

Prisons: those of the State, those of the mind

This past week has been designated *Prisons Week*. It has been held now over forty years and is aimed at the Christian community, and draws attention to all those affected by prisons: prisoners and their families, victims and their communities, everyone working within what is called the criminal justice system, and all those affected by crime. That's a pretty broad canvas.

The organisers want to raise awareness and to generate prayer. They hope it will stir up more people to volunteer their time and talents, as it has done amongst us: there are several of our community here who are actively involved as volunteer visitors and befrienders at prisons and detention centres in and around London, another who has taught literacy to prisoners, a former verger who (in another life) was a prison assistant governor. With a more global reach, I remember a now-dead member of our community whose work in this field was the regular correspondence she maintained with prisoners awaiting execution. She devotedly maintained the practice of sending words of hope and respect to those who, we can be fairly certain, felt totally abandoned.

The phrase 'lock them up and throw away the key' summarises very concisely much of the attitude towards those who end up in prison. Get them off the streets, off our backs, out of our way, and behind bars.

That is not an attitude that is hard to understand. There are, amongst our human brothers and sisters (mostly brothers but some sisters), those who's minds and hearts become dangerously unwell, who (as the phrase has it) 'pose a danger to society'. If ever you have been on the end of threats of violence (or actual violence) from someone who has your name and number and worst interests at heart, you will understand the

relief that comes from knowing they are incarcerated.

Sometimes the relief, delight even, of knowing of someone's incarceration is not because of that much needed sense of personal safety but from a wider tendency of the human heart to delight in another's fall, humiliation and shame – especially where we dislike them already for their fame or wealth or influence or for whatever trivial or petty reason we take against others, in the way that most of us can from time to time. Elements of the media like to preside over this kind of delight, and to make sure that the complex nuances of each human person are ignored in favour of blanket condemnation as 'sick', 'evil', or 'criminal'.

There is a duality in the human heart. None of us is perfect. It is not unknown to project the discomfort we have in relation to our own failings on to others. Scapegoating. Those in prison are ripe targets, in a generalised sense. We can side-line their humanity and ease our own unease by thinking badly of them.

In the 18thC more than 200 offences were regarded as serious enough to be punishable by death. There was overcrowding of prisons even then – caused mostly by debtors, kept in prison until they could pay off their debts (an example of perverse logic if ever there was one). Places of confinement ranged from small village lock-ups in rural areas to the cellars of castle-keeps in towns.

It is an antidote to any risk of cynicism to see how – in the bleakest periods – people with heart and conscience become involved in causes they could so easily afford to stay clear of. The history of prisons provides them.

John Howard gathered evidence which he presented to a House of Commons committee in 1774. The Howard League is named after

him. Non-conformists – Elizabeth Fry the Quaker among them – drew attention to the inhuman conditions of prisons, as did Dickens in some of his novels. The list is a good one, and honourable.

Throughout much of all this an underlying conflict of aims has been, and remains, in play. Is the purpose of prison to punish or to reform and rehabilitate?

Here in the UK the situation may be better than it was then, but it remains far short of what it could be. There is overcrowding (between 1990-2016 the prison population in England and Wales rose by an astonishing 90%). Inside, there are high levels of violence, drug abuse and self-harm. 'Budget pressures' have resulted in lower staffing. A member of our community here, who volunteers within a prison chaplaincy department, says he often has to conduct conversations through locked cell doors because there are insufficient staff to escort him and the prisoner to a private room.

Anyone who thinks there are easy answers is probably mistaken. *Prisons Week* will have achieved something good if it makes any of us stop and think more about this inescapable dimension of human society which requires some of our brothers and sisters to be deprived of their liberty for a period of time. Being informed is better than being unaware. Pressing those standing for public office on their views on penal policy is good. Likewise lobbying MPs. Perhaps you might find yourself wanting to get involved in some way - giving money or giving time.

