

Burnley's Pastor Mick - from dangerous drug dealer to lifesaver

2 days ago

By Ed Thomas

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Two weeks ago, millions of people watched Pastor Mick Fleming and Father Alex Frost on BBC News, feeding and clothing the poor in Burnley. Many were moved by their work, and since then they have received more than £250,000 in donations.

But Mick's life wasn't always about love and care. He was once a dangerous, violent drug user and dealer, covering up painful childhood memories. Until a single moment changed everything.

It was 10am, in a rough industrial area, far away from his home

county of Lancashire. Mick Fleming, in his late 30s, was waiting outside a gym for someone to emerge. Mick was in a stolen car - a dark blue Vauxhall Cavalier - with the engine running. This was going to have to be quick.

"There was no sun, it was a dull dark day, I knew his routine, everything about him," he says. "He was another drug dealer, just like me."

Mick was a well-established underworld fixer in the North West of England. He was the man others would ring to clear drug debts, and by the time he got the call it meant someone was heavily in debt to equally dangerous people. They were about to get hurt, and badly.

"My gun was in a plastic carrier bag, on the passenger seat, wrapped tight. You could see the shape of the gun, no DNA or prints would be left behind. Six bullets, spring loaded, it never fails."

He didn't have to wait long.

"I watched him walk out of the gym. But this time was different. He had two kids with him, two young children, blonde girls, around five years old.

"I got out of the car, and walked, my hand reaching into the plastic. But then I looked again at the children, again at their faces, their blonde hair, innocent kids.

Mick describes in detail seeing a blinding light coming from one of the children's hands.

"It was white, brilliant white. For 15 seconds I couldn't see," he says. "It was like looking into the sun and I was paralysed by it."

Mick doesn't know what really happened to him that day, but one

thing he is certain of - this was the moment that changed his life forever.

"I collapsed, then struggled back to the car. I felt sick, I was shaking, sweating, heart beating fast. I could hear my pulse as if it was in my head. I didn't know what was happening to me."

And then, he says, he pleaded with God to help him. But nothing happened.

The only thing piercing the silence, he says, was Johnny Cash randomly playing on the radio. The song was Man in Black.

"I wear the black in mournin' for the lives that could have been," Cash sang.

"I felt like I was the Man in Black. By this point in my life, I had been arrested for attempted murder, kidnapping, firearms offences. I wanted to die, I'd had enough."

Mick took the gun, pressed it to his chin, still wrapped in plastic, and pulled the trigger.

"I broke down, the tears would not stop falling, and I started to feel sick again. I was retching and I punched and smashed the car radio, my hand started to bleed.

"In that moment I was seeing myself for who I really was. I hadn't cried for nearly 30 years. The last time I cried like this was when I was 11 years old. Sitting in that car it was like I was crying for him, that child, the boy I was, and the life I could have had."

Mick was suffering a complete breakdown, his violent past catching up with him, the end of decades of pain.



When Ed Thomas met Pastor Mick

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Mick was born during England's 1966 World Cup-winning year into a Burnley working-class family. His Dad was a window cleaner, who had contracts to clean factories around the town, and, as Mick describes him, a "proper Labour-supporting man".

"It wasn't poverty, but it wasn't luxury. It was a strict upbringing. We were forced to go to Church, we couldn't step out of line, it was old-school discipline."

But everything changed over two days at the beginning of February 1977. On the first day of the month, Mick was attacked by a stranger in the park on the way to school. He was just 11 years old.

"I was in turmoil," he says. "I'd been sexually abused, and I couldn't cope."

Mick realised he needed help, but first he had to tell his Mum and Dad.

He walked out of his room where he had been crying, went downstairs, and looked his Mum straight in the eye. But what happened next was both cruel and extraordinary.

"Before I could open my mouth, the front door opened. It was my dad. He shouted, 'Your sister is dead.' It was brutal, just so direct. I remember the moment of pure silence, quickly pierced by the screams from my mother, howling like an animal."

Mick had been very close to his 20-year-old sister Ann. He says she looked out for him, gave him money, and bought him clothes.

Ann, he later discovered, had had a heart attack and died in her father's arms at the doors to Burnley hospital.

"My dad was a tough man, but this must have been horrific for him. He watched the doctors and nurses trying desperately to resuscitate my sister."

Mick told me that this was the moment his childhood ended. A life disfigured in 48 hours.

"Drugs were my solution, and that was my introduction. The next 30 years were hell. Pure hell. I would use any drug, and always alcohol."

But with his dependency came criminality. At just 14 he was dealing drugs. People in Burnley, though, just thought he was self-employed, working out of town. The truth was very different.

"I was a drug runner and debt collector. I was good at my job. I'd hurt people. I wasn't bothered. I was arrested for murder twice, armed robbery three times, countless firearms offences.

"I was making crazy money, but there was nothing glamorous about this. I was lost, trying to keep my pain down, hide it. None of it

worked."

