

I was in prison and you visited me

Tony O’Riordan SJ

During this week, particularly on Sunday 16th November, the Catholic Church in Britain and Ireland will be offering prayers for prisoners, their dependants, and all those who work with them. Tony O’Riordan SJ calls us to examine our own attitudes to the penal system and to develop a Christian response to the problems faced by prisoners and their families.

Parents’ fret

Parents often shed tears of worry and anguish for their children in public. Many of us will have seen or will think of common scenes such as a mother in a hospital who has just received devastating news about their child’s illness, or parents leaving their children at the door of a school on their first day. Regularly, mothers and even fathers can be seen weeping openly at airports, as they bid farewell to a son or daughter embarking on a foreign trip. Parents worry and fret for their children – it is part of the package of being a parent. This worry is particularly acute when care for their son or daughter is entrusted to someone else or an institution such as school or hospital. In all these scenarios the pain and worries of parents follow a similar pattern. However, while many will understand the predicament of parents in these situations, few will think of the particular situation of a parent who sheds tears in a courtroom as their child is sentenced to a term in prison.

Imprisonment is different

The situation of a parent whose son or daughter is sentenced to imprisonment is in some respects similar to that of any parent who sees the care of their child taken over by someone else or some other institution. However imprisonment is different – prison is a place of harm. Unlike schools or hospitals – which are places whose purpose is care, healing and development – prisons exist for punishment. The harm that prison inflicts includes the material deprivations of



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prison life, isolation from family and friends, and the social stigma that imprisonment carries long after a sentence is complete. In addition to these foreseen harms, any prisoner risks becoming a victim of crime such as robbery, assault, exposure to drug use and more rarely serious physical injury, rape and murder.

The anxieties which the realities of prison life might evoke in any parent of a prisoner are compounded by the fact that prison life is largely hidden. The gospels of the imprisoned are impossible to write from a witness perspective. Although the administration of justice is carried out in public, prison life occurs behind high walls. Prisons are not only institutions designed to keep people in; they also operate to keep family, friends and loved ones out. Although a weekly visit is allowed, this takes place in a special visiting area. Increasingly such visits take place behind glass screens where moments of simple intimacy are restricted. Family members never get to see the parts of the institution where their loved ones spend most of their time. The cells, the landings, the yards, the education and workshop areas, all remain areas that must be imagined rather than seen firsthand.

Seeing first hand the realities of prison life

For nearly fifteen years as a visiting chaplain I have been a regular visitor to prisons in Ireland and some prisons in England. I have seen much first hand. I have seen many shocking conditions and regimes. Although some prisoners are in prison for very

serious sexual and violent crimes, most people I have encountered in prisons are young males who find it extremely difficult to find their place in society and have committed minor crimes. On almost every visit I have seen many sad and lost individuals, including some prison staff. However on some occasions I have also seen individuals who have looked at a prison sentence as an opportunity to make life-changing decisions. I have also seen how prison staff and services can respond positively to this desire for change and how prisoners can gain new perspectives and skills. Most importantly I have seen individuals supported to make the successful transition from prison to secure accommodation, to education and to work - to a normal life. Regrettably these 'good news stories' are not the norm. It is sadly the case that prisoners themselves rarely experience the hope expressed by Pope John Paul II that prison might be "a place of redemption". Increasingly the prison systems in the UK and Ireland are becoming 'human warehouses', where the ideal of rehabilitation is seldom realised and where the likelihood of re-offending on release is increased.

Improving prison conditions

A number of things need to be in place if imprisonment is to be a positive experience for individual prisoners and a just response by society to the harm caused by crime and offenders. These things include: humane conditions, free of overcrowding; motivated staff; and appropriately resourced rehabilitation regimes. I am also convinced that planning for release must begin almost at the time the sentence is imposed and that every prisoner must have a sentence plan that will seek to marry the needs and situation of the prisoner with the appropriate provisions and resources of the prison service. A crucial ingredient in this process must be measures to support and maintain positive family contact during imprisonment.

