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October 3rd 2021

Prisons Week

Psalm 142; Isaiah 42: 5-9; Matthew 25: 34-40

It's the beginning of a new Legal Year, and every year the churches designate the second week of October as Prisons Week, a time to remember and pray for those in prison, prison staff, and prison chaplains.

In Scripture prison features in two ways. As physical experience and as metaphor. The Old Testament People of God knew the actual experience of living as captive people. They were slaves in Egypt and cried out to the Lord for release. God called Moses to lead them out, through the Red Sea, to freedom in the Promised Land. Later they were captured again and taken away to live in Exile in Babyon, and again they lamented their suffering and prayed for deliverance.

In the New Testament, Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, bound and taken away. In the early days of the Christian Church the apostles were often thrown into prison. St Paul wrote many of his epistles in prison: "I Paul, a prisoner for Christ...". John the Divine wrote the Book of Revelation in a cell on the island of Patmos.

There are millions of prisoners in our world today. Some because they've opposed unjust regimes, some for their faith. A woman priest I knew in Bristol Diocese, now in her eighties, will probably be sent to prison next month for continuing to take part in Extinction Rebellion: you may or may not approve such people, but she believes that it's what God calls her to do.

Most of the people in our prisons are there because they have broken the law. Some of them have done terrible things and society needs to punish them and protect itself. The murder of Sarah Everard shocked the nation. Some people reacted to the sentencing of her killer this last week with "prison is too good for him". Others have continued to uphold an ethical objection to whole life sentences.

Justice requires that violent and other crimes do not go unpunished. There are many people in prison who have deliberately sought to do wrong, and the common cry is

“Lock ‘em up and throw away the key”. They deserve what they get. They must pay the price for what they’ve done.

But we also know that there are many factors behind why people end up in prison: being brought up with no sense of right and wrong, a deep-set grievance caused by poverty and inequality, a lack of self-esteem, gang pressure, mental illness, a dependence on alcohol and – especially amongst prisoners these days – on drugs.

Last night there were about 79 thousand people in our prisons, including just over three thousand women. Over a quarter were from a BAME background, despite BAME people making up only 16% of the population. England and Wales put more people, per capita, into prison than any other country in Western Europe – over twice as many as in Scandinavia. Spending on education, behaviour management and resettlement has at best stagnated. Extra funding has reduced suicides, but overall violence has increased, most worryingly in young offender institutions. There is talk that, once the pandemic is over, prisoner numbers could increase to 90, even 95 thousand.

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them” wrote the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. And as we heard in the Second Lesson, Jesus drew a remarkable picture of where people might find him. “I was in prison and you visited me”. How they must have laughed: Lord, when did we ever see you in prison, and visit you? “When you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to me”.

I said that Scripture features prison in two ways, as a physical experience and as metaphor. The prophet Isaiah in our first lesson was bringing good news to the people in Exile: “bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness”. Liberation is near! But he was also addressing a deeper alienation, their fear that in Exile God had given up on them. Or as we sang with the Psalmist: “Bring my soul out of prison.”

The 17th-century poet Richard Lovelace wrote “Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage: Minds innocent and quiet take That for an hermitage.” One of the things he meant was that physical incarceration is not the only form of prison that one can suffer. So where might we be looking, hoping, praying for release?

What is it that keeps us back or holds us down. I know that talking about sin may no longer be polite or woke, but people sentenced to prison do not have the monopoly on wrong-doing. Confession is good for the soul. Knowing you're forgiven is even better.

And the deeper we risk going the more we find other things which hold us captive: shame, fear, failure, can also become the bars through which we look out on the world. We too might pray with the Psalmist, "Bring my soul out of prison." We too might be seeking freedom. "I have come to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners".

This, to finish. During my five years at Portsmouth Cathedral I was also the stand-in chaplain at Kingston Prison, just along the Southsea promenade, taking services when the actual chaplain was not available. Kingston is now closed, but at the time it was for lifers, mainly men who had murdered their wife or siblings. So many of them were older, but the Chapel "trustee" was a young man in his twenties who'd been the sacristan at his parish church until one day, in a family row over breakfast, he'd killed his grandfather with a bread knife. Many of you would have warmed to him as he had a passion for the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Version. I would put out a modern liturgy on the altar, but when I processed in he'd replaced it with the BCP!

One Maundy Thursday, celebrating the institution of the Eucharist, I happened to note that in the circle around the altar there was me and twelve men. Just like the Last Supper in the Upper Room. So what does it mean to place a piece of bread into hands that have murdered? And Jesus said, "This is my body, given for you".

I preached that evening, anticipating Good Friday the next day, about the Polish Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe. In 1941 in another prison, in fact in the death camp of Auschwitz, Father Kolbe volunteered to die in place of a stranger who unlike Kolbe had a wife and children. There was one man in our Chapel congregation who never spoke. I guessed from his name that he was Polish, perhaps spoke little English, and that he was there because he'd killed his wife. At the end of the service he showed me a picture he kept in his prayer book, it was the face of Maximilian Kolbe who I'd been preaching about, and he asked me to visit him in his cell. Around the walls were more small drawings of the priest which he'd copied out. So this was how he spent his time, day after day, in his cell in Kingston Prison, in the prison of his

own mind, but maybe finding in Father Kolbe's sacrifice some hope of release, some glimmer of freedom, some possibility of redemption.

Jesus promised release to the captives. That may sound a strange text to put before a congregation some of whom send people to prison! But it reminds us not to forget those in prison. It reminds us not to always hide from those things which imprison us. For in the end freedom is what we all long for.

*So sing the praise of him who called you
out of darkness into light,
broke the fetters that enthralled you,
gave you freedom, peace and sight.*

From the hymn which followed "Ye who know the Lord is gracious"