In the 90s, there were two serious attempts on Mick's life, one a drive-by at traffic lights, the other a home invasion that went wrong.

"Criminality was my world. I didn't know how to work in a factory - I couldn't be normal. I'd see people going to work with sandwich boxes and I didn't want that. I wanted to stand out.

"Drugs were a constant around me - my best friend died from a drinking session aged 16. He choked on his own vomit, my other friend suffered a methadone overdose at 17.

"I became hardened to death. I always believed in God, but I also believed God didn't think too much of me."

Mick was also leading a double life - he had a wife and three children. But the years of lies took their toll. Mick's mum had to step in to take care of the children, to prevent social services getting involved.

He says that during this "horrendous" time his home was often raided by police looking for drugs and guns.

"All this destroyed my mental health, too. I started taking more drugs. I was now a very dangerous man collecting debts, hurting people. I never expected to live long - genuinely I always believed I'd die young. I didn't want to live, I didn't know how to change."

It was 2009 when Mick found himself outside that gym with a gun wrapped in plastic. What happened in the car, the call to God for help, the attempt to take his own life, triggered an intervention by the authorities.

"Within 24 hours, I was sectioned under The Mental Health Act. My

new home was Burnley psychiatric unit. I had nothing but the clothes I arrived in."

Strangely, Mick says, he felt at home in the unit. The patients made him feel loved and cared for. They gave him things - cigarettes, clothes, trainers.

"There were schizophrenic people in there who weren't treated, those who self-harmed, really ill people, the most vulnerable alcoholics. But these people were giving me essentials, because they saw I had nothing. I was overwhelmed."

It was here that Mick met Pastor Tony, who used to visit the unit. Together they prayed and talked, and Mick says he began to feel emotions again. He started helping others. It was the end of a troubled life, and the beginning of a new one of hope.

A chance meeting with a tutor at the University of Manchester led to a degree in theology. It was tough at first - without much of an education Mick struggled to read and write, and was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia. He failed his first year, but with hard work and support from the university, he eventually achieved a 2:1 degree.

"I never drank or touched a drug again. It wasn't easy, it was horrendous. But it was my path to God - and all the way to 2020 and the pandemic. I had no idea of how much I'd be needed and how once again I'd be overwhelmed by suffering and pain."

Today you'll find the man now known as Pastor Mick, with the charity Church on the Street Ministries, in Burnley, with those most in need - the homeless, the drug users, the hungry. During the coronavirus pandemic he's never been needed more.

I met him on a crisp, late November evening in an almost-empty car

park in the centre of town. It was only 6pm but it was quiet - a silence we've become used to during lockdowns.

Pastor Mick began to talk about the struggles he's witnessed this year.

"Politicians say that it's a leveller, this coronavirus. It's a lie, because if you're poor you've got no chance," he tells me.

Across a dual carriageway, in the distance, they started to arrive. First the homeless, some carrying their belongings in bin bags. Then the users, from those on heroin to those dependent on alcohol. There were around 20 people here, from their 20s and upwards.

Then more people came - some in cars, most on foot. At least 40 people were here now, of all ages. Many were desperate, huddling around two cars belonging to the volunteers, looking for warmth and food.

"There's no need to push - there's plenty," shouted Kaz, a friend of Pastor Mick's, and a volunteer.

The boots of two cars opened and the waft of the hot food hits you first. It was hard not to notice the hands grabbing what they could, a slight push and a shove. Some were so in need, their freezing fingers burned as they touched the food, but it didn't stop them and not a single tray was dropped.

It didn't take long for the hot food to be snapped up. There was more though - pre-prepared food bags for people to take home. At the back of the queue there was a gentle complaint. "There's no chocolate in mine." "I think they've all got chocolate in brother," said Mick. "Well mine hasn't." "I'm not Asda," Pastor Mick retorted with a smile.

Most here were respectful and thankful, but there was also a sense of community. It's hard to believe this is happening in the UK today.

Burnley is one of the most deprived local authority districts in England. What's more, the local council's spending power was reduced at a greater rate than the English average between 2010/11 and 2018/19.

There's a young couple here who are struggling - she is in a wheelchair, he is her carer. They say they're having difficulties getting food and money to get by. "A couple of day's food makes a massive difference to us," they tell me.

Another car boot opened, this time it was full of clothes. It was now a more frantic scene as people searched through it. One woman in her 30s told me that she suffered from depression and the pandemic had made it worse. "If it hadn't been for all these, I'd basically be dead."

Pastor Mick was approached by a man in tears. "My foot is white, Pastor Mick, I'm in so much pain," he said. "Don't worry brother, we'll get you sorted." Mick guided the man in his 20s to two volunteer nurses, positioned away from the group for privacy.

After 25 minutes, the initial rush had calmed. "The need is absolutely colossal," said Mick. "You've seen people who are working who can't make ends meet tonight. We've got volunteer NHS nurses for those who can't access primary care - some of these guys are sleeping on the concrete."