Parents, especially mothers, visit prisons regularly. They often make long journeys with other younger children. They can feel powerless and guilty. They sometimes feel that they have failed as parents. They know their offspring need help to deal with lots of problems such as addiction and the legacy of childhood trauma, and they hope that this might be available in prison. However, in Ireland, increasingly

many prisoners are locked in their cells for twenty-three hours a day for their own safety – they can't get the help they need in prison.

Such parents also know that few in society seem to care about what happens to people who are sent to prison, at least not care enough to exert pressure for change. Public concern and powerful pressure is constantly brought to bear to improve the quality of public services such as hospitals and schools; however, the same concern does not exist with regard to prisons. Yet perhaps there are many reasons why we should be more concerned about the reality of life in prison and the way prison is used.

Hard work

In conversations about my work I regularly meet the presumption that working with people in prison must be difficult. I have to admit that for the most part working with individual prisoners is not difficult. However, working for penal reform is very difficult and frustrating. For most people who are close to the prison system and who see first hand the realities of prison life, it is easy to conclude that the prison system is failing prisoners and the public. One need only read some of the annual reports of the Inspector of Prisons to conclude that the case for reform is compelling, yet the subject of crime and punishment is so emotive that rational analysis and sound policy formulation seem to be frustratingly elusive. This can be seen if we consider that the most significant change in the prison system in recent decades is simply the expansion in the number of prison places. For example, over the past twenty years the number of prison places in England and Wales has risen by 20,000. Yet with nearly 100,000 prison places, 87 out of 142 prisons are holding more prisoners than they were built for. This problem of overcrowding must be tackled as a matter of priority and must be tackled in a way that balances the need for public order and safety with the re-positioning of the role of prison in society.

Smart use of prison?

Christians and others need to be concerned about the moral issues raised by expending vast sums of public money on penal resources and the poor return for this spending. Each year, of the thousands of people sent to prison, few are guilty of the most serious crimes

such as murder, rape or serious violence. Most of them are young men from poor backgrounds. A significant number of women are also sent to prison each year. Last year Baroness Jean Corston undertook a thorough review of the situation of women in prison, from which she concluded that most of these women are vulnerable, and suggested that more effective and human responses were required. Baroness Corston even concludes that with a change in mentality the need for female prisons could almost be eliminated, and in the process these women could be helped to become good neighbours.

Most people in prison are sent for non-violent crimes and often they spend short periods in prison. Once released, ex-prisoners face an uphill battle of waiting lists for many basic services and supports – maybe up to a year for drug treatment and even longer for somewhere to live. And so many people get locked into a vicious and hopeless cycle of addiction, petty crime and prison. A mother of one young prisoner who had just been released said to me recently that she felt that her son had just moved into another prison where hopelessness and despair were ‘the bars’ and where there seemed to be no easy escape. She feared that because he wasn’t getting the help he needed he would be back in prison before long.

The nature of punishment

There is a need for dialogue with regard to the criminal justice system. This dialogue must take account of all relevant factors – the responsibility of criminals, the debt owed to victims, the nature and purpose of our response to crime, and wider societal factors. Such dialogue might, firstly, produce a better understanding of the somewhat controversial question concerning the nature of imprisonment as punishment in response to crime.

It can sometimes seem that the popular understanding of imprisonment is not so far removed from the Old Testament logic of ‘an eye for an eye’. Yet many people, if offered a chance to reflect on and talk about what they want from the criminal justice system will articulate a more nuanced and measured position where restoration and reintegration of offenders is more to the fore.

For many Christians, the parable of the Prodigal Son exercises a strong influence in regard to how they view human failings. It is a parable that sees offending and response from a number of perspectives. The young man suffers the humiliation of a life of poverty abroad and the shame of returning to his father – this is his ‘punishment’. But it is a punishment which is completely overshadowed by the dominant dynamic of the parable – which is the unconditional love of the father and his desire to accept the erring son back into the heart of the family.

