

Setting the Prisoners Free

Padua, Italy 1231



Anthony rose from his prayers as the bell rang for Prime. His knees creaked as he stretched his sore body after the long hours he had spent kneeling. In the pre-dawn dark, he made a slight effort to straighten his rough friar's habit and felt with his feet for his worn leather sandals. Finding them at the foot of his narrow bed, he slipped them on and went to join his fellow friars as they filed past his cell to the chapel. At this time of the morning the only other sounds Anthony usually heard were a few songbirds greeting the day while the city of Padua began to wake. Oddly, today he could hear a steady murmuring and shuffling of feet coming from the streets. Who could be making that noise at this time of day?

After their simple prayer service the friars gathered in the refectory to prepare for the day. No food would be served this morning. It was Lenten season and the friars were fasting. A light meal of bread and beer would be served later in the day. By this time the sun was streaming in the windows and the noise from the streets below had risen to a noticeable level. Friar Angelo went to the window to investigate.

After leaning far out, Angelo pulled his head back inside and exclaimed, 'Friar Anthony, look! I've never seen so many people all in one place before. And they are still coming in the city gates, from all around the countryside. Isn't it wonderful?'

Anthony frowned as he went to join his fellow friar at the window. Angelo was right. The narrow street was full of people and so was the piazza at the end. Not one square inch of cobble-stoned street could be seen. Anthony shook his head.

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Angelo laughed. 'O come now, Brother. Be glad! All these people have come to hear you preach. And not just the poor people. Rich people and merchants. Shopkeepers have shut up their shops. Even the city leaders, and the priests and bishop. All to hear you!'

'Then I won't preach,' Anthony replied, sitting down abruptly on a wooden bench, his olive-skinned face set in determination.

Brother Angelo sobered and put his hands on his hips. 'What do you mean you won't preach? God has given you the gift of speaking and the gift of learning to understand His Word. Why would you refuse to use those gifts?'

Anthony shook his head again, sighing heavily. 'Brother Angelo, if these people have only come to have their ears tickled with fancy words or well-spoken arguments then they should all go home. They should only come to hear God speak, not me. God gives his gifts to be used for his glory, not mine.'

'Of course,' Angelo agreed. 'But how will they hear God's Word except someone preach to them? These people are hungry to hear what you can tell them about God. Otherwise, they would have stayed in their homes and their shops. Go to them, Brother, and feed them.'

Anthony suddenly felt sorry for his hasty answer to Angelo's enthusiasm. 'You are right and I am wrong. Thank you, Brother, for your kind words of rebuke.'

When the wooden doors to the friary were pushed opened, Anthony was amazed at the sea of people.

'How will we get to the church?' he asked aloud.

'I don't think you can preach in the church today, Brother,' Angelo replied. 'Not even a fraction of these people will get to hear you. I think we need to have you stand on the hillside outside the city. Then everyone can gather round to hear you.'

'But how will we get there?' Anthony wanted to know.

'We'll take care of that,' replied Friar John, as he stepped in front of Anthony. John, the tallest of the friars, then directed the rest to

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form a circle around Anthony and walk as a group while John broke open a path for them through the crowds.

‘Make way! Make way for Friar Anthony!’ John called out in a loud voice.

Most of the people parted respectfully, but some tried to press closer to the now-famous preacher. Anthony walked with his head bowed, shrinking away from any who tried to touch him. He was very troubled that all these people thought that he was special.

Once they passed through the city gates and across the bridge over the River Brenta, the group of friars led Anthony up to the top of a hill, scattering a few sheep that were munching on the spring grass. Behind them the crowd surged through the gates and formed a huge semi-circle at the bottom of the hill. A couple of men laden with tools and some boards pushed their way through and began to climb up the gentle slope with their burdens. One of them hastily explained that they could build a small platform for Friar Anthony. Once that was accomplished Anthony climbed up on the platform and looked out over the crowd.

