

# Fed by grit and the Prayer Book

Terry Waite talks to Sarah Meyrick about solitary captivity

IF ANYONE is equipped to write a book on solitude, it is surely Terry Waite. Kidnapped and imprisoned while he was in Lebanon on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury 30 years ago, he was held hostage for 1763 days. All but the last few weeks were spent in solitary confinement.

Now aged 78, he has written *Solitude: Memories, people, places*, an exploration of what that means to different people. He wanted to find out whether others had learned from solitude, as he has done; it's a topic that he's been mulling over for many years.

"Having experienced solitude for myself, and having tried to make what could have been a negative experience into a positive experience, I went through a whole process," he says. "From isolation and seeming emptiness, where I felt I was learning nothing, slowly, slowly, slowly I was able to convert that experience into something creative."

His own extreme experience suggests that suffering doesn't need to destroy us. "You only have to think of the great works of art or the central symbol of the Christian faith, the cross. That's a symbol of suffering that is key, where you find hope."

The book is the result of conversations with people from a whole range of backgrounds who have vastly different stories to tell. Farmers in the Australian outback, for example: one farmer's city-born wife told him that she hadn't visited the nearest town for nine years. There's the man living in unnoticed and unwelcome isolation in the heart of a busy city. There's the former prisoner-of-war; and the spy whose wife had no clue that he was a double agent.

"I've met some rough and ready characters, people who have had solitude pressed upon them through no fault of their own. For instance, Svetlana [Stalin's daughter], who because of her father's misdeeds is isolated from her people, who have ostracised her. Myra Hindley, who in later years converted to the Roman Catholic faith and, I believe, was repentant, but who would never escape that isolation.

"I've put it all together to let the reader draw their own conclusions," Terry Waite says. "I hope it might encourage people [who] experience solitude to see how they [can] make that creative."

FINDING that creativity for himself took an act of will. "When you are in solitary confinement for a long time, you naturally become concerned that you might lose your mind. You see your skin go white, because of the lack of daylight, and [I lost] muscle tone because I was chained to a wall for 23 hours and 50 minutes every day. I had no books, and no one to speak to.

"You wonder if you will deteriorate mentally — or spiritually, too; you have to find a way to keep the mind and spirit alive." Indeed, he wrote his first book in captivity —



and in his head, because he had no pen or paper: *Taken on Trust*, first published in 1993 after his release, and republished in an updated form last year.

It was while he was a hostage that he began to write poetry, too. (His first collection, *Out of the Silence: Memories, poems, reflections*, came out last year.) "Not all the verse was written in captivity, but it had its genesis there," he says. "Good language, in my view, is like good music, and it breathes harmony into your soul."

In this he was aided by his upbringing as a chorister in the parish church. "Unconsciously, those words, the words of the Prayer Book and the Psalms and the Bible, stuck in my mind. I can't remember a single sermon from my childhood, but I could and still can remember those words."

Mr Waite says he fears that we are losing something extremely valuable by letting that knowledge slip. "We shouldn't despise learning by rote," he says. "In captivity, I had a store of language. Just last night, I was with someone who is ill, an old man, aged 93, who is dying, and we said the collect together, 'Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord. . . .' [But] in many churches, language has been put to one side. There's a place for extempore prayer, but it shouldn't be dominant."

What, I wonder, does he think is the difference between solitude and loneliness? "Loneliness is a state of mind where you feel bereft," he says without hesitation. "Again, the man I was speaking to last night, his wife has for many years been in a care home, and he is living by himself. He refuses the offer of accommodation because he wants independence. I sat with him for an hour or two, and he said: 'I'm lonely. I'm thinking of suicide.'"

"In his case, what he has not done is reason that loneliness can be converted into something else. Within the self is a whole rich, lively inner world."

Does everyone have the capacity to make that choice? "When I was in captivity, I decided that this was an opportunity, not a disaster. It was an opportunity to take an inner journey, because any external journey was prohibited."

He believes that the Church needs to educate people about that inner life. "It's increasingly difficult . . . when religion is being squeezed out of the curriculum. But time and again, when I speak about this, I find that there is a spiritual hunger, a desire for life beyond the material, that's not being met."

UNDOUBTEDLY, Mr Waite was sustained by his faith through the long years of his ordeal. "The situation reduced my faith to something essential and simple," he says.

"First, I never engaged in extempore prayer. I felt in my psychological condition at the time, any prayers would be, 'Oh God, get me out of here!' But I don't believe God put me in there.

"So I fell back on the language of the Prayer Book. Most mornings, I saved a little bread and water in my beaker and I said to myself the communion service. 'We do not presume. . . .' and so on was all there, and I could say it. In my imagination I was taking part in this act with congregations across the world, in parts of England or America. I joined with them, using my imagination.

"Then there's the simplicity. I used to say about my captors, 'You have power to break my body (I was tortured), you have power to bend my mind (I was interrogated), but my soul is not yours to possess.' It was fundamental but simple. Whatever happened, they couldn't capture my soul. That lay in the hands of God. That was enough to maintain hope, and it was a great step forward."

The most difficult time, he says, was towards the end of his captivity when he became physically ill. "I had a bad bronchial infection and I couldn't get my breath. I sat day and

night against a wall. Terry Anderson [a fellow hostage] told me afterwards, 'We thought you were going to die.' And I remember thinking that death would be preferable. That was the most difficult, and it was difficult for my comrades. They'd spent years together, and I was thrust in on them and about to die, which meant they had to face their own deaths."

From the world's point of view, Mr Waite is defined by that experience in Lebanon. Does he feel personally defined by it? "Definitely," he says. "It puts me in the category of 'former hostage', just as Tony Blair is 'former Prime Minister'. I can't get away from it, but I try to utilise it creatively."

"One of the things that happened, which I didn't realise at the time, was that my sympathy with those on the margins has turned into empathy. I feel it as the people themselves feel. Hence I've established Hostage UK, about to be Hostage International, and my work with Emmaus. When I meet people in prison, for example, they say, 'You know what it's like', and, to a degree, I do."

The only moment that gives Mr Waite pause for thought is when I ask him what was the most important lesson he learned in captivity. "I suppose. . . probably that I am a complex person, and there's a deeply introverted side to me. I have a long way to go before I achieve what I would wish, that inner peace," he says eventually. "The other thing is, to try to understand why people behave as they behave. Don't condemn them. Try to understand what motivates them. That's the same in everyday life as it was in captivity."

And what if he'd never been taken prisoner? What does he think would have been different about his life? "I think, to be honest, I would be the poorer for it, though I wouldn't want to go through it again. It was tough. But I think I have gained immeasurably through it.

"I can't say I regret it, because without [that experience] I wouldn't have had the time for that self-analysis. I wouldn't have given myself the chance."

*Solitude: Memories, people, places by Terry Waite, published by SPCK, is reviewed on page XV.*

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**'You have to find a way to keep the mind and spirit alive'**

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