

Prison Chaplaincy

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Some years ago, Cardinal Basil Hume, addressing a group of Roman Catholic prison chaplains, concluded by saying how much he envied the work they were doing. ‘You could hardly be involved in a ministry more deeply rooted in the Gospels.’ Having recently completed 36 years as a Methodist minister and 18 years as a part-time prison chaplain, I believe he was right.

Of course, all forms of Christian ministry go back to the Gospels and much of what a prison chaplain does is similar to the work done by a circuit minister or parish priest, yet there is an intensity and drama about prison ministry which is not often to be found in the local circuit or parish. A pastoral visit to break the news of the death of a loved one is greatly complicated if the bereaved prisoner is refused permission to visit the family or attend the funeral. Many Sunday services and congregations in local churches hardly vary from year to year, yet a Communion service in a prison chapel where the chaplain places bread and wine in the hands of a man who earlier in the week had tearfully confessed to having murdered his son, provides a moment when there is a real ‘hush of expectation’. During my years as a circuit minister I must have baptized dozens of babies whose families never set foot in the church again, so it makes a refreshing change to baptize a hardened criminal because, in his own words, he ‘wants to make a fresh start with Jesus’.

John Wesley may have declared that all the world was his parish, yet the parish of the prison chaplain is far more concentrated and focused. Within the boundary of the prison walls will be living accommodation for many hundreds of inmates, with each cell serving as a bedroom, living room, dining room and toilet; a hospital, a segregation unit for holding prisoners in solitary confinement either as a punishment or for their own protection; workshops, education department, library, gymnasium, chaplaincy suite; and a whole range of offices for administrative staff, psychologists, probation officers and others. A large population all contained within a remarkably small geographical area and every part of the prison will be visited by members of the chaplaincy team on a daily basis.

The whole emphasis of prison ministry seems to be reflected in the ministry of Jesus, as he goes deliberately to the outcasts, sinners and untouchables; the stories of lost sons and lost sheep, and sayings such as: ‘I

was in prison and you visited me.' Perhaps it was these words of Jesus that stirred the heart of the young John Wesley in his student days at Oxford as he visited the prisoners there and so initiated the strong link between the Methodist Church and prison chaplaincy that has remained ever since.

On entering a prison for the first time there is a marked air of isolation about the place. Four hundred years ago convicted criminals were deported to faraway countries. Today we do something similar when we remove people from society, family and friends. From inside a prison, it's hard to imagine that on the other side of those huge, impenetrable walls, life is going on as normal, with people doing their shopping, pushing babies in prams and taking dogs for walks. Inside, the prisoner is stripped not just of his clothes and possessions, but of everything that is familiar and personal. The biblical image of a desert is pertinent here: a place of desolation, loneliness, fear and frustration. It is in such a context that prison ministry is set, but always with the abiding hope that, within such a place, the spirit of the living God may be discovered, and in which, surprisingly, flowers may be seen to bloom (Isaiah 35.1). Indeed prisons provide fertile ground in which wheat and tares grow closely alongside each other, the good and the bad, the violent and the weak, laughter and tears.

Almost incidentally the chaplain provides a bridge between life within prison and the prisoner's family outside. At the end of last year a prisoner who had had no contact whatever with the chaplaincy previously came to me in a state of great distress because his family lived in that part of Cumbria affected by the floods, and he couldn't get in touch with them. Another came because his eight-year-old daughter had been admitted to hospital with suspected meningitis, and he had no credits left on his phone to find out how she was. Such problems outside may be regarded as minor, but in prison they can quickly become major issues. The response of the chaplain can help to establish a relationship of trust which eventually might enable a prisoner to unburden himself of the huge weight of guilt, shame and regret which he carries around constantly.

People sometimes ask how chaplains can deal with men who have committed the terrible crimes we read about in the newspapers. It's not always easy, particularly when they show no remorse for what they have done. One way is to attempt to see them through the eyes of God, as they really are, not just in terms of what they have done to their victim, but also in terms of what others have done to them. Some years ago I was asked by an officer to visit a prisoner who was rapidly losing his sight. He was a small man in his fifties who had been in and out of prison for most of his life, always for fighting and assaults. After a number of visits and conversations

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he started to tell me about his life. He had been brought up in a deprived area of the north east of England. His mother was an alcoholic and his dad was in prison. At the age of 10 he and his friend threw stones at a street light and smashed it. When the police took him home to his mother she said she didn't want him back. He was placed in a residential home for badly behaved children. After a week he was raped in the dormitory by a 16-year-old boy; he then started to wet the bed which resulted in his being caned by the head of the school; as a consequence he resorted to sleeping on the floor under the bed, to protect both himself and his bed. After a few weeks he asked a friend what he thought was the best way to commit suicide.

