



Elizabeth Fry 1780-1845

In 1780 Elizabeth (Betsy) Gurney was born in Norwich, England. She was an English prison reformer, social reformer and, as a Quaker, a Christian philanthropist. She has sometimes been referred to as the “angel of prisons.”

Elizabeth became a Christian at the age of 18 when she was deeply moved by the preaching of William Savery, an American Quaker. So deep had been her conversion that she had wept in the carriage most of the way home where she confided in her diary, “Today I have felt that there is a God.”

Motivated to serve God, she started a Sunday school with one boy. It quickly grew to eighty. She provided the poor with food and clothing and read to them from the Scriptures. When banker Joseph Fry proposed marriage the following year, she hesitated, praying for the Lord’s direction. They were married and had eleven children, but only ten children survived to adulthood.

In 1817, her brother-in-law Thomas Fowell Buxton, a Member of Parliament, suggested she visit the women’s section of Newgate prison. Crime was on the rise. English prisons were overcrowded. Perhaps some remedy was possible.

Friends cautioned Elizabeth not to go. The female prisoners were so violent that they would snatch clothes off visitors' backs, heckle them, and steal their valuables. The governor of Newgate himself dared not approach them. But the mother of ten determined to take action. This was just the challenge she craved. Had not the Lord commanded us to remember those in prison?

Nothing had prepared her for what she found. Hundreds of drunken, rag-clad women crowded into four rooms built for half their number. Innocents awaited trial side by side with hardened prostitutes and thieves. Children, whose only fault was to have nowhere else to go, might have envied barnyard animals their stables. Babies born in prison squalled in nakedness.

Life behind bars for women was cruel. Bathing utensils were scarce. Lice swarmed in clothes and hair. The daily ration of food was one small loaf of bread per person. There were no medicines. Sick women were dumped on dirty straw without so much as a bed. Death by "prison fever" (Typhus) was common.

Elizabeth made her appeal through the babies. Surely the women desired better than this squalor for their little ones? Indeed, they did! But they had no income, no education, no discipline, no hope. Elizabeth promised help and they listened, recognizing her plain dress as a religious uniform.

Drawing on her own resources and the funds of others, Elizabeth gathered supplies and formed committees. She organized classes in knitting and sewing. Soon the women

were able to sell their piecework, earning a little money for soap and food. After fierce haggling, she obtained a room for a school. The best educated among them was designated to teach. Each day Fry read aloud to them from the Bible, hoping that the salvation story would sink into their minds and convert them. A few sought Christ's pardon and lived with new peace.

The Quakers convinced the prison authorities to appoint matrons in the place of men. With steely determination, the matrons enforced rules, which the prisoners themselves voted on. Elizabeth had them elect leaders to keep order among themselves. Soon, Newgate's female wards evidenced unprecedented decorum. The transformation was so extraordinary that world leaders heard of it and consulted Elizabeth concerning their prison problems.

Queen Victoria took a close interest in her work and the two women met several times. Victoria gave her money to help with her charitable work. In her journal, Victoria wrote that she considered Fry a "very superior person". It is claimed that Victoria, who was forty years younger than Elizabeth Fry, might have modeled herself on this woman who successfully combined the roles of mother and public figure.

Elizabeth's reforms prompted other advances. Theodore Fliedner, a young German pastor, imported her ideas to Germany. To care for needy ill women, he trained nurses. Elizabeth, impressed by the idea, founded the Institute of Nursing Sisters to work among the poor. The nurses were given rudimentary training. One of these sisters nursed Elizabeth in her last illness. Elizabeth died at age 65.

Elizabeth Fry's actions, spurred by faith, changed the lives of countless prison women. She had become the voice for prisoners who could not speak for themselves. She was a voice for Christina reform and compassion. Indeed, she was an "angel of prisons."