

Sermon preached at St. Mary's Woodbridge on Sunday 11th October 2020

18th Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.*

There are a lot of them in the Bible. Joseph, in Egypt, for two years. Genesis chapter 39. The prophet Jeremiah in Jerusalem. John the Baptist under Herod and John the Evangelist on the island of Patmos. Saint Paul in Caesarea, Rome and, according to the New Testament scholar Tom Wright, probably in Ephesus too.

We could add many other biblical figures to this list: Zedekiah, Daniel, Peter and James. And Jesus too, on the night that he was betrayed, between Caiphias and Calvary.

The link here is, of course, prisoners. Today is the start of Prisons Week. This is an ecumenical initiative that has operated for over forty years to encourage a national week of prayer for all those who are caught up in the criminal justice system.

In the ancient world, the practice of detention in a dedicated confinement facility was relatively rare. The Greeks typically used chains, manacles and wooden blocks to restrict the movement of felons awaiting sentence. The Roman world too rarely used imprisonment and then it was as a holding option, rather than as a long-term punishment.

There are several references in the Hebrew Bible to the binding or chaining of prisoners whilst awaiting trial and judgement. House arrest is mentioned but more often recourse was had to a dried-out water pit. English translators use 'dungeon' for the Hebrew word *bowr* which means pit or well. Biblical Israel placed a strong emphasis on the collective burden for sin. As John Hare told us in his address two weeks ago, the great festival of atonement included the acknowledgement of the sins of the whole society.

The Hebrew God is repeatedly emphasised as one who wants nothing to do with imprisonment. The Psalmist asks God to “let the groans of the prisoners come before you” and tells us that God “broke their bonds asunder” and “the Lord sets the prisoners free”. Two of the great defining events of Jewish history have captivity at their heart, the slavery of Israel in Egypt and the exile of the Jews in Bablyon. “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt” is God’s instruction to those released from bondage: you have been there; you know what it is like to lose your freedom.

This justification for empathy with prisoners is developed in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them.” You see, God wants to set prisoners free. He tells his prophet Isaiah “I have given you as a covenant to the people ... to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” and the prophet later proclaims this divine imperative to society: “he has sent me ... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners”.

This is the very section of the scroll of the prophets that Jesus reads aloud in Nazareth, he who is the fulfillment of the law and who has come to set all his people free, for all eternity. Prisons are never part of God’s way.

So where does this leave us today? Rates of imprisonment keep on rising: the prison population in England has quadrupled since 1900 and half of this increase has come since 1990. The demand continues to be made in certain media and political circles for more offenders to be sent to prison; for sentences to be longer; for release on licence to be subject to tougher conditions and for prison life to be made more uncomfortable.

This is a litany that speaks loudly of wrong-doing and evil and little of belief in repentance and forgiveness. It has its roots in retributive and not restorative justice. Let us make no mistake, prison is no soft spot. Even the most enlightened Scandanavian approach systematically denies human dignity, in ways that produce lasting psychological damage. And the worst jails, often in non-Western countries but also, as we have recently seen, in places like the United States, are simply hell-holes, more terrible than the cistern in which Jeremiah feared he would die.

What should be the response of the contemporary Christian to prisons and prisoners? The New Zealand theologian Dr. Christopher Marshall, writing nearly twenty years ago, tried to answer that question. He concluded that we need to be “a community of people who truly understand both the grace and the discipline of forgiveness”, because this is what Christ did.

He knew that there were indeed a lot of them, these prisoners. He sees us all in bondage and knows us all as human beings imprisoned by sin. And he gave everything to free us. Let us, then, blend our voices with the Psalmist and with every prisoner, everywhere to say: “O Lord, bring me out of prison so that I may give thanks to your name.”

Amen.