And as with virtually all such questions (by which I think of things like wealth, warfare, public order, 'feral youth', mental illness) it is never bad *to start with ourselves*.

We are never fully detached actors in any scene. It is tempting (indeed, our default position) to think of *them* - *those* rich people, *those* war-makers, *those* who threaten good order, *those* out of control youth, *those* mentally ill – as if we are serenely detached.

Likewise, *those* felons, law breakers, sex offenders, fraudsters, the criminally violent.

A degree of detachment is necessary (we can't fully identify with every cause – we don't have the resources and to do so risks having no helpful impact). But we must resist any and every temptation to discount other people, or groups of people, as in some way or other *not human*.

The message is, maybe, contained in the saying attributed to the Roman playwright Terence: *I am human, and nothing of that which is human is alien to me*. It serves as an antidote to the splitting we so easily resort to, and which dehumanises others.

I have been unable to contemplate Prisons Week without my mind wandering beyond the brick-built penitentiaries of the State.

I am imprisoned. I think you are also. Our freedom and liberty are constrained by many things: sometimes by our sex, status, colour, orientation; sometimes by fear, disposition, private terrors, wrong choices. We can be imprisoned by our education, class and occupation, and by our wounds; sometimes by our formal disabilities; often by our half-baked opinions. 'Mind-forged manacles' as William Blake, baptised here, called them.

We can be imprisoned by the religion we are either saddled with or chose to follow and by the various sub-brands of that religion. Sometimes these aspects are beyond our control and due to external forces. At others we are not only the prisoner but the prison's architect, builder, maintenance crew and jailer. The mind generates prisons we remain willing to inhabit. Why, even when the cell door is left ajar, we sometimes choose to remain in a confining space and follow only the safe routines of limited yard exercise and slopping out.

Anyone who has experience of seeking to help others quickly realises that many of us don't want to change. We are imprisoned within confining attitudes, seemingly wedded to the

various prisons we inhabit. 'No, I can't change that', 'no, I don't deserve that', 'no, I can't possibly risk walking out of the main gate'.

I am sometimes chided by people here for speaking of the danger of too much religion. Don't come to church too often I say. The underlying point is that familiarity can blind us to the startling claims of the gospel.

It's a shame that today's gospel is rather unhelpful in this regard, and in passing gives tacit approval to slavery, to inherited power over others, and to dominion (I see that the Vagabonds group today have that as their topic). Step back. Take in the wider message. God has summoned you into being for a purpose. That purpose is denied, frustrated, by fear and self-accepted imprisonment. Break free. Discover the assurance that you are loved. Discover what Paul describes as 'the glorious liberty of the children of God'. For many this is a lifelong process, two steps forward, one back. Keep at it. My steps to freedom will be different to yours. We are, however, to help one another in this task. It is such an important calling.

It is right to be reminded of the condition of those in the State's prisons, and to pray also for all those involved in the justice system. It is just possible that our contribution to that, and to the wider common good, is

strengthened to the extent that we, ourselves, escape our own prisons. Take some time to consider this. What may feel like a cool, got it together life, could turn out to be little more than a well upholstered cell.

Conversely, if you feel imprisoned in grief or depression or fear and dread, double check that the locked cell door is not, in fact, unlocked – ready to venture through when you feel ready to take that step.

As I was preparing these words yesterday, some lines from a hymn came to mind. Something about chains falling off and hearts set free. Turned out to be another Wesley hymn. I thought what a shame we can't sing it. And then I spotted it in the order of service – it's down as the recessional. It is of its time, of course, and for me has a few dodgy lines. But the sense of losing our chains is brilliant – and helped by a great tune. We usually have some silence after the sermon to reflect, but I wonder if today we might, instead, stand and sing the last two verses of the hymn we shall sing in full later (you'll need to turn the page). And, as we do, consider how our imperfect world imprisons us in so many ways, and how the Gospel calls us to a radical and tangible freedom, the like of which we scarcely grasp.....

Hugh Valentine