

A former parishioner shows me the gospel

His life had emerged from chaos, but he didn't have a bad word for anyone.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [September 13, 2017](#) issue



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Twenty-three years ago, when I was in my first pastoral appointment, there was an 11-year-old boy who started coming to my church at the suggestion of a teacher at

his middle school. He was an isolated, disconsolate figure who didn't mix easily and took a greedy share of the cookies after worship. After he had been coming a few months, funds were found for him to participate in a parish weekend retreat.

By Saturday morning, the complaints were raining down. He was rude. He was grabbing food. He was bullying the younger children. The adults finally had to talk to each other about it; it was one of those parish conversations where the pastor doesn't get a casting vote. The teacher through whose influence the boy had first come to church pointed out that, being brought up solely by his young and temperamental father, he was a troubled boy looking for security. Allowances were made, patience was maintained, and gradually the lad began to find his feet.

Nine months later at a special evening service he was baptized. His father was not there. His mother and brother, living across town, weren't there either. But about 40 people were, and each member of the congregation was invited to describe what they most valued about being members of that church. One said friendship, another said acceptance, a third said trust. When the boy was asked the same question his narrow, fixed frown broke, for once, into a smile, and he replied, "You didn't throw me out after that weekend."

That moment was so precious to me that I wrote about it in a book I published ten years later. It said everything about baptism: new community, new story, new beginning, and abiding, patient, enduring, long-suffering love. Rather like a vacation photograph, my memory of that boy ossified around that moment, that night, that vision of church.

Earlier this year I received an email that said, "I'm the boy from that weekend." Like a flash I knew who it was. But now I was reckoning with a grown man. He told me about the intervening years. He'd been homeless: "It wasn't all doom 'n' gloom. I actually regard those days as some of the best days of my life. I became a graffiti artist and I'm pretty proud of some of my work. After my dad chucked me out his drinking and depression got worse. After about 15 painful years in and out of hospital he finally passed away from premature-onset alcohol-related dementia in September 2015."

My young friend now had a partner and helped raise her two children. He qualified as a personal trainer but had damaged his foot when pursuing his graffiti career. He taught himself the guitar and played in a band.

We spend a lot of time complaining about the burden of email. But once in a while a message floats down from the ether like a dove descending from a cloud. I was heading to Scotland a month later and realized I could stop and see him on my return journey. And there he was. Bigger, wisps of beard—but most of all, the mistrustful frown that once was seared on his face had healed into a broad-cheeked smile, a self-deprecating chuckle, a generous sense of wholehearted attention.

He wasn't poor anymore. His girlfriend wasn't badly off. I said, "You've chosen well." He said, "I think she likes a bit o' rough." After a couple of false starts he'd settled into a job working for a bank, helping others deal with debt repayments and find their feet, just as he'd had to do in his younger days.

Then came the unforgettable moment. I said, "Why've you brought a backpack?" He said, "Because I've got something I want to show you." He gently, lovingly, opened the backpack and brought out a scrapbook. The untidy writing and endearing titles made it immediately clear it came from his childhood: perhaps the only relic from that troubled era, and lovingly cherished. I was absorbed in a baby photo and a family tree. But he rushed ahead to the middle pages.

He pointed to a letter. My eyes widened with amazement. I recognized my wife's handwriting: "Sam and I are in Liverpool, and last night we saw half the Liverpool soccer team in a restaurant, so we got their autographs for you because we know you support them." And, on the opposite page, there they were. Six treasured autographs, preserved through seasons of struggle. Phil Babb, David James, Steve McManaman, Jamie Redknapp—the great Liverpool team of the nineties.

Out of the ruins and rubble of his neglected and deprived childhood, here he held this precious document, like an epistle of hope from the caverns of exile. A gesture of kindness is never wasted. In the words of Ignatius, "that which is done for love becometh wholly fruitful."

Here was this gentleman, whose life had emerged from chaos, and who showed me it's possible to live without bitterness. He didn't have a bad word for anyone. "I guess life was too much for my dad. Yes, my mum can be difficult, but I try to call her every couple of days. My brother—I think they had to separate us as children but we're the best of mates now. I understood you had to move away and you live in another world now, but we had some good times back then, didn't we?"

He's coming to stay in a few months, with his girlfriend and the band. I'm excited. I don't know how to say to him: "I gave you some autographs. But you—you showed me forgiveness and resurrection; in short, the gospel. How can I ever thank you?"

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