The friend replied, 'You mustn't kill yourself, you must learn to fight.'

'But I'm too small to fight,' said Johnny.

'Then I'll teach you to fight,' said his friend.

'And,' said Johnny to me, 'he did teach me to fight and I've been fighting ever since'.

Many men and women in prison are not just the perpetrators of crime; they are also the victims of other people's violence, neglect and abuse. Many of the things that we church people take for granted – growing up in a loving, stable family, and being part of a community of love in the church – are completely beyond the experience of many prisoners. Michael was 20 years old when he came to us from a Young Offenders Institution. He was a compulsive self-harmer, cutting himself and swallowing all kinds of objects. Despite having family outside, on his twenty-first birthday he received just one birthday card, and that was from the Samaritans! Perhaps it was people such as these that Jesus had in mind when he spoke of 'the least of my brethren' or, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta describes it, as 'Jesus in one of his most distressing disguises'.

If part of the prison chaplain's task is to try to see people through God's eyes, as men and women made in the image of God, however distorted that image might be, another important task is to see these same people in terms of what, by God's grace, they may become. A former Archbishop of Canterbury once wrote: 'The prisoner is never only a criminal and nothing else . . . it is good to think more of what the man may become than of what he is.'² Again this is not always easy. A Christian scholar with a keen interest in prison ministry put it this way: 'Belief in the essential dignity of Man is as much an act of faith as belief in the existence of God'.³

Yet prisoners do change, lives are transformed, and every prison chaplain will have tales to tell of remarkable conversion experiences right out of the pages of the Gospels. A recent approach to changing prisoners'

attitudes to crime has been through the introduction of a programme of restorative justice, which shifts the emphasis of the current judicial system from one of punishment to one of seeking to repair the harm caused by criminal acts and thereby reducing the likelihood of future harm. In many prisons, including my own, this has been done under the auspices of the chaplaincy and involves, amongst other things, encouraging a prisoner to see the effect which his crime has had on so many people – not just his victim’s family, but his own family, friends, work and the wider community. In many cases victims of crime are invited to meet with offenders to share feelings and emotions, with some quite remarkable results and many tears shed on both sides. Genuine expressions of pain, regret, forgiveness and healing are revealed with a new understanding on the part of both victim and perpetrator. In the majority of cases, prisoners who have taken part in the programme are quite visibly shaken by the realisation of the hurt they have caused and this has resulted in their wanting to find ways of making amends to both the victim and the wider community. How appropriate that such a programme should take place within the setting of the prison chaplaincy and beneath the cross of Christ.

Perhaps the greatest change which has taken place in prison chaplaincy over the past few years has been that of the multi-faith context in which we now operate. A developing chaplaincy, reflecting prisoners’ needs from all faith traditions and none, is seeking to work in a collaborative, inclusive way. Most chaplaincy suites are now multi-faith areas with Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Pagans and others all meeting and worshipping within the same set of premises. This is not a move towards multi-faith worship, but it is ‘a recognition that adherents of many religions now co-exist here and that they must be given the respect and freedom traditionally enjoyed by the established church’.⁴ What has been achieved in prison ministry has much to offer to communities outside the prison walls. The Revd William Noblett, Chaplain General to Prisons writes: ‘The perception of a team of people of different faiths, of varied ethnicity, holding each other, and those with whom they work, in mutual respect and regard and working for the common good, can offer an insight into world faiths that is a model for good relationships in prison, and in wider faith communities.’⁵

The greatest threat to our chaplaincies today lies in the stringent financial restraints being imposed on every establishment. I would hope that all prison governors would take note of the conclusion drawn by Stephen Shaw, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, writing in the 2008 edition of *Prison Service News*: ‘There is a case for saying that the chaplaincy has

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been amongst the most vibrant parts of any prison over the last 20 years.’
May this continue to be the case for many years to come.

NOTES

- 1 Revd Fraser Smith is a chaplain at Garth Prison.
- 2 William Temple, *The Ethics of Punishment* (1930).
- 3 T. Morris, *Deviance and Control* Hutchinson, 1976.
- 4 Hooker and Lamb, *Love the Stranger: Ministry in Multi-Faith Areas*
- 5 The Revd. William Noblett, *The Future of Criminal Justice* SPCK, p. 95