. The love triumphed. Let that love flow through you, let that love transform you, and look on the cross and crucifix and gaze on the face of your friend, of your redeemer, and find peace by letting go of your sins, and letting his love fill your soul. Be liberated, and bring that love into a fallen world.