Friar Angelo was right. People dressed in the richest clothing to those wearing the poorest rags stood below him; thousands of them now silent, waiting for him to speak. Anthony had been preaching every morning since Lent had begun the month before. At first only small crowds had gathered in the church. Then the crowds had grown to fill the town piazza. Now they had come from all the surrounding towns and filled the valley below. *Please let me say the right words*, Anthony prayed silently, and then he opened his mouth to preach.

‘Do you think you can continue to live each day without a thought for God?’ Anthony challenged his audience. ‘Do you think that God cannot see what you do, what you say and even what you think? Do you not fear coming face to face with the great Creator, the mighty God, to answer for your sins?’

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No one moved. No one spoke or even whispered. They all stared straight up at the friar who was looking down at them. Anthony had lived in Padua for over four years and knew the people well. He knew that some of the more important families were constantly feuding, trying to cheat each other in business dealings and threatening to harm each other. He knew there was a group of women who lived sinful lives and weren't even ashamed of it. He knew that some of the city officials took bribes regularly and some of the bankers charged such high interest rates that they had driven many to poverty. He knew there were thieves in the audience and people who regularly lied in the courts for money. And he knew the poor were despised and ill-treated. Anthony knew that these people needed God's message of judgment and hope.

So Anthony told them how their sinful behaviour looked to a holy God who is perfect, warning them of God's anger at sin. And then he told them of God's love and how Jesus, God's Son, had come to die for their sins.

'That was a dark day when Jesus died, loaded down with all your sins and mine. How he suffered! And not for his sin, for he was sinless! He did it for you and for me. Then God turned that darkness into light when he raised his Son from the grave. Death was defeated and hope is now offered to all who will receive it.'

The crowd began to stir. Some were weeping at the description of Jesus' death and resurrection. But Anthony didn't stop there.

'You must repent of your sin. You must confess all that you have done wrong to your heavenly Father so you may have forgiveness. You who constantly fight with others must confess your anger. You who are greedy must confess that you have made an idol of your wealth. You who lie and scheme must humble yourself before God and ask for his forgiveness.'

Now many people were weeping and some had fallen to their knees with their heads bowed. But Anthony still wasn't finished.

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‘Repentance and confession are the first steps. But it is not enough to ask for and receive God’s great gift of forgiveness. Your whole life must change. You can no longer sin against your loving Heavenly Father or against your brother or neighbour. Your lives must show that you belong to God. You must turn from your wicked ways and obey God’s commandments.’

By the time Anthony had finished speaking, most of the people were full of remorse for the way they had been living. So Anthony encouraged those who wanted to confess their sins to come forward and he and other priests from the surrounding churches met with them. For the rest of that day Anthony sat and listened and prayed with each of the people who knelt down before him. And after each confession he advised them to show their remorse by making restitution for their sin. A thief had to return either the item he had stolen or the money to pay for it. Those who were feuding must make up their quarrels and promise to help one another. Those who had oppressed the poor by charging high interest rates must lower their rates and share their profits with the poor. And so it went on until the sun began to set and Anthony was feeling faint with hunger.

At last he and the rest of the priests and the friars were free to return to the city. As they entered the friary, Anthony saw Podesta Stefano Badoari pacing impatiently in the courtyard, his fur-lined woollen cloak flying out behind him with every turn. As a city official, he was used to having people wait for him, not the other way around. But when he saw Anthony his scowl changed to a smile and he came forward to greet the famous preacher.

‘Friar,’ Stefano said as he bowed to Anthony. ‘I’ve been waiting a long time to speak with you.’

‘I had to care for the people,’ Anthony replied. ‘What did you want?’

Stefano looked at the group of curious friars. ‘I’d like to make a confession,’ he said with some embarrassment.

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Anthony almost scolded him for not lining up with the crowds earlier, but instead motioned for the Podesta to follow him to the chapel. After Anthony was seated, Stefano hitched up his long tunic to kneel down and began to confess his sins. Once he finished he rose quickly and turned to leave.

‘Wait,’ said Anthony, not entirely convinced that the Podesta was serious about what he had just done. ‘What changes will you make in your life now?’

