

Saint James's Church Piccadilly London

Sermon preached by The Revd Ivan Khovacs – with other voices

16 October 2016 (Prisons Week)

Readings Acts 16.25-34; Luke 18.1-8

PRISONS WEEK: EXTREMISTS FOR THE CAUSE OF JUSTICE

A Dream Deferred
(by Langston Hughes)¹

JANE What happens to a dream deferred?

CORNELL Does it dry up
 like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 And then run?

FINNA Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 like a syrupy sweet?

TONY Maybe it just sags
 like a heavy load.

JANE Or does it explode?

Nelson Mandela knew something about a dream deferred after 27 years in prison, much of that time confined to a solitary 8x7 foot cell on Robben Island. However, only months following his release from prison, Nelson Mandela was speaking to a gathering of Hollywood's best-known actors and producers at a black-tie dinner in New York.

The invitation came from the legendary movie producer Harvey Weinstein. He had heard that Mandela was in town to address the United Nations. When Mandela stepped up to the podium, standing before cinema's A-list actors and producers in one of his famous Batik shirts, **everyone of course expected him to speak about politics.**

And they were prepared to stand in awe at the mental resilience of a man who had kept alive a dream of justice for his nation during all those years in prison. Perhaps Mandela would hint at his run for president, and speak of a post-apartheid future in South Africa.

But going against everyone's expectation, Mandela took the podium and turned all the attention back on the film stars gathered before him. **He spoke to them about ... movies.**

He looked at Robert DeNiro, and joked with him about the roles that have made him famous; he spoke in turns to Bill Murray, Sean Penn, Bette Midler, Oliver Stone. He turned to Eddy Murphy, saying to him, "I watched you grow up, young man." Hollywood's biggest players were in the thrall of the tall, dignified, political dissident.

¹ Langston Hughes, poet of the Harlem Renaissance, early 20th cent.

Twenty-five years later, speaking in London, at the premiere of the film about Mandela's life, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Harvey Weinstein recalled Mandela's closing remarks that night in New York. Mandela spoke about the stories that movies tell and the hope they brought to him and his fellow prisoners.

- TONY** Every Thursday night at Robben Island was movie night. Everyone, from lowest to the highest-ranked prisoner, it didn't matter who...
- FINNA** the one communal thing we did in that prison was watch films.
- JANE** You don't even understand as filmmakers what you do. And you certainly don't understand your impact.
- CORNELL** But you would have understood it had you been in those screenings on Thursday nights.²

On Thursday nights on Robben Island, Mandela sat with his fellow prisoners to watch comedies and dramas on the screen. **And they let their imagination run free.**

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The chains of prison life cannot hold back hope. And so Christian churches around the country have dedicated this week to hope and to keeping faith with all those who are serving a prison sentence.

Today's Gospel reading speaks of a corrupt judge, who hands out justice only out of self-interest. And the message in Jesus' parable is clear: **How much more does the God of justice long to answer the prayers of those who cry out to him day and night?**

Today is the final day of Prison's Week. We along with many other Christians have stopped this week to ask ourselves how we can be God's answer to the prayers of men and women serving time in prison.

This week we have also prayed for victims of crime, for the justice system in general, and for all those who work in our prisons.

The Prisons' Week campaign tell us that when prisoners have served their sentence and are released, they come out with £46 in their pocket. They are likely to have acquired or fed a drug habit in prison. They will probably not have a qualification, and may need help with reading, writing and numeracy. That spells out poor chances for re-entry into the community and working life.

So Prison's Week has focused specially on how we can support prisoners: as volunteer visitors, or by expanding literacy and prison library schemes; by lobbying government for a commitment to rehabilitation and re-entry programmes; and by providing meaningful work for those who could not be otherwise employed with a prison record.

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A prison sentence is handed down as punishment, and with the idea that it should prevent re-offending. It is not supposed to be an easy life.

So why bother with prisoners in the first place? Don't the crimes that put people in prison justify the toughness of prison life?

On the other hand, is prison supposed to break a person? Is it supposed to break down someone's sense of worth, of who they are: should it blind people in prison to the fact that they are God's creation? Should it deprive them of their place in God's story of salvation?

² The story is told by Harvey Weinstein and has been repeated in media interviews and recalled in varying detail, including on 'Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo's Film Reviews Podcast', BBC Radio 5 (6 December 2013).

