

## 'You fence me in, behind and in front'

Charles Randall

Charles Randall, a former member of the chaplaincy team at Feltham Young Offenders' Institution, tells Thinking Faith about the real and important difference that the ministry of a prison chaplain can make to the inmates. As we pray particularly this week for prisoners and their families, let us remember that prison really can be a place of redemption.

Looking back on my experience of volunteering at Feltham Young Offenders' Institution this year, and the discernment which led up to my placement, I liken the whole series of events to the story of Peter escaping from prison in Acts 12, only in reverse.

I walked straight in to (rather than out of) prison, without any let or hindrance. Not that the guards, like Herod's, were asleep; security was tight, and my analogy belies the not-insignificant amount of bureaucratic to-ing and fro-ing which accompanies the start of any prison volunteer placement. It's just that, in hindsight, it all came about quite easily.

I had been discerning a vocation to the priesthood for the best part of ten years, throughout university and my first graduate job, and I had finally decided to take my leap of faith. Having spent four years working for a residential developer in Oxford, I left my job on Christmas Eve 2008 with a view to starting priestly formation this year.

Fast-forward two months to February 2009 and I was sitting down to dinner at St Beuno's spirituality centre in North Wales, where I had gone for an individually guided retreat in the hope of discerning the next steps on my journey. Whilst mealtimes at St Beuno's are normally silent, those on their first night are allowed to talk over dinner, and so when Fr Roger

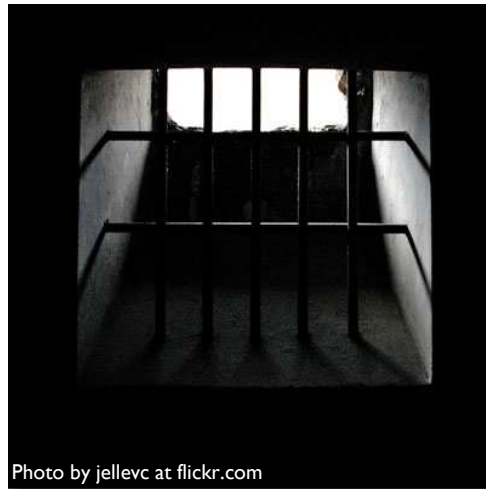


Photo by jellevc at flickr.com

Dawson SJ walked in and sat next to me, it was good to be able to communicate! We had met a couple of times in Oxford in the preceding months to talk about my vocation, but it was a surprise nonetheless to meet him here as well. Since our last meeting I had been spending time enquiring with the Redemptorists, and so the object of my retreat at St Beuno's was to ask God whether I should seek to join the Redemptorists in September, and if so, what I was to

do until then!

As we parted after dinner, Fr Roger assured me of his prayers and said that if I was at a loose end until September, there were plenty of volunteering opportunities with the Jesuits in the meantime. By the end of the retreat, two definite ideas had formed within me: to seek admission to the Redemptorists in September, and to volunteer with the Jesuits until then. Regarding the latter, during the retreat I had been indefinitely detained by verse 5 of Psalm 139:

You fence me in, behind and in front.

In fact, this verse made such an impression on me that I actually left St Beuno's asking: 'God, are you going to send me to prison?!' I was excited at the prospect. There was an accompanying consolation about this seed of an idea.

When I got back to Oxford, I got in touch with Andrea Kelly at the Mount Street Jesuit Centre to ask about the possibility of finding a placement through the London Jesuit Volunteers. Amongst the various organisations she was in touch with at the time that were looking for volunteers, was Feltham Young Offenders' Institution. Soon I was to be walking through the gates for my first day.

