

FROM RIVER THIEF TO RESCUER OF SOULS: THE AMAZING STORY OF JERRY McAULEY

In New York City's Greely Square (near the intersection of Sixth Avenue and 32nd Street) stands an old memorial water fountain, now plugged up and unused, a relic of an earlier era. (Originally, there had been an even larger monument, constructed in 1885, complete with water trough for thirsty horses.) Today's modest memorial bears a simple inscription:

To the memory of JERRY McAULEY
I will give to him that is athirst
of the fountain of the water of life freely

Who was Jerry McAuley? He was a trophy of the power of God's saving grace, a wayward man whom God reclaimed and used to bring others like him to a new life in Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah McAuley was born in County Kerry, Ireland, in 1839. He was unschooled and did not have much of a home life. (His father was a counterfeiter who ran away; his mother may have spent time in jail.) At age 13 he was sent to New York City in care of a married sister living there.

As a lad he fell into bad company and settled in the City's notorious crime- and vice-ridden Fourth Ward. His main occupation was that of river thief: He and his friends went out in a boat stealing at night; they sold their loot in the day, then squandered the proceeds on clothes and drinks. As he later described his life at that time:

I had no fear for any man living. I was a born thief. Stealing came natural and easy. A bigger nuisance and loafer never stepped above ground. I made good hauls. It was fair and easy to board a vessel and take what you pleased. The Fourth Ward belonged to my kind.

Falsely accused of highway robbery, he was sentenced in January 1857 to 15 ½ years in Sing Sing prison, about 30 miles up the Hudson River. Amidst dismal, unsanitary surroundings, he at first behaved himself, but then his health began to fail; he became restless and gloomy and was subjected to harsh discipline.

One Sunday, about five years into his prison sentence, he went to a chapel service and discovered what looked like a familiar face on the platform. It was Orville "Awful" Gardner, a former crime associate of his. At the service, Gardner gave a stirring testimony of how God had changed his life. Jerry, listening, was moved to tears. He went back to his cell and opened the Bible he had been given when he entered Sing Sing. (He had put that Bible in his cell's ventilator on the day he had entered prison, where it had remained until then.) Starting from the beginning of the Book, he read page after page. The Bible's message gripped his heart and mind until one evening, on his knees and

under great conviction, he felt God's merciful, forgiving presence: "My son, thy sins, which are many, are forgiven."

Jerry became a changed man. He turned into such a model prisoner that in March 1864 he was pardoned and set free. Once outside, however, there was no one in the Christian community who came alongside to help him. As he later testified, "If I had found a single Christian friend at that time it would have saved me years of misery." He fell back into a life of crime and drinking. He even had a live-in girlfriend, Maria Fahy.

With the help of some Christian friends (one of whom once pawned his own coat and gave the proceeds to Jerry so he would not go out stealing one night), Jerry McAuley was brought back from his waywardness. He found honest work. Even though he occasionally lapsed into drinking binges, his Christian friends encouraged him not to give up; he finally became sober. Maria, his girlfriend, eventually underwent a conversion experience of her own; the two were married in early 1872.

One day at work, Jerry received a vision of helping the down-and-out destitute poor of his old neighborhood. He shared his vision with Christians at camp meetings (Sea Cliff on Long Island; Sing Sing on the Hudson; Ocean Grove in New Jersey) he and his wife attended in the summer of 1872, and he was able to raise about 450 dollars for the project.

With that sum, Mr. and Mrs. McAuley began their ministry in October of that year at 316 Water Street. The work caught on. Jerry's down-to-earth messages resonated with the down-and-out people and others who came in from the neighborhood; souls were converted. His remarkable ministry attracted others from outside the neighborhood, churchgoers as well as the curious. George Kennan, the explorer of Siberia, spent many evenings at the Water Street mission in 1876 and later called it "one of the most remarkable things to be seen at that time in the city of New York or any other city."

Jerry would encourage his destitute listeners to come to Christ, Who not only offered them a wonderful home in the hereafter, but a help to improve their here-and-now:

Just look at me now. I have everything a man could want. I have plenty to eat, a good home and good clothes, and I am respected and trusted. Think of it: Jerry McAuley, the biggest bum that used to hang around this ward turned into a respectable citizen. . . . This is what Jesus has done for me—made a man of me—and He will do it for you too if you let Him.

Jerry and Maria, having established this mission work on sound footing, eventually left and founded another mission further uptown in January 1882. Jerry was in failing health, however; he suffered from tuberculosis he had apparently contracted while imprisoned at Sing Sing. He died in September 1884.

His funeral was held at the old Broadway Tabernacle (around Sixth Avenue and 34th Street), then one of the largest churches in the nation. A huge crowd gathered for the

service, packing the church and overflowing into the street in such numbers that police had to keep the Sixth Avenue streetcar tracks from being blocked. Jerry McAuley's humble ministry had touched many lives, and the people had come to pay their respects. It was reportedly one of the largest funerals for a private individual ever held in New York up to that time.

Mrs. McAuley continued in rescue mission work until she retired in 1892. She remarried with Bradford Lee Gilbert, a noted architect of that period. She died in 1919.

The original mission they established is still in operation. Now known as the New York City Rescue Mission and located at 90 Lafayette Street, near Chinatown, it continues to serve the needs of the destitute and the needy. They could use our help. If you feel led by God to help them in their work , you can send your gifts to New York City Rescue Mission; Canal Street Station; P.O. Box 275; New York, NY 10013-0275.

Adapted from Arthur Bonner, *Jerry McAuley and His Mission*, revised edition (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers).