

## Prison At Christmas

Sunday, 25 December 2005

This is the first Xmas of the new millennium I've spent with my family in happiness and peace.

The last four were in prison - Belmarsh and then Maidstone.

And the one before that had been tainted by my arrest and the massive publicity that provoked all the other inventions, inflations and exaggerations.

That's how it works when you're a celebrity.

But the lesser known suffer in the same way.

Local publicity about a doctor or teacher or priest has the same effect.

Just on a smaller scale.

And those are the ones I feel sorry for today.

Many of them had their lives, families and careers ruined and this time of year they really miss them.

Because I'm the way I am and also because I'm lucky (or selfish) enough not to have wives, children and others, I spent much of this time comforting and cheering up others when I was inside.

That's probably why one year I got a birthday card signed by 150 other inmates.

And why so many came to my cell and hugged me when I left.

But I feel sad for them.

Don't get me wrong. Not all were innocent - far from it.

Some were guilty of lesser crimes (a moment of mistaken shared passion 30 years earlier gets reinterpreted as rape) but many were totally guilty as convicted.

But does that warrant making them suffer too?

I don't think so.

A civilised society takes care of everyone and that includes the bad - many of whom (and I now speak from experience) are not all bad and, indeed, have tremendous good parts to them. Often one extreme characteristic is reflected by other opposite ones.

I found prison a most rewarding experience, mainly because it countered my self obsession and allowed me to think of others and to try to help them.

Which is, after all, the main reason for Xmas, surely.

After all, Jesus was reputedly the greatest victim of miscarriage of justice ever, wasn't he?