

## Truth and Freedom

*'Lovely smell of fresh grass.'* Father Jim took his place on the bench outside St Elizabeth's. This seat had heard more confessions than the church building itself in recent times. Sitting here gave Jim a broad view of the whole square at the centre of his downtown parish. The square comprised a larger than normal expanse of grass, with a few small mahonia shrubs and a cherry tree on each corner, the whole surrounded by Edwardian terraces. A few lime trees marked the sidewalks of houses which at one time had been the homes of newly affluent folks, but now were mostly flats and apartments for the working class community and students at the neighbouring art college.

*'It's a beautiful fresh smell after the rain.'* Ronnie replied. *'The cut grass smell reminds me of my childhood in our village. They were good days. The village school and the church. We had a great Youth Club. Not many of us and we were not always saints. Judith, my sister, would love to go back.'*

*'I'm pleased to see you two together in Sunday worship.'* Father Jim was glad of the opening to talk about Judith. *'Judith seems to be coming to terms with her loss of Jeff. She tells me you've spent a lot of time together lately.'*

*'Yes, I suppose we have. But she's a great help to me too. I'm waiting for her now. She'll not leave the hall kitchen till the last mug's put away.... and the last bit of gossip's mulled over!'* Ronnie turned to receive Jim's knowing smile.

*'I've been wanting to have a talk with you, Father. There's another reason I've been helping Judith.'*

*'I sensed you've something on your mind Ronnie. You've had what I recognise as a sad aura about you these last weeks. I suppose losing Jeff bowled you over too. I gather he was a long- time friend.'*

*'Yes. It is about Jeff, unfortunately.'*

Experience prevented Father Jim expressing surprise. He knew Judith's husband Jeff had died while serving a prison sentence. He had accompanied her on a couple of prison visits as well as taking part in the funeral service.

*'Jeff and I had been friends since Youth Club days. Not close, mind. His life followed a different course to mine even though we were from the same village. We'd been to school together. We met occasionally in the pub... just exchanging a few words. We had secrets from the past. That's part of my problem now. I thought he was doing well after college. He had a good job as a car salesman here in town but he got himself involved in another world of dealing too. It started with a few stolen goods, then on to drugs in quite a big way. When he showed an interest in Judith I was worried, but didn't like to say anything to her. She was in love and Jeff had made a good impression on Mum and Dad.'*

*However, when their relationship became more serious I arranged to meet him and almost pleaded with him to go straight for Judith's sake and not risk spoiling her life. He took it well and assured me he had changed. He made me promise not to say anything to her about his past. I keep promises, but thinking back, this one had an element of blackmail about it. He reminded me of the time a few of us took a car without the owner's consent. I was driving underage; there*

*was an accident and the others protected me. I ran and they took the rap. When he reminded me I knew that if the story came out it could possibly affect my chances of promotion, so I promised. When he and Judith got engaged I was torn between my promise and the truth – but if Jeff was really changed, I told myself, it would be alright.*

*The marriage seemed to go well at first with a lovely wedding in our village church and for a while I felt more at ease about things. Jeff and I had a fairly good relationship then as brothers-in-law. Our mother had given up hope of me marrying and longed for the day when Judith would start a family. That never happened. That's one good thing about Jeff. I think he really loved Judith. He obviously wanted to keep her safe from infection. She was working long nights at the hospital and seemed blind to what Jeff was up to. His women had to be paid for and money had to be found without Judith knowing. It wasn't long before he was back to crime and drug dealing to pay for his other habits. Judith was devastated when he ended up with a fairly long prison sentence.'*

*'I didn't know about an earlier time inside,' said Father Jim*

*But I expect you know the rest of the story Father. Jeff came out and there were reprisals and debts to pay. It all went from bad to worse and next thing he was convicted of manslaughter over an incident down at the railway station. He was getting well through the sentence when he managed to pick up the Covid19 virus. In his abused state his body really didn't stand a chance.*

A Jack Russell terrier appeared at the gate of a nearby house, barking wildly at a black cat he obviously knew well. The cat, unsure of the dog's potential, had retreated under a parked car. After a further spasm of furious barking, Jack Russell lay down in sunshine behind his gate, watching the captive.

*'It was when Jeff was inside the first time that I started feeling guilty. Ronnie continued his confession. 'If only I had warned Judith at the beginning, I could have saved all the heartache. She's been amazing. She stayed faithful to Jeff right to the last. That made my guilt even worse. It was like I was in prison too. I've been in a cage of regret and remorse I couldn't share. I'm just afraid it will spoil our getting closer again.'*

*'Have you thought you could tell Judith now Jeff has died?' Jim observed. 'You could be considered to be free from your promise.'*

*'Yes, I have thought about it now. That's what I wanted to talk to you about.' It was after your sermon Father. You preached a few months ago on Jesus' words, "the truth will set you free". I didn't really hear much of what you said, but those words struck me. It was as though God was telling me I had to give Judith the truth. I knew I couldn't live with myself in the prison of my mind if I didn't.'*

*'It must have taken some courage, Ronnie.'* Father Jim rested a reassuring hand on the suppliant's arm.

*'Yes, it did. But Judith, bless her, made it so easy. She just sat and listened, waiting while I dabbed at tears. She listened without a word, right through until I'd finished. In the end "I'm sorry" was all that was left to say. She looked at*

me. Her eyes were bubbling. "I'm sorry too!" she said. I stared back at her watery smile. "I wish," she said, and then collecting herself she came across to sit beside me. She took my hand and said, "Ronnie. I knew it all. All the time. I so often wanted to talk to you about it. I was pleased that Jeff had you for a friend and I didn't want to spoil that. He needed real friends."

The black cat made another attempt to escape from her prison without bars, but Jack Russel was alert and another round of barking ensued, only to subside after loud shouts from inside his house.

'I felt free,' Ronnie continued. 'It seemed wonderful for a while. Then soon after, Judith's words came to me again and ever since they keep pulsing through my mind. I keep hearing her say "I wish I could have talked to you about it." If only I had given her the chance. All the guilt came back again, chaining itself round me. I was inside again.'

Father Jim waited a few moments before he spoke. 'Ronnie. I wish you had listened to the whole of the sermon on truth and freedom. You would have seen, I hope, that your freedom is not just getting the truth said and shared. That's right. It's good, but there's so much more to it. When I gave that sermon I reminded us of another word of Jesus. He said "I am truth". To be really free you have to face the truth about yourself. Ronnie, I believe true freedom is about our relationship with Jesus – with God and ourselves. It's about living with him. It's like telling your best friend, telling God, about everything that's haunting you. Then if you listen, you will hear him say, like Judith, "Ronnie, I know. I've known all the time. I know how much you regret your part in what happened and I want to lift the weight off you mind. I want you to be free. I'm truth. Your freedom is my gift."' Father Jim sought for an illustration and added .. 'It's a bit like that time when Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" If only he could have known, all the Truth was standing right in front of him!'

Ronnie said nothing for a while. The Truth was as close as the sunshine. A mid-day sun had warmed the green. Jack Russell dozed - just momentarily. Black cat seized her moment. Tail high, she sped, a dark shadow, straight across the brilliant grass, slinking as daringly close to Jack as possible, and away to freedom.

Father Jim laughed. Placing a hand on Ronnie's shoulder, he said. 'Judith's coming. Perhaps we three could pop back into the church and talk to The Truth. Claim our freedom, like?'