My brief at Feltham was to sit in on and help prepare the three weekly groups run for the prisoners (young men aged 15-21) by the Catholic chaplains, to come to the two Masses on Sunday morning and, on Sunday afternoons, to shadow one of the chaplains on their rounds of visits. The Monday Don Bosco Group, run by Sister Dominica, was dedicated to preparing candidates for the Sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation and Reconciliation. The Wednesday Rosary Group led by Joe, one of the lay chaplains, met each week to learn about and pray the Rosary, as well as to discuss the implications of living the Christian life. The Thursday Group, run by Sister Monica, met to pray together and to learn about Catholic spirituality. As well as these weekly groups, a host of dedicated part-time volunteers on the chaplaincy team visited the young men on the wings, either in response to requests from the inmates themselves or from a concerned prison officer, or following up some other pastoral lead. The chaplain himself, when managing to free himself from his desk (no small achievement given the amount of paperwork!) spent most of his time either on the wings hearing confessions, counselling and encouraging the boys, talking to their families or liaising with prison staff or other agencies on their behalf. The dedication of the chaplaincy staff that I observed throughout should reassure all who read this that prisoners are not being forgotten, and I would encourage those who feel called to prison ministry to make enquiries as to how they might volunteer themselves.

Feltham holds something like 700 inmates when at full capacity. By law, all prisoners must be seen by a chaplain (regardless of their faith or the faith of the chaplain available) within 24 hours of arrival. On these initial pastoral visits the chaplain will ask whether a prisoner has a faith or not, and whether he wants to be invited to participate in the religious observance of that faith if he has one. Of these 700 or

so inmates at Feltham, about 100 or so were registered as Catholic at any one time. This was an unusually high proportion, prompting the chaplain to jest with the prisoners one Sunday at Mass that they were not running fast enough!

Any given day at Feltham promises a certain amount of unpredictability. For a start, the place has something of a revolving door: as a remand prison, the population is in constant flux. Prison transport vehicles (aka 'sweatboxes') arrive at the forecourt each morning to take inmates off to court or to other prisons, so you might see an inmate at a group one day, and learn the next that he has been sent to another establishment, been deported or released.

Most mornings as I passed these sweatboxes on my way in, engines purring, I used to wonder who was inside. Sometimes the prisoner inside would bang on the side of the vehicle as if to call your attention, but it was impossible to see in through the thick black glass. It could have been someone you had come to know trying to say goodbye, or just someone acting up; either way I would look up at the window and give some sort of nod in acknowledgement of his effort to communicate with the world outside.

Most of the inmates I was meeting with in the five months I was at Feltham were seeking to deepen their Christian faith. This obviously meant something different for each one of them, just as in any congregation. There were those who simply wanted to come to Mass on Sunday and savour the peaceful atmosphere in the chapel; others would have come to every group we organised, such was their enthusiasm to learn more and more about the faith. A few seemed to enjoy primarily the social aspect of meeting friends who were on different wings to them. Inevitably perhaps, a handful might come to attempt to transact some sort of business. But as long as the prison and chaplaincy staff could discern no reasonable grounds to prevent someone participating in a liturgical or pastoral event, any inmate was welcome subject to space.

I was once asked by a friend what the prisoners actually expected from the Catholic chaplaincy. I would say their one expectation, whatever else, was that they would be able to come to Mass on Sunday. Sunday Mass was understood by the inmates to be the summit of all Catholic activity in the prison. As

the inmates arrived, Father and the Sisters would welcome them – despite the high turnover, even those who were new might well be known by first name to a member of the chaplaincy team who might have carried out their ‘reception’ or been called to a wing to meet a prisoner. There would be a fair amount of chat until everyone had arrived, and then Father would invite everyone to quieten down for the Mass to begin. Often we would begin by praying a decade of the Rosary as a way of inviting a prayerful attitude amongst all those present.

The statue of Our Lady was a focus for so many of the lads at the beginning and end of Mass, as well as immediately after communion, where many would light a candle and stand praying. Most Catholic inmates wore a Rosary around their necks (requests for these came in almost every day at Feltham) and most also had a New Testament and Psalms in their cells for private reading. Amongst the inmates at Mass there were usually one if not two readers and a thurifer who could be called upon to serve, and when it came to Communion, all would go up either to receive Communion or a blessing. From the moment Father indicated that Mass was about to begin, the norm (though not the rule!) was for quiet to invade the chapel. Whatever each inmate was taking away from the experience, it was common to hear from the lads how much they valued coming to Mass on Sunday.