‘Changes?’ Stefano asked. The important man was genuinely puzzled.

Anthony frowned and then stood up. ‘Come with me,’ he said and he led the way back out of the chapel and the friary. Together the friar and the city leader walked down the stone streets to the city prison.

‘What are we doing here?’ Stefano asked nervously. ‘Surely you don’t want to go in there!’

That was exactly what Anthony wanted to do and he called to the guard to bring a torch. With the flaming length of wood held high Anthony walked through the iron gate that the guard held open and motioned to Stefano to follow. Gathering his fine woollen cloak around him, the man stepped carefully through the entrance.

Almost immediately Stefano let go of his cloak and raised his arm to cover his nose. The nasty, dank odours of the dirty dungeon together with all those people who had not bathed for a long time made him feel ill. As they walked through the prison, Anthony held the torch so they could look into the cells. Peering over his sleeve, Stefano could see that each cell was crowded, some with whole families in them: young children, parents and grandparents. The people shied away from the brightness, not used to light and ashamed to be seen. And it was cold. Everyone huddled together trying to stay warm with the few blankets they had been given.

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Anthony stopped and turned to the city magistrate. 'Look!' he commanded.

Stefano bristled. 'But they broke the law,' he replied defensively. 'They belong there.'

'This is a debtors' prison,' Anthony stated and Stefano nodded. 'These people were charged exorbitant interest rates when they fell on hard times. When they couldn't pay their debts the bankers had them arrested and brought here.'

'Of course,' Stefano agreed. 'That's the law. If you can't pay your debts you go to prison until the debt is paid.'

'And how do they pay the debt when they are in prison?' Anthony asked, his anger rising.

Stefano shrugged. 'It's the law.'

'And who makes the laws in Padua?' Anthony demanded impatiently.

Stefano's eyes widened. 'You want me to change the law? But what about their debts? If they were foolish enough to borrow money they shouldn't have, or spend more than they made, why shouldn't they be in prison?'

'Because it's unjust! They're not criminals, only poor people. Our Lord commanded us to care for the poor, not imprison them!'

Anthony led the troubled Podesta out of the prison, handing the torch back to the waiting guard. Turning to Stefano, Anthony explained his idea. 'Podesta, you have been given the power to make just laws. Instead of sending people to prison for debts, why not have them turn over whatever they have to the bankers in payment. That way the debt is paid and people are free to begin again.'

Stefano thought for a moment. 'It's never been done that way before, but I think that's a good idea. I will have the new law drawn up tomorrow. Thank you, Friar. I think I see now what you mean by our lives changing.'

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‘Good,’ Anthony replied. ‘God has shown you compassion by forgiving your sins. Now you go and show that same compassion to the people of this city.’

The following week the new law was passed and read out to the people of Padua.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. At the request of the venerable Friar (and holy confessor) Anthony of the Order of Friars Minor it was established and ordained that henceforth no one is to be held in prison for any pecuniary debt or debts, whether past, present or future, if he shall have agreed to relinquish his possessions; and that is to be understood both of debtors and of their guarantors. Furthermore, if any renunciation or cession or alienation shall have been fraudulently made by the debtors or the guarantors, this renunciation or cession shall not be valid nor have legal effect nor work to the prejudice of the creditors. And if such fraud cannot be proved to have taken place, the case shall rest with the judgment of the Podesta.

That day the prison doors were opened and all those who had been imprisoned for debt were released. Most of them came to the friary to thank Anthony for his part in making the new law. He refused their praise and instead directed them to God.

‘You have been given a second chance.’ Anthony told them. ‘Use it wisely. Honour God, repent of your sins and live lives that bring glory to him.’

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Anthony died later that year, much to the sorrow of the city of Padua. But they had listened carefully to his teaching and preaching and the city became a more peaceful, well-ordered place to live.

Anthony was only one of the many men and women that God has used through the centuries to teach and preach for him. Let’s read about some others in the Bible that God called to carry out this special task of speaking God’s words.