

TRUE POWER

The first time the Cross and Icon were taken to a prison in Australia was when they went to the Baxter Juvenile Detention Centre just outside Gosford, on the New South Wales Central Coast. As was to prove to be the case each time the Cross and Icon were taken to a prison, the response of those in the prison to the Cross and Icon was quite powerful for all those privileged to witness it. At Baxter, Jacs from the JCI team and I struck up a conversation with 'Jason', a young man who told us that he had been on remand for eighteen months and that he expected to be there for at least eighteen months more.

He was not yet eighteen and he told us that he had been charged with committing an act of grievous bodily harm. He explained that he had been in a gang and, as the youngest, he had felt the need to go in harder than any of the others in order to prove himself. When

Jason went to the Cross he placed his forehead up against the wood and stayed there for a long time. He obviously didn't mind now what his peers thought as he unashamedly prayed in front of them all. I asked him afterwards what he had been thinking while he was there. He told us that he had been thinking of his mother who had stuck by him and was praying for him every day. He quietly stated that he was so sorry for what he had put her through. Then Jason said, "I prayed that I would have the strength to get through the rest of my sentence ... and the strength to turn my life around when I get out. I don't ever want to come back here".

Jason was muscular and solidly built. He was tough. But what struck me about his prayer was that he was looking for a different kind of strength, a strength that came from beyond him. It seemed that he had come to a point where he knew he needed to live by a different kind of power. I am not exactly sure why he

and many other prisoners around Australia found the visit of the Cross and Icon such a significant moment in their lives, but I often had to pause to reflect upon their response to the Cross. Maybe they had something to teach us because not all of life's prisons have physical bars. We don't have to be in a jail to be imprisoned by something or someone. Sometimes it can be the prison of what other people think, perhaps it is the prison of an addiction, or perhaps it's the prison of greed or hatred. While they don't impede our physical freedom, they can leave us captive, hostage to other people's opinions or our own compulsions. Jason had got to the point of realising that he needed a different power from the one he was used to, and he went to the Cross to find it. Maybe, in that action, Jason had something to tell the rest of us about the right sort of power to live by and where to find it. Maybe, in a funny sort of way, Jason was freer at the foot of the Cross than those of us who could leave that prison but

who carried our own 'cells' out with us. In saying that, I don't want to minimise or disregard the harsh reality of life in a prison but, rather, point out the importance of acknowledging our need for God. Jason knew his need for God, because the power that he relied upon, the power of the clenched fist, had brought him to jail. How often do I deny my need for God and think that the power of success, the power of my reputation or simply my own power is enough? The World Youth Day theme for 2008 told us that we could receive power when the Holy Spirit had come upon us: this is the power that we really need, and it was the power that Jason connected with the day the Cross and Icon came to the Baxter Detention Centre.

In the Light of the Cross

Reflections on the Australian Journey of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon

Christopher Ryan MGL

p. 70-71