It was the day after the car park session, and Pastor Mick was in his white van, driving through the hilly mill town's stunning scenery, from the sandstone terraces to the prefab bungalows in the villages on the edge of Burnley. The van was packed with food, bread, biscuits, milk,

chocolate.

His phone never stopped. A 10-year old boy was asking for a freezer on behalf of his mum. Mick was on it. A single parent needed a bed for her child. Mick would sort it.

He visited around 10 homes - and he does this every day, seven days a week.

"I go into houses and I sometimes have children ripping the bags open as I am carrying them through the door." Pastor Mick's voice started to falter, the emotion was too much. "And it's not alright that, and it wasn't as bad as that before the virus."

Not far from the centre of Burnley, Mick visited the imposing Gothic-style St Matthew's Anglican Church to see Father Alex Frost. They've worked together since the pandemic hit. The room next to the altar is now a makeshift food bank.

"The level of need here in Burnley at the moment, I think, is unprecedented," said Fr Alex.

"I think the people feel forgotten about. It is about money and numbers, and statistics. We can't rely on a food bank, it doesn't seem right, it doesn't seem modern day Britain. But it is."

Once Mick stocked up his van, he was back on the road.

First up was Pete, his wife, and son. Debt has crippled them. An issue with the family's benefits meant payday loans and financial crisis.

"I had to take loans out, so we could eat and pay us bills," said Pete.

"We were in debt for well over a thousand pound. Thanks to Pastor

Mick, we've got it down now to two, three hundred pounds. My son suffers from depression from it, and so does my wife."

Mick was off again. This time to see Viv. She's 55, lives alone and suffered terribly with her mental health during lockdown.

"I stopped eating for about a week, I just ended up collapsing on my bathroom floor and I were there for, I think, a full day," she tells me. "Hyperthermia had kicked in with everything with me."

Viv had only recently got out of hospital, and was painfully thin. Mick had got some high-energy nutrition drinks to drop off.

Living alone during this time has brought back painful memories for Viv - of previous family bereavements.

"It's like losing all my family again, it's just like brought it all back."

As Mick left, he promised to collect her painkillers prescription later in the day. "She was trapped inside her house, imagine being trapped inside your own mind. She stopped living," he said.

Next was a food parcel for Sheila, in her late 50s. Sheila had been diagnosed with stage-four cancer and was worried about the impact coronavirus had had on her care.

"I'm supposed to have blood tests done once a month for my cancer count," she said. "But nobody's been and done it [in] six months. And I've just found out that what I thought was two hernias is not, it's one huge hernia. I can't be operated on, because my lungs won't survive it."

Sheila relies on her 21-year-old granddaughter.

"I don't want to be a drain on the system that's already dying,

because I'm already dying, people need the NHS," she said.

This was just a small insight into one day on Pastor Mick's journey in one town.

Across England the death rate from all causes, between April and June this year in the most deprived areas of the country, was nearly double that of the least deprived areas.

"I've never seen anything like this, on this scale," said Pastor Mick, "Poverty seems to be hidden, It's underneath the surface that people don't see, they think they do but they don't.

Pastor Mick has travelled his own road to Damascus, from a life of crime to being tested everyday by the impact of coronavirus. I wanted to know what motivates him to keep going.

"What I do today, it's not a penance, it's the complete opposite. It's a privilege to serve the people of Burnley. It's a glorious thing," he said.

But then Mick revealed a staggering story to try and explain why he is at peace with those terrible events of his childhood.

Ten years ago, he befriended a homeless alcoholic outside a take away. Mick listened to him, cared for him, helped him to get sober and reunite with his family. The man died two years later but his family was thankful they'd all been together.

"What I never told him or his family, or the police, was that he was the man who raped me as a child. Why? I knew that I had been forgiven for my past. I didn't do what he had done, but still, terrible things, but I felt forgiven and I didn't want to live in his sin."

"This is why I'm free, I'm not spending my life in torment. It's redemption."

We next found Pastor Mick praying with a woman outside St Matthew's. It was the second week in a row she had been here. She was distressed but finding comfort in Mick's words.

Fr Alex explained what had happened. "She came last Saturday and she broke down and told me her daughter had killed herself."

Afterwards, the woman, Sonia, explained the difference Pastor Mick and Fr Alex have made to her life. She said that without them she, too, would have taken her life.

Inside St Matthew's, Fr Alex, broke down and sobbed. "I'm sorry about getting upset. You carry people's burdens, you try to tell them it's alright. It's so upsetting."

Pastor Mick is proud that it is "the people of faith who are stepping in and making a massive difference".

But Fr Alex wants others to find a longer-term answer to the issues exposed by the coronavirus in places like Burnley.

The government says it is committed to reducing deprivation and has spent £100bn on welfare support this year.

This is the story of Pastor Mick's journey, helping just some of those struggling in Burnley. But the fear is the challenges now facing our poorest communities will remain, long after this pandemic is over.

Photographs: Phill Edwards