



Act justly; love mercy

Rethinking prisons: A Christian response

Historically in this country attitudes to prisons can often be summed up as “out of sight, out of mind”, with many people taking the approach that crime should be dealt with swiftly and those responsible safely locked away. But in this feature Catherine De Souza urges that, as Christians, we need to engage with the criminal justice system and respond to those caught up in it.

Justice is one of the most frequently recurring topics in the Bible – there are hundreds of texts that speak about justice throughout the whole Bible and the major Hebrew and Greek words for justice occur over 1000 times. The Bible speaks specifically too about prisoners and our responsibilities to identify with them, visit them and care for them. So as Christians we are compelled to understand our prison system, particularly in a country that relies so heavily on imprisonment as a response to crime.

England and Wales have the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe; our prison population currently stands at just over 85,000. This has almost doubled in the last 20 years, yet, as of last year, crime is at its lowest since surveying began in 1981.* In fact according to the National Audit Office there is no consistent correlation between prison numbers and levels of crime. Prison itself has not been proven to cut crime effectively: 46 per cent of those in prison go on to reoffend within one year of release, and this goes up to 60 per cent for those serving sentences of less than a year.¹

Deaths in prison are at their highest since records began; suicide has increased; assaults have gone up and in 2015 alone there were 32,000 incidents of self-harm.* Prisons are overcrowded, spending is being cut and staffing has been severely reduced. In the latest Prisons Inspectorate Annual Report the Chief Inspector of Prisons stated, “[Prisons] have become unacceptably violent and dangerous places”.

“Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

Hebrews 13:3

How do we make sense of this picture? There are at least four key root causes that have led to the current state of the prison system that should inform our thinking. The first is that we don't agree on what prisons are actually for. Hebrews 13:3 exhorts us to “remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering”. But so often society views someone who has committed a crime as “other”.



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It's this separation that can too often dictate the view of what prison is for and what it looks like. Broadly speaking there are four key reasons cited for imprisonment: punishment, deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation. Punishment is usually retributive and argues that prison should be a harsh experience; however controlling people's behaviour based on fear and degradation is not transforming. Deterrence argues that a tough response to crime puts other people off, but doesn't take into account the chaotic nature and impulsivity that often surrounds crime. Incapacitation focuses on getting offenders off the streets, but doesn't factor in the majority of people being released back into society, often having been exposed to more criminality. Rehabilitation focuses on behavioural changes in a person and has increasingly been acknowledged as providing the potential for change, but it requires investment rather than cuts and is limited by the very environment of prison.

The second root cause for us to consider is that society and the justice system respond to the crime, but can often ignore the issues that contribute to someone's offending. Prison as a response to crime often cannot deal effectively with the high rate of addictions amongst those in prison – 66 per cent of women and 38 per cent of men in prison report committing offences to get money to buy drugs.* Or the

20-30 per cent of people in prison who are estimated to have learning disabilities or difficulties “that interfere with their ability to cope with the criminal justice system”.* Or the numbers of perpetrators of crimes who have been victims themselves. While none of these issues justify crime, they do help to formulate the most appropriate response to crime as well as enable us to view each individual as a person, rather than an offence.

The third root cause for the current state of the prison system is that there has not been enough investment in alternative responses to crime. Despite the fact that community sentences have a lower reoffending rate than short prison sentences, community sentences have, in fact, been cut rather than increased and over half of all custodial sentences given last year were for six months or less.*

Restorative justice, which is defined by the Restorative Justice Council as “about victims and offenders communicating within a controlled environment to talk about the harm that has been caused and finding a way to repair that harm”, has proved to be an effective response to crime. Those who have been part of restorative justice processes reoffend less and both victims and offenders report satisfaction from the experience. However restorative justice approaches can be expensive in the short term and are not always publicised or made available.



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“ I was in prison and you visited me ... I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me. ”

The fourth root cause for the state of our prison system is the lack of support many people experience after release, with many experiencing difficulties in finding a positive and supportive community, somewhere to live and a job. High numbers of people enter prison from an unstable living situation and others lose their accommodation whilst in prison. Only 12 per cent of employers say they have employed someone with a criminal conviction and most job application forms ask about criminal convictions before the person has even had a chance to get to interview, often removing them from the selection process immediately.

The challenges of our prison system can be overwhelming and can seem insurmountable. But we serve a God of justice and mercy, and as church we carry the ultimate response of hope and life in Jesus Christ. As Christians we can affect change by getting involved in prison ministry, by supporting people leaving prison and by being a voice for the voiceless. Our vision for prison ministry within prisons is recorded in Matthew 25: “I was in prison and you visited me ... I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me”. There are great things already happening across Norfolk in our prisons, from Sunday services to Bible studies to Angel Tree initiatives. At One Church we recently led an Alpha course in HMP Wayland, supported by St Thomas’ Heigham, Norwich Central Baptist Church and Prison Fellowship volunteers. Another great way to support your local prison is by praying for all those involved in it.

But prison ministry doesn’t stop at the prison gates. As church, we are called to live out our faith, to demonstrate the love of Jesus through both our words and our actions. This means that our churches should be places of welcome and support, where those who have left prison can find a family.

The church can demonstrate love and support to those leaving prison through practical ways such as mentoring and signposting. Or it may be that you can provide job opportunities in your business, or talk to the HR department at work about their recruitment approaches. Through equipping ourselves via organisations such as The Welcome Directory, Caring for Ex-Offenders or Community Chaplaincy, we can be the church to those on the margins. As the Apostle Paul showed us, nobody is beyond redemption and true transformation in Jesus is possible, as he changed radically from persecuting and terrorising Christians to following Jesus and proclaiming the gospel. But it took the testimony of Barnabas to convince others of his true conversion. Men and women leaving prison need a few more like Barnabas to stand with them!

Over the years that I have worked with those who have experienced prison, homelessness and addictions, I have become increasingly convinced that in order to demonstrate true justice our practical support needs to be accompanied with speaking out. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu beautifully put it, “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out who’s throwing them in”.

As Christians we need to equip ourselves with the knowledge of what our prison system is actually like; we need to be unafraid of engaging in discussions that aren’t always straightforward or easy; we need to add our support to campaigns for justice; we need to be actively proclaiming God’s incredible justice and mercy from our pulpits and around our dinner tables; and we need to strive for change in our prison system.

Perhaps we might follow in the footsteps of Norfolk’s own prison reformer Elizabeth Fry and be part of completely rethinking and reshaping our prison system; after all, as theologian Christopher Marshall put it, “The Bible has nothing good to say about prisons”. If we truly believe in acting justly and loving mercy, our faith needs to be lived out in demonstrating God’s justice of restoration and transforming love.



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¹Prison: The Facts, Bromley Briefing – Summer 2016, Prison Reform Trust

*All facts and figures are from either the Prison Reform Trust’s Bromley Briefings, or HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2015-16.