

THE TEMPLE CHURCH

FIRST CHORAL SERVICE OF THE LEGAL YEAR – 7 OCTOBER 2012

NICK HARDWICK – CHIEF INSPECTOR OF PRISONS

'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Matthew 25:35-36

I am afraid that is rather an obvious text for a Chief Inspector of Prisons – perhaps rather vainglorious.

I looked at some alternatives. Isaiah 61:1 would be worse:

'He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound'.

Which would get me into trouble with Chris Grayling.

Or here is what Ahab, the King of Israel, said in 1 Kings when the prophet Micaiah gave him an unwelcome prediction about what would happen in a forthcoming battle:

'Put this fellow in the prison, and feed him with bread of affliction, and water of affliction.'

Which not only illustrates a particular approach to penal policy - which quite a few seem to approve even now – but also illustrates the danger of giving unwelcome messages to your political masters.

I will stick with my first choice:

'I was in prison and you came to me'.

It is a curious exhortation when you think about it.

Visiting someone in prison.

Right up there with feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers and caring for the sick.

Not where it would rank in many people's list of charitable priorities.

And just visiting. Nothing practical. Not freeing them from their chains or saving their souls or caring for their children.

Just visiting.

Yet it is a message that many have taken to heart.

John Howard, who might be called the first prison inspector, and after whom the Howard League is named, thundering up and down the country - and indeed across Europe - in the latter part of the C18, knocking on prison gates, demanding to be let in, and railing against what he found.

Elizabeth Fry, horrified by the conditions of women prisoners in Newgate, urging the nobility to come and see for themselves.

Incidentally, I think we must be the only country in the world celebrating a prison reformer with her picture on a banknote – which tells you something perhaps.

So why is visiting prison important?

First, because at its most basic, human level, loneliness and isolation is the hardest part of a sentence for many prisoners.

I have yet to find any holiday camps in my time as Chief Inspector but amongst the privations prisoners face, loneliness is amongst the most severe.

That may seem surprising when you think of overcrowded prisons with men or women crammed together, doubled up in single cells.

But when you ask prisoners – as I always do – what advice would you give to a new prisoner entering here for the first time, the most common answer by far is ‘Trust no one. Keep yourself to yourself’.

It is good advice. You would want to be very, very careful before you opened up to anyone in prison - other prisoners or officers.

And, of course, in addition to any self-imposed isolation there is the separation from family and friends on the outside.

If you go to a prison, on an official visit perhaps, they will naturally want to show you the most interesting parts – the segregation unit where the most recalcitrant prisoners are held, healthcare, the workshop with an impressive record of getting prisoners into jobs after they are released.

But that is only a small part of the picture. Let me, as far as is possible, describe for you what I think is typical.

Come to a modern, new build prison on an industrial estate at the edge of some town in the East Midlands, next to the ‘Big Yellow’ storage warehouse – “flexible storage space without compromising security or cost” according to its website. The warehouse, not the prison.

The prison is not a bad place.

The governor is a good man, I think. It is generally safe and decent and is doing some good work to prepare men for release.

The wings in the prison radiate from a central hub on two levels.

Go to the end of one of the wings on the upper level. Not many staff come down here.

A third of the men will be locked in their cells even during the working day so whenever you go, you will find one of the cells occupied.

Cells about this wide and twice as long.

Uncovered toilet at the end of the bunks.

Blanket draped over the window as a curtain.

Pictures of partners and children stuck to the wall with toothpaste.

A matchstick model in the corner.

Toiletries lined up in exact, neat rows on a shelf.

Daytime telly on.

Sealed windows, airless and sour smelling.

A man lying on his bunk.

You will probably be the first person he has spoken to since the day before.

Prison officers, thinner on the ground than they used to be, move quickly from task to task or are in the central hub on the computer.

Remember Porridge? Well - there is no Mr. McKay or Mr. Barrowclough here, with time to stop and chat.

A breakfast pack was served the night before and other meals are collected to eat in cell.

The prisoner needs permission to do even the simplest thing but in this prison, a kiosk, like a hole in the wall cash machine, allows him to make applications or apps remotely, terribly efficiently, without an officer needing to speak to him.

And so it goes on, day after day. Alone with his thoughts.

Charles Dickens, whose own father had been imprisoned in the Marshalsea, and whose novels and essays curdled the blood of his readers with the horrors of Victorian prisons, after a visit to a prison during a tour of the USA, denouncing the system of solitary confinement he found:

In its intention, I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who devised this system of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentlemen who carry it into execution, do not know what it is that they are doing.

I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.