As far as the weekday groups were concerned, having prepared jugs of squash and trays of biscuits in advance, we would wait at the chaplaincy to see how many of the fifteen or so on the group list would arrive. All those attending would have made a formal request to be invited, so attendance was quite high and there were even waiting lists. Prison officers from the wings would escort the lads down to the chaplaincy in groups.

Everyone was greeted by name as they arrived and handshakes would be offered. The chaplain in charge would then invite everyone to share something that was happening in their lives: some would say how their court cases were going; others might relate something which had happened to them on their units, maybe they had lost some privileges, or were about to earn some for good behaviour. Someone else would be due a visit from a family member they

hadn’t seen for ages; another, an expectant father, would be waiting for news from his girlfriend. (A fair proportion of the inmates I met were fathers – this made me think that a ‘fathers’ group’ would be well received in the future.) It was also the norm at this point for each member of the group to share their prayer intentions for the day, which we would return to at the end of the session when we all prayed a decade of the Rosary for them.

There were so many different personalities on any given day, each with his own personal story unfolding at a different pace, that whatever outline we had agreed beforehand for the group to follow had to be flexible. The most memorable Rosary Group involved a discussion on forgiveness prompted by one inmate’s experience of having been betrayed by his friends on the outside. Many of the inmates related easily to events in Jesus’s life: being betrayed by friends, being rejected, standing trial, going to prison. When we looked at the conversion of Paul, again many seemed to understand the transformation in his life from being part of the mob that murdered Stephen to meeting Christ and not being the same again. There were two or three instances in my brief experience at Feltham of Christian lads actually changing their pleas and incriminating themselves for the sake of telling the truth. When this did happen it seemed as if it was in direct response to the Gospel.

After a couple of months at Feltham I was trained up to carry keys, which meant I was able to move around the prison by myself, and carry out pastoral visits under the direction of the full-time chaplains. This usually involved visiting inmates on their units, having read up on their notes beforehand to ascertain something of their current mental, physical or emotional state. In the majority of cases these visits involved sitting down with an inmate, listening to their story and offering to pray with them about it if appropriate. Of all that I did in those five months, this was what I felt came most naturally to me. Normally these visits would take place in small observable interview rooms, but when none were available you just had to sit down where you could find a seat amidst all the noise of prisoners on their recreation. Perhaps because they had lost so much privacy already, I never noticed an inmate feeling self-conscious about closing his eyes and praying in front of his peers.

Whilst chaplaincy staff are not there to *be friends with* inmates, they are there to *befriend* them. It was enough for me to be introduced by the chaplains as: 'This is Charles, who is hoping to start training to be a priest soon.' This introduction generated a certain amount of interest whenever I was asked to share my vocation story, but other than that the whole question of my wanting to be a priest did not seem to strike the lads as being odd, and I think this was because of the example of the chaplain that they observed every day. I think they could see very well what his job was about, and in that context they wished me well.

Having left Feltham a couple of months ago now, I often wonder how all the inmates I met are fareing. Many will have moved to other prisons, some will have been released; others will have gone back to their home countries. The weekday groups were comprised

of different inmates week by week, so two months on I probably wouldn't recognise any of those attending Catechism or the Rosary Group. Likewise those who are there now wouldn't know me at all. And this in itself confirms something I learnt whilst I was there. The role of a prison chaplain is not to become somebody's indispensable support: the inmates cannot rely on chaplains any more than the chaplains can rely on the inmates. But I did see prison become a place of redemption for many, a place where the chaplains made real to the inmates the memory of Christ by their actions, and where Christ was made physically present for them in the Eucharist.

*Charles Randall is now pursuing his postulancy with the Redemptorists.*