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White Church (4) II "Church in Prison"

The prisoners who were not allowed to worship together in a Jackson church were certainly not allowed to live together in a Jackson jail. At the City Jail they were placed in segregated cells. But they could communicate with each other; sympathetic Black trustees carried written and verbal messages from the white women to the Black women to the ministers and back again. Sometimes they sang Freedom Songs, sometimes hymns. Every day we brought in "CARE" packages prepared by Tougaloo students -- food, candy, fruit, clothing, and books. One afternoon Mrs. Ruth Beittel, wife of the college President, went to the jail and asked to see her students and their friends. Mrs. Beittel, a tall woman whose dark hair was partly white, approached the policemen with her air of innocence and Quaker-like ways. She knew there was little chance of seeing the prisoners but she acted shocked. In her hands she carried a bowl of beautiful fresh flowers for the prisoners. When told that prisoners did not normally receive flowers, she presented the bouquet to the desk sergeant to cheer everyone up.

Another visitor to the jail was Dr. Ralph Bunche, the Black United Nations officer. He was giving a speech at Tougaloo for the United Nations day. The jailed students sent him a note and he came to see them. But he was not admitted to the prison. In his speech at Tougaloo (to an integrated audience that included a few daring souls from Millsaps College and even some local white public school teachers and Dr. and Mrs. Ashmore from the Methodist newspaper) and to a press conference, Dr. Bunche criticized conditions in Mississippi. He said, "White Jackson of today has the morality of a jungle,"⁴ and endorsed all forms of protest and demonstrations as being necessary in the civil rights struggle. A few days before this Gov. Ross Barnett had announced that "United Nations Day" would not be observed in Mississippi but urged citizens to make the day a kind of America First remembrance. Mr. Bunche drew applause and laughter from his Tougaloo audience when he commented that no one should criticize the Governor for his hostility to the United Nations but they all should be glad that on this one day out of the year Mississippi did honor America.

Governor Ross Barnett was never a man to stay silent long. The next day he issued his

denunciation of Bunche, the United Nations, Communism, and atheism. One of the things that was so upsetting about the United Nations, as the governor so courageously and clearly proved, was that the UN was not Christian. The Governor found nothing ironic in the fact that twelve people were in his jails for trying to worship at churches of Jackson at the very time Barnett made his defense of Freedom and Christianity. In a prepared statement released to the press, the Governor made a clear presentation of what most white Mississippians thought about themselves and the rest of the world:

Wednesday night of this week, at Tougaloo College, Ralph Bunche, a Negro United Nations diplomat, blantly (sic*) slandered Mississippi in a most abrupt manner and with abject disrespect for her people and institutions.

For a man to come to Mississippi and to speak out for pro-Communist principles is something the people of Mississippi will long remember in a long chain of insults that our state has had perpetrated against it.

In his speech, Ralph Bunche was upholding atheism and atheistic organizations. It is time to recognize that the UN is a completely atheistic organization and this is one of the main reasons that I have refused to issue a proclamation declaring UN day in the sovereign Christian state of Mississippi. There is no sign of Christianity in the towering structures of the UN in New York City. It is known to have a meditation room that is comparable to an oriental dungeon.

The people of Mississippi and the people of America must know that while Mississippi struggles to uphold its Christian principles, men like the Negro pro-Communist Ralph Bunche are attempting to literally tear apart at its heart-strings our Christian heritage in the United States of America.

If Ralph Bunche is as interested in stopping turmoil, strife and torture in Africa, Cuba, South America and other places as he is in trying to reform people socially, why does he not stay on his job and quit meddling in the affairs of Mississippi?⁵

Considering everything, Ralph Bunche was probably lucky that the Jackson police just refused to let him visit the prisoners in jail — instead of placing him in jail as one more prisoner.

The Tougaloo students sent out the request for Mr. Bunche to visit them; he tried. The Methodist ministers in jail sent messages to the Methodist Bishop and the District Superintendent to visit them, requesting a service of Holy Communion. The Bishop and the District Superintendent refused to visit the men in prison. "When saw we thee in prison . . .?"

To my surprise I was allowed to visit the ministers in prison. Some decent police officer made the decision; I had taken for granted that my request to visit the prisoners would be turned down with curses or laughter. But the police were not as uniformly evil as I sometimes

imagined. Perhaps it was just the irony of the situation — that I should be visiting the prisoners instead of being a prisoner myself.

In the cellblock with the ministers we talked of the state of the church and the world, of God and man, and laughed at the absurdity of so much that was happening to us all. And we had a celebration of Holy Communion. I was asked to lead the service. The cell was our chapel. On the low ceiling above us we could read the names of those who had been imprisoned — for freedom, for faith, before us. Recent names from the demonstrations of the 1963 summer, before the death of Medgar Evers. Earlier battles and names of soldiers — students, other ministers on the 1961 Freedom Rides. Sometimes a name was familiar to one of the Chicago men; many of the names were familiar to me. Scrawled among the names of these men — and of all the regular lonely prisoners and more traditional criminals — were simple messages, slogans of freedom in the Movement sense with the slogans of freedom, of "Ten more days to go," of the petty thief and alcoholic who slept here last month; verses or lines from Freedom songs barely legible under the more recent pornography — graffiti no future archaeologist could ever decipher. We commented on these names and hopes and fears written around us; I told some stories about some of the names I recognized. It was easy to move into a spirit of worship; the recent past and the ancient past both seemed close. Our altar-Communion table was the long, simple metal-covered all-purpose table the prisoners used for their meals and their card games. One of the men brought out a hard biscuit, left over from the meager breakfast. (I had advised the men to always hoard a piece of bread or something from their breakfast in case they were hungry later in the day.) This became our Communion loaf. The Communion wine (smuggled in from the outside world) was poured into our chalice — a prisoner's battered tin drinking cup provided by Jerry Forshey. I read the words we all knew; we joined in the prayers; we sang together, we had silence together; we broke bread together, we shared the cup of wine, the Body and the Blood. We felt unity, and strength, and humility, and love. There was a kind of awe, as

though our little band of five prisoners (and I always thought of myself as a prisoner) were the only people present in some immense cathedral, kneeling before some small crucifix in a tiny chapel on the side aisle, waiting, in no hurry, to walk back out into the great building around us. We knew strength and we knew peace.

And Jerry Forshey stole the chalice, the water cup that is the legal property of the Jackson City Jail, hiding it under his clothing as he left the prison, taking it back to Chicago. No doubt this missing cup was the final proof the police needed to know those men were not real ministers.

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