

CHRISTMAS DAY IN PRISON

By
Joe R. Garman

In prison, Christmas Day is the second happiest day of the year. New Year's Day is the happiest because New Year's signals another year gone and one nearer release and the outside world. It doesn't really matter which month you were "sent up," another calendar year has passed. It's gone forever.

There is an air of expectancy throughout the prison as prisoners anticipate a Christmas visit from their families. Some lay silent on their bunk beds, trying to recall memories of childhood Christmases. Past and distant images are awakened of family and friends gathered around the table laughing and eating, then later relaxing and exchanging gifts.

The prisoner tries hard to keep his mind off the length of his sentence and the crime he committed. This is a time to receive word from home...though some messages will prove painful. A solemn air hovers over the prison. Try as he may to keep them away, dark clouds of failures, mistakes, regret and remorse over crimes committed that have separated him from freedom, bring salty raindrops in the form of tears.

Actually, the Christmas season began weeks ago with the Angel Tree program. Prisoners were asked to submit the names and addresses of their children, and what they would like to give their children for Christmas. The Angel Trees were set up in shopping malls all across America. On the branches hung little angels with the name, age, and clothing size of the prisoner's children.

Shoppers chose an angel, purchased the requested gifts or an alternative gift, and presented it to the volunteer sitting beside the tree. Although it is suggested that the gift not exceed \$15, some shoppers spent twice as much in the spirit of Christmas. A few days before Christmas, the gift is delivered to the prisoner's child in the name of the parent.

Excitement abounds as prisoners ask each other what they are requesting for their children. Beautiful Christmas cards in multi-colored envelopes begin arriving, resulting in an atmosphere not felt during any other season of the year. Prisoners tape their Christmas cards on the walls of their cells for others to see, and each day re-read the hand written messages inside.

A few days earlier, the chaplain has gone throughout the institution making sure that everyone who wanted one was given a card to send home. The chaplain then dipped into his always limited "love fund" to make sure that the hardship cases had postage for their card. Chaplain's assistants decorated the chapel with evergreen boughs, bright banners and a live Christmas tree.

Volunteer groups begin coming in, extending best wishes and bringing refreshments and gifts consisting of fresh fruit, homemade fudge, socks and toiletry items...sometimes with a Christmas tract strategically placed.

On Christmas Eve, the prison factory closes early and visiting hours are extended. Family and friends who come to visit are the highlight of the day, but the annual Christmas Eve play, whose actors are the prisoners themselves, runs a close second. Much preparation and excitement, and "much ado about nothing" goes into the play, from the screening of the cast to the full dress rehearsal.

Some have been locked away so long they are unable to sense joy or happiness, except in a warped fashion, that usually results in pain for someone else. So they try to get all pumped up, to act happy without really knowing how or even why they should.

This results in a lot of shallow talking and forced laughter. Some will ask the chaplain to show them the proper way to cross themselves, some will ask for a cross to wear around their neck, while others will want the

chaplain to tell them where to find the Christmas story in the Bible.

Christmas seems foreign in a prison setting...like an improper balance. No one wants to be where he is...especially today. Everyone is trying to feel significant. The Muslims and the American Indian Movement will busy themselves so as not to cause a fuss with the attempted celebration.

Then the holiday arrives at last. Within reason, the guards will turn their heads on some rules and regulations normally enforced, such as dress codes, shakedowns and group gatherings. Prisoners try, with some difficulty, to be nice to the guards, and guards, with the same difficulty, try being nice to the prisoners. Both prisoners and guards will breathe a sigh of relief when Christmas is over, knowing both sides have come through without any trouble or injuries.

The prison buzzer will be delayed so the prisoners can sleep late, then all will gather in the mess hall for the highlight of the day...Christmas dinner. The kitchen crew goes all out to prepare what the prisoners have requested, including a mouth-watering dessert.

This is the one day of the year when family members (not friends) are allowed to enter the cafeteria to eat with their loved ones. It is a time of introducing their families to their friends. Those who do not have family visitors are usually invited to sit with those who do and sort of "adopt a family" for the day. In maximum security prisons, families would never be allowed access into the cafeteria, while in some minimum security units, prisoners are encouraged to earn "points" during the year which will allow them to spend Christmas Day at home.