This aspect of the Prodigal Son story suggests a challenge to us to allow the retributive aspects of punishment be subordinated to the overall purpose of reintegration and restoration. To do otherwise is to lock ourselves into the iron logic of a strict ‘just desserts’, which is the breeding ground for the elder brother’s resentment in the parable and, in the manner of the Pharisees, may easily become a hypocritical cover-up for our own sinfulness and need of mercy. A very simple response of Christians this Prisoners’ Sunday might be to take opportunities that arise to discuss crime and punishment in light of the story of the Prodigal Son, and help others explore their own complex emotional and rational responses to offending.

Societal Factors

Any dialogue on crime and punishment must also take account of the wider societal factors. Politicians and sections of the media often find it easier to be ‘tough on crime’ than ‘tough on the causes of crime’. I have already noted that the vast majority of prisoners come from disadvantaged backgrounds: it makes sense to suppose that individual responsibility is shaped by environmental and social factors. For example, in Ireland we know that despite the great gains of more than a decade of economic success there have been downsides as well, including the lack of a social dividend in areas such as education and health that impact on crime levels. There is re-balancing to be done to address the need to tackle white-collar crime with more serious intent. And there is the worrying coarsening of our society, perhaps attendant on such rapid economic success without an accompanying moral or spiritual compass, which has

led to a trivialisation of sex, an upsurge in the recreational use of drugs, a widespread abuse of alcohol, a fragility in relationships and family, and, worst of all, a de-humanising of violence which sees the ganglands replacing the paramilitary no-go areas. We need not exaggerate: compassion, fairness and generosity are present too in our societies, often nourished by deep roots of spirituality and faith. Nonetheless, we do well to recognise the crude forces of a kind of social Darwinism at play in our towns and cities trumpeting the survival and flourishing of the strong and fit.

There is a wide agenda here for government, and indeed for civil society as a whole. The issue of crime and punishment cannot be solved without attending to this wider context. It will not do, for example, to use prisons as a kind of 'out-of-sight dumping ground', and prisoners as scapegoats who carry our anger about crime. And it will not do either to allow ourselves to remain undisturbed by questions about societal injustices or how prisoners are to be re-integrated into a hopefully more just society. One does not have to excuse or condone criminality to acknowledge that many criminals are themselves damaged and vulnerable individuals, victims in this sense of the injustices of our society.

If Christians are challenged to develop a holistic response to crime and punishment then we need to respond much more sensitively and effectively to the needs of victims of crime. It is true that in recent years there has been greater awareness of the trauma experienced by victims and the support they require to get their lives back on track, in particular where there has been violence involved. The parable of the Good Samaritan indicates the kind of practical and loving response which can make a great deal of difference to victims of this kind.

There is, however, also an issue about the justice in the way our penal system operates. The professionalisation of this system and its specialised, formal – and to the lay person often very abstruse – ways of proceeding can result in an alienation of the victim from judicial proceedings. This arises above all because, in contrast to some traditional legal systems, the State takes the place of the victim in criminal law

so that the process can become a contest between State and offender with the victim as an almost incidental witness. The introduction of victim-impact statements was clearly an attempt to address this problem, even if a not yet entirely unproblematic attempt. Perhaps there is a need to develop liturgical and specialised pastoral responses to meet the needs of victims of crime, especially victims of violent crimes.

The challenge of Prisoners' Sunday

Christian tradition places strong emphasis on care for those in prison. For the most part this care is expressed through the work of prison chaplains and the many faith-based groups that undertake important work with those in prison and on release. In addition to this valuable work, it is crucial to remain aware of and to challenge the problems facing non-Christian prisoners. A priority in the prison service must be to ensure that the increasing numbers of Muslim prisoners in British prisons, whose spiritual needs differ from those of other prisoners, as do their practical needs such as their dietary requirements, are given the appropriate care.

The current crisis in our prisons requires a new expression of care for those in prison; considering the challenging fact that these prisoners are our brothers and sisters may lead us to share some responsibility for assisting in their reintegration. This practical care offered to prisoners and their families is crucial but the concern of Christians for prisoners must include rethinking the way imprisonment is used in the first place. Prisoners' Sunday invites us all to engage with this challenging area where we are called to build right relationships and restore broken ones. Hopefully many will find diverse ways to respond in contemporary times to the Gospel line: "I was in prison and you visited me."

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