I do not conflate what exists in prisons here today with what Dickens found, nor do I flinch from the need for punishment – but the effects of isolation and loneliness that prisoners face, even in a well run prison, remain hidden and a very severe punishment indeed.

And so I applaud those who temper it; the monitoring boards and visitors who visit those who have no one else; those who support the work of the chaplaincy, meeting a man at the gate when he leaves, helping him settle, and doing the same again if he fails; the volunteers who staff the visits centre, helping weeping parents and bewildered children; who run the arts project and draw out creativity, talent and pride that was hidden before, or help with reading and writing or provide advice.

Much of this does not provide ‘performance’ that can be easily ‘measured’ or ‘results’ that can be ‘paid’ for – but it has value nonetheless, and we should not underestimate the difference all these visitors make to the decency of our prisons and the lives of those they hold.

There is another reason why visiting is important.

Things go wrong in prisons for the same reasons they go wrong anywhere.

There is, of course, some deliberate wrong doing - abuse and neglect.

That is not surprising perhaps, given the power imbalance between the jailer and the prisoner and the prisoner’s lack of credibility.

External scrutiny is crucial to preventing it.

But more frequent, I think, is the consequences of the normative effects of custody.

In every organisation, the inspectorate, the church, dare I say it, your chambers, we get used to things that are madness.

We stop seeing them. They become normal.

In prisons, its worse.

It is so difficult if you work in a prison to compare your establishment with another and the situations you have to deal with are so extreme and unusual, it is all too easy to lose your way.

So a visitor's observation can provide an important reference point.

Let me give you a small recent example.

I was in a women's prison recently. It had much improved.

The governor and staff had worked with skill and compassion to reduce levels of self harm, improve care for the mentally ill and provide better drug treatment – all essential in a women's prison.

I went into the visits hall during visits. It is an aspect of inspection that feels particularly intrusive.

The prisoners, by the way, were wearing reflective sashes, like you might on a bike to be seen at night, which seemed a particularly humiliating requirement for women prisoners meeting their children.

Anyhow, as I talked to staff, I noticed one young woman out of the corner of my eye, a girl really, sitting on her own, waiting for her visitor to arrive.

All the other visitors were in.

It seemed a sad thing. I thought she had been publicly stood up by her visitor. She would be soon escorted back to her cell.

Boys in young offender institutions, who get so few visits anyhow, call that 'The walk of shame'.

But a few moments later, here in this women's prison, an older woman arrived with a baby in her arms.

She sat down next to the girl, who took the baby tenderly and cradled it. A heart warming scene I thought.

Grandmother bringing the baby in to see its mum.

That was not what was happening at all, the officer told me. This was a separation visit.

The older woman was a social worker, bringing the baby in so its mother could see it for last one time and say good-bye before it was adopted.

In a packed room full of 100 people or so.

Needless to say, the visit did not end well.

This was the way things were done in a good place run by skilled and caring people.

When I fed this incident back to them, just as I have to you, and asked whether this process could not be handled in a better way, they were aghast.

My point is how in even the best run establishment, the external scrutiny that visitors provide, the mirror they provide, can be the reference points by which the ethically complex territory of prison can be navigated.

And it is complex. I do not pretend these judgements are easy.

A speech Winston Churchill gave about prisons when he was Home Secretary is often quoted on these sorts of occasions but in very truncated form. It is worth hearing a bit more of what he had to say:

We must not forget that when every material improvement has been effected in prisons, when the temperature has been rightly adjusted, when the proper food to maintain health and strength has been given, when the doctors, chaplains and prison visitors have come and gone, the convict stands deprived of everything that a free man calls life. We must not forget that all these improvements, which are sometimes salves to our consciences, do not change that position.

The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country.

A calm and dispassionate recognition of the rights of the accused against the state, and even of convicted criminals against the state, a constant heart-searching by all charged with the duty of punishment, a desire and eagerness to rehabilitate in the world of industry all those who have paid their dues in the hard coinage of punishment, tireless efforts towards the discovery of curative and regenerating processes, and an unfaltering faith that there is a treasure, if you can only find it, in the heart of every man.

These are the symbols which in the treatment of crime and criminals mark and measure the stored-up strength of a nation, and are the sign and proof of the living virtue in it.

He does not shy away from the need for punishment but calls on those who are charged with that duty to search their hearts.

He posits the mood and temper of the public in this regard as a test of civilisation.

I say that the tradition we have here of prison visiting, and the many, many people who do so in many different roles, are not just a powerful factor in the heart-searching that Churchill enjoins but are indeed a symbol of a civilised country and the attitudes it has to those it imprisons.

We should be grateful for it.