

As Long as it Takes

The children called him Fred. He was Reverend Fred to most of the older generations. The title was by virtue of his close association with the little red brick chapel on the edge of what had once been a Council Estate. It was a mark of respect for a man everybody found amiable. Even if you tried to fall out with him he still liked you! Reverend was a part compliment from way back. Fred certainly had no official or ecclesiastical right to the title and would never dream of taking the place of the various ministers who had served the chapel over the years. His theological training came from the Bible and life experience of people. His deep, quiet spirituality had not been forged in meditation courses or desert retreats, but in his everyday communion with his Lord in the quiet of Lady Carter's gardens where he had worked for most of his life.

Many of the children who had flocked to his chapel clubs and meetings in the days when they were popular, were now mature residents of the local community. Not many came now to the Sunday service, but many more would acknowledge how much their lives had been shaped by Fred's example and friendship. He had reached that stage when he was invited to their funerals more than their baptisms.

Summer evenings, like this one would find Fred walking around the estate talking to anyone who had the time. His stocky frame and shock of white hair were established features of the local landscape. The estate had changed. At one time on an evening like this everyone would be out on their little patch of front garden - men and women gardening and gossiping while children played. There were not so many well-tended gardens now which was why Fred stopped to talk to Patrick at number forty-three. Patrick had been born at that address and stayed there after his parents, raising his own family.

Patrick was a keen gardener. Fred expressed his appreciation of the roses adorning a lattice fence and was invited round to the back to look at a fantastic vegetable patch. *I knew you'd appreciate it, said Patrick, being a gardener yourself like. I remember you taking most of the prizes at the local show. Pity we don't have the show anymore. It's not surprising. Some folks round here take a pride in their personal rubbish tips!*

I don't think it was that many prizes, Fred said modestly.

You've had a busy day Fred. I hear you've been in Court. You got young Jimmy Yates a bit more time.

I hope it's more than that, Fred sighed. News was everybody's news on the estate. Jimmy's been given *Community Service*. *I've the job of helping him stick with it.*

You'll be wasting your time. Patrick had no sympathy for young offenders. *That lad's destined to do time. At least he'll keep his father company!*

Fred resisted trying to explain. Patrick wouldn't try to understand how frustration and anger built up in Jimmy and without words to express himself, it usually erupted into more aggressive behaviour. Jimmy was angry at the world - at a society where he didn't seem to have a place. Where he didn't appear to be wanted or understood. He was an honest lad - and kindly generous. His mother saw to that but she was helpless to control his aggression. How could the lad respect a society which couldn't respect him.

Fred had made a friend of Jimmy and the lad would often come to find him - secretly though and for fear of his peers. Jimmy would come to watch him in the garden and sometimes Fred find let him help while they talked. Fred was not averse to expressing his disapproval sometimes but never condemned the boy for his actions. He couldn't explain to Patrick the trust which had built up between them, nor how Jimmy was in his prayers every day. He never preached. His sermons were wise counsel and his wide ruddy-faced smile.

How many chances do you give a lad like that? Patrick thinned out a few carrots and threw them into his barrow. *There's some who'll never make it. You say that every year,* Fred grinned and nodded towards the discarded thinnings. *But you keep sowing all the seed!*

Patrick missed the point. *Young Jimmy's had a few chances. How many more does he have to get?*

As many as it takes, said Fred. *I'm sowing seed with that lad, and I'll do all I can to make it grow. I'll give Jimmy as many chances as I can Patrick -and for as long as it takes!*