

Setting the Prisoners Free – A workshop on an Anarchist Christian response to imprisonment.

I would like us to have some time this morning to talk about imprisonment and liberation and so I am not going to speak for very long. Maybe we could then have some discussion about some of what I have said and you may want to take the opportunity to ask me some questions. I am very open to discussing both the personal, political and spiritual aspects of this situation because for me they are all one.

My experience is that I worked for a time in both Leeds and Wakefield prisons as a drug counsellor. Leeds is a local male prison and Wakefield is a maximum- security male prison. Whilst I was working in Wakefield I met my partner Paul and we have been in a relationship for the past 5 years or so. He is a life-sentenced prisoner. He has been moved several times during our relationship and he is currently in a therapeutic unit in a private prison. We are awaiting news of the outcome of a major investigation in to his case.

I have been involved with a number of mainstream reformist organisations, like the Prison Reform Trust and Action For Prisoners Families but I don't really believe in reform and these days my focus is more on No More Prisons, the abolitionist movement.

I have been a member of the congregation here at All Hallows for many years and if I had to give myself a label in terms of my politics then I would describe myself as an anarchist.

When Jesus began his ministry he read this piece from Isaiah;

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has chosen me to bring
Good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind;
To set free the oppressed
And announce that the time has come
When the Lord will save his people.”

When I was thinking about this workshop today it was these words of Jesus that came to me. It struck me how important it is to notice that in Luke’s gospel, this is the way Jesus begins his journey amongst his people, by clearly stating that this is what he has come to fulfil. In an age of on-going crisis within the prison system, how do we as radical Christians hear and respond to that calling?

I first began to really confront this issue when I was working in prisons. What I saw, heard and experienced in both those places convinced me that the prison system is based upon a lie. That lie being that what is done in our name somehow protects and brings justice to society. It does not. Prisons are essentially places of torture. They deliver pain and punishment to people incarcerated within them and those who love them. They fail consistently to rehabilitate most people within them. If they were schools who performed that badly at their stated task there would be uproar but because most of the people held in prison are poor and voiceless very few people either know or care about the gigantic failure that we spend millions on each

year.

The anti-prison activist, Angela Davis said in her book “Are Prisons Obsolete?”

“In most circles prison abolition is simply unthinkable and implausible. Prison abolitionists are dismissed as utopians and idealists whose ideas are at best unrealistic and impracticable, and, at worst, mystifying and foolish. This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families”

I believe that we are called to envisage the Kingdom of God on earth and the words of Jesus at the start of his ministry, “I have come to free the prisoners” are a challenge to step in to the possibility of liberation, not just for some of us but for all.

Just as there was no such thing as reforming slavery or apartheid, there is no such thing as reforming something as deeply rotten and evil as the prison system. I have seen it first hand and I have been and continue to be intimate with its cruelty and it simply does not work. It has such a long history of abuse of power. These are closed institutions, largely unexamined dumping grounds for the problems this society does not want to face. These are the places where we put the poor, the addicted, the vulnerable and angry and where we punish and brutalise them. These places are about separation and humiliation.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn said;

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere else insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were simply necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

How do we liberate the captives? How do we create communities of healing and real justice? As the Indian poet Kabir said

“True love is not for the faint-hearted”

Love is not an easy option. It involves confrontation, challenge, exploration, patience, kindness, boundaries, forgiveness and letting go. We are called to love people at the margins and that is so much harder than hating them.

There is an ancient Buddhist chant:

“Hatred never ceases by hatred
But by love alone is healed.”

What I encountered at Wakefield, and this is common across the prison system, was a level of hatred and disgust towards prisoners that is overwhelming in its power. It permeates everything that’s done there and in many ways it is how things are done in the prison system on a daily basis, unchallenged, unobserved and corrupting of everybody who comes in to contact with it. Paul and I still refer to that place as the Hate Factory because that’s what it was. The only thing it really created was misery and despair and I can see no justification for treating human beings like that, whatever they have done. That level of self-righteous hatred permeates the current agenda on crime in this country. It leads to a denial of even the most basic human

rights and that is dangerous for us all.

I think a major part of how we might begin to liberate the captives is to hear their voices and to listen to the experiences of the men, women and children held in these disgusting places. These are our brothers and sisters, our children, those we are called to love. We also need to listen to the Outside prisoners, prisoners' families who are treated with such contempt by the prison system.

Pauline Campbell, whose only daughter Sarah died in Styal prison has led a campaign to bring to public attention the treatment of women prisoners. Whenever a woman kills her self in jail she goes and lays flowers for her outside the jail and leads a demo in which she is usually arrested trying to prevent the vans bringing more women in to the prison. Her main argument is that these are dangerous places that harm vulnerable women. She's right. They also harm children, people who are mentally ill, the sick and elderly. They fail us all because they do not prevent crime or rehabilitate people they incarcerate. If someone manages to rebuild their life after prison it is usually despite what has been done to them not because of it.

“Father forgive them, they know not what they do.”

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