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The German Protestant pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the midst of his imprisonment by the Nazis, wrote about his loss of direction and sense of self. In one of his best known poems from prison, Bonhoeffer's experience of isolation and separation from those he loved—family, friends, and church congregation—confronted him with the question: Who Am I? It is a question asked in the prayers and poems of prisoners everywhere.

JANE Who Am I?
They often tell me,
I come out of my cell
Calmly, cheerfully, resolutely,
Like a lord from his palace.

FINNA Who am I?
Am I really then what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, melancholic,
 and ill, like a caged bird,
Struggling for breath, ...
Hungry for colours,
 for flowers,
for the songs of birds,

TONY Thirsty for friendly words
 and human kindness,
Shaking with anger at fate
 and at the smallest sickness,
Trembling for friends
 at an infinite distance,
Tired and empty at praying,
 at thinking, at doing,
Drained and ready to say goodbye to it all.

CORNELL Who am I?
This or the other?
Am I one person today
 and another tomorrow?
Am I both at once? ...
Or is something still in me
like a battered army, running in disorder
from a victory already achieved?³

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Prison life is tough. Our prisons across England and Wales, however, are facing what has been described as a toxic cocktail of a rising prison population and reduced staffing, as well as resources that cannot keep up with the needs of the system.

Prisoners struggle with isolation and boredom, and this robs them a chance at rehabilitation, and that in its turn robs them of a chance of a redeemed future.

A recent inspection of a prison on the Isle of Sheppey—not far from Canterbury where I work—found the facility so seriously understaffed, that inmates are locked in cells for up to 23 hours a day because there are no officers to supervise work or education.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted from the poem “Wer bin ich?” (Who am I?) found in *Letters and Papers From Prison* (London, SCM, 1997), p. 347.

But in answer to the question—Why do we bother?—we only have to look back to Jesus at the start of his public ministry to see that keeping faith with those in prison is at the heart of the Christian story that God is a the God of justice and of lives transformed, resurrected and set free.

Standing before his temple congregation, Jesus unrolled the text of the prophet Isaiah and adopted it as his mandate and mission:

JANE The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor; to heal the brokenhearted; to preach deliverance, give sight to the blind, and set the captives free. (Luke 4.18, paraphrased)

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The Prisons Week prayer campaign began in 1976. So this is the fortieth anniversary year of this prayer campaign for justice: for a prison system that serves society and its body of laws. **But its central message is that imprisonment can never be the end of someone's story.**

In this 40th year Prisons Week has focused on reflection that speaks of God's mercy and of a faith that—as in our reading from Acts—shakes the foundations of the prison where Paul and his companions are locked up, so that their chains fall off, bringing the prison guard to plead, **“What can I do to believe? What must I do to be saved?”**

These are questions I am consistently faced with: not because I doubt what I believe. But I ask these questions because I believe, and because I am reminded in this church—time and again—that my faith in God, needs to be seen in concrete commitments and tangible action.

I began as a curate in this church a year ago this past Friday. The PCC were kind in offering their greetings in a card at yesterday's PCC away day.

And looking back on this past year as a member of St James's, and as clergy in formation, I know how much I have learned from this congregation gathered from various walks of life and from people who are at various places along the journey of faith. And I would simply sum it up in the word, “Justice.”

The Gospel of St James's Piccadilly is a Gospel of Justice, not of some promised and unseen future, but of a justice already taking root in our midst, and glimpsed each time we meet in our gathering around the Eucharistic feast, always equals before God and before one another.

So in closing, I have asked our friends, Jane, Tony, Cornell, and Finna, to read for us a passage from one of the most impassioned pleas for justice the world has ever known. **For the Baptist pastor and leader of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, without justice, there could be no freedom for millions of African Americans. For as King famously put it, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” His “Letter from A Birmingham Jail” and its prophetic cry for justice cradles the very hope that Prisons Week asks from us today.** Let us hear in King's words our own prayer for justice, and our Christian call to freedom.

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CORNELL “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people, “Get rid of your discontent.”

FINNA “But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. Now this approach is being dismissed as extremist. ...

TONY “But as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love? – **“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that hate you.”**

- CORNELL** “Was not the prophet Amos an extremist for justice? – **“Let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”**”
- JANE** “Was not Saint Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? – **“I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”**”
- FINNA** “Was not Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, an extremist? – **“Here I stand; I can do no other so help me God.”** ...
- CORNELL** “So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? **Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?**”

And so let God's people say Amen.