This is a great time of healing and bonding between prisoners. Some will, of course, pretend to be too preoccupied for such frivolity. Others, sadly, will fake a headache or stomachache and need to return to their cells.

Recreational privileges will be extended, providing it's a nice day for gathering in the yard. Most are on good behavior because no one wants to be placed in solitary over Christmas. Friends and family fill their loved one's prison bank account, which usually has a mandatory ceiling of \$20.

Prisoners who smoke exchange cigarettes for gifts. Those who don't smoke exchange candy bars, stamps or toiletries. These items are normally used for bartering and illegal gambling inside prison.

Prisoners present craft shop leather goods to their families and used toys that have been donated by various civic groups. The prisoners have labored over these toys, repairing, sanding, polishing, and painting them until they look like new. Some of the "like new" toys are sent back to the civic groups to be distributed among the poor in the community.

Prisoners are more spiritually sensitive during Christmas than at any other time of the year. Some "make deals" with God, hoping to manipulate a miraculous pardon on Christmas Day, or an early release next year. Sneering at other inmates or at the festivities is frowned upon. Peer pressure controls this. Even non-Christian inmates are silent so as not to disturb the holiday for the others.

This is a day when the prisoner can feel contact with the outside world. Families around the world are celebrating – he will celebrate too. Even in this confined and confused setting, he feels at one with society. He does not feel like such an outcast...like such a "loser."

But some have no Christmas memories except those spent in orphanages, foster homes, reformatories, and other prisons. For them, depression sets in. They will purchase some of the drugs or liquor that an unscrupulous guard has smuggled in. Others will celebrate by getting a new tattoo, or by smoking the one cigar they have kept hidden away in order to have something special on Christmas Day.

Some prisons have boxing rings in their gymnasium while in others boxing is strictly forbidden. Conjugal

visits are allowed in some, while others allow only one short embrace at the beginning of the visit and another at the close...all monitored by prison guards.

Another chapter has been written in the prisoner's life. Let it read:

Today I behaved and enjoyed as best I could...as Christmas dictates. No guards got on my case. I was not sent for counseling or to lock-up. I did not fight or curse a guard. I was not written up...did not receive any tickets or was told I need to attend an attitude adjustment class.

For one day I did not plot the demise of my enemies or relive my trial. I conducted myself according to what I once was, and what I someday hope to be...not what I am.

I cleaned my cell and shined my shoes. I sorted through my locker to find my best prison clothes, making sure there were no tears or patches on the shirt and that my trousers were ironed. While showering, I felt a strange expectation, and wished myself a happy Christmas. Shaving took on a new excitement and upon returning to my cell I said a prayer.

I spoke to other prisoners I have never spoken to before. I wished both guards and prisoners 'Season's Greetings'. I could tell some of them were eagerly anticipating a greeting from me...a break in the routine...and they wished me the same.

I don't understand Christianity, but I went to chapel anyway. There I saw real women, genuine smiles, wholesome love, and heard great singing. I saw beautifully colored dresses, smelled perfumed candles and touched a member of the opposite sex...if only in a handshake. People even asked me my name...not my number.

Blind devotion...tradition...call it what you will, I made peace with my inner man...if only for a day. "Merry Christmas" - what a great holiday...no, what a great Holy Day.

On the day after Christmas, when the morning buzzer sounds, the prisoner may react exactly the opposite. He might spit on a guard or curse fellow prisoners.

But not today...because today is Christmas Day in prison.

So it's difficult to describe Christmas Day in prison. It's my prayer, though, that the flavor of this magical and majestic "Greatest Day of the Year" and the effect it has on prisoners, has been partially conveyed in this article about this mysterious, forgotten world, and how they celebrate "Christmas Day in Prison."

Author's note: Prisons, like churches, are all alike - yet different. For instance, each Labor Day weekend, the Oklahoma State Prison in McAlester hosts their annual "Inside the Walls Prison Rodeo." The inmates are the cowboys and the public is invited...an activity allowed in only half a dozen prisons across America.

If you need help in making a decision for Christ, or if you want someone to assist you in Christian baptism, please contact:

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