From Wales

MINISTRY IN PRISON: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

by Rowan Williams

Thinking about pastoral ministry in the context of penal institutions raises — surprisingly quickly — some large issues as to the nature of pastoral ministry itself and, even more searchingly, issues about how the Church relates, pastorally and theologically, to institutes of any kind. In this paper, I want to look first at some questions about the basic character of the pastoral task as they emerge in this particular environment — especially the complex issue of what role the expectations of change might have here; then to turn to the ambiguities of the idea of the 'chaplaincy' itself, as something that focuses the problem the Church has when it offers to provide care and the proclamation of the grace of God to corporate bodies whose rationale is not always easy to square with the gospel. In this connection, of course, prison chaplaincy is a special case of a general unease familiar among chaplains to the armed forces — or even schools ...

Shepherding away from home

We tend to take it for granted that chaplaincy is by its very nature a ministry whose emphasis will be on support or nurture. The pastoral situations we describe as chaplaincies are those in which people are addressed in contexts other than home or family — school, industry, work, abroad, hospitals and so on. The starting point, spoken or, more usually, unspoken, is that such people are living away from their natural support structures; their identity, normally bound up with the primary relations of family and/or locality, is going to be that much more fragile than usual, and so the kind of ministry that is appropriate is less likely to be confrontational or disruptive. If people use the distinction between pastoral and prophetic ministry (not one I like very much, as will become clear), they will be inclined to put chaplaincy on the non-prophetic side.Yet we're all aware, when we try to exercise an honest pastoral ministry, that this is at least a half-truth. We are all aware at some level that the temptation to be watched is the temptation to be bland; supportive in a way that asks no

questions, that demands no work from the persons we're with. And that is quite hard to reconcile with ministering the gospel of Christ, insofar as the gospel seems to have rather a lot to say about change and, indeed questioning. When Jesus in the fourth gospel describes himself as shepherd of his people, the primary image is certainly about nurture, feeding; but there are two aspects of the language here that do not easily reduce to unquestioning care and support. One is the clear insistence on the risks the shepherd runs, risk to the shepherd's own life or identity; the other is the repeated concern with mutual knowledge. The shepherd knows and is known: shepherd and sheep are in some way transparent to each other.

Truthfulness

Think for a moment about this second point. It sounds very much as though the pastoral task entails a ministry of truthfulness. The shepherd's job is bound up with being truthful about himself or herself in a way that conveys a recognisable authority or attracts a level of significant trust; and also with being able to speak the truth of someone else, to address them as they are, not as they desire or pretend to be. This too is part of pastoral authority in the sense that a pastor who only addresses the self-image of the 'flock' has no authority or power to 'lead', in the sense that this passage in John 10 envisages, leading to a place where proper nourishment is to be found. The pastor who deals in and deals with self-images cannot direct anyone to such a place because s/he will not know what the serious needs, the real hunger are about. There cannot be an effective pastorate, then, without the commitment to truth, to proper knowledge. And that commitment may be tied up with the elements of risk in this ministry also — but I'll return to that in a few minutes.

Perhaps this begins to make sense of the things that make 'chaplaincy' a distinctive sort of ministry. When people are away from those contexts that habitually sustain identity, they will readily cast about for new identities, new constructions that may have little to do with what their history and context has actually made them. Institutions in particular provide ready made identity supports in the shape of ritualised behaviour, standardised dress and so on. Even the student, however convinced of his or her radical liberty, is overtly and covertly socialised into the life of a tribe, with habits and costumes available for the reconstruction of this person. To act effectively in this new and 'unnatural' setting seems to require the acquisition of new strategies in presenting or even imagining yourself. And it may be that here the chaplain has his/her most central and significant role.

Prison Chaplain — a 'remembrancer'

In such a context, I think, the easy distinction between ministry that is unquestioningly supportive and one that is prophetically transforming does not actually make a great deal of sense. It's true that, because of the isolation of people from their usual support systems, confrontation, and the explicit call to repentance or change, are not likely to be helpful, to say the least; they may have short term effect — but only as another way of offering a new and 'safe' identity in a strange land. But a ministry that asks no questions will not, as I've said, bring people nearer to what will genuinely feed or sustain them. The notion that seems to me to capture what most matters here is that of a ministry of 'reminding'. The chaplain, to use an old fashioned word, is a 'remembrancer'. Central to a ministry conceived in these terms is the patience to explore the vulnerability that underlies the pressure towards reinventing yourself in the way that new institutions encourage. Central also is the willingness to work with someone to bring to light a vital sense of what in fact has made them the person they are, what still shapes reactions and expressed instincts.

And no, I do not mean to reduce the chaplain's role to a therapist or analyst — though therapy is, of course, what is happening, in the broadest sense. The chaplain is unlikely to be working with any one developed psychodynamic theory, but simply with a commitment to assisting a person to be able to talk of their actual history without fear.

It may be that in that sort of encounter, it becomes possible for someone to recognise that their identity is actually stronger than they imagined, less in need of new and consciously constructed formations. And that becomes in a very straightforward sense a ministry of liberation. But it depends on a fundamental theological and spiritual orientation in the pastor: his or her own orientation towards truthfulness in the presence of God, enabled by the confidence that God is pre-eminently not just the reality that makes it possible for us to be truthful, because God has no fear of us or what we say or do, no repugnance or contempt, no will to reject. God has time to hear us out, to listen to our confused attempts to come somewhere nearer the truth. The pastor, in this situation, has to witness to such a God; and s/he will do so most clearly by not being afraid of his or her own vulnerability, not being preoccupied with the 'results' that justify action, being a penitent person and a hopeful person — hard as it is to spell out how these characteristics make themselves visible.

Risk and Vulnerability

This too, is where the risk comes in. If this picture of the chaplain's ministry is accurate, the chaplain's vulnerability will be close to the surface, and the exercise of ministry will require a certain lowering of defences. This is a complex matter. I've said 'close to the surface', because it is possible to use one's vulnerability by letting it dominate — so that the pastoral encounter becomes one in which the pastor is drawing the attention or care that s/he needs at the expense of the other person. The hard thing is to be aware of vulnerability, not to hide yourself from another, but to let it give you a way into the experience of another so that trust is created. The line between proper professionalism and impersonality is always difficult to draw here; but I do not think there can be effective pastoring without at least some willingness to let the encounter make some difference to the pastor, and thus to let it be a context receiving as well as giving ministry. This may be some way short of 'giving one's life for the sheep'; but it does entail a certain kind of 'dispossession', a putting aside of the safety of status so as to give some room for the truth to emerge. The pastoral encounter is most authentic when it is underpinned by a shared search for truthful ways of talking, in a way that makes sense to both partners. It is interesting that, as a matter of anecdotal observation, chaplaincies do not seem to appeal to those who have a very powerful sense of being in command of a language of solutions and cures. There is something about the sheer patience required that pulls against this sort of command or fluency.

Remembrance

Spelling this out in terms of prison ministry is not too difficult, and I've already given a good few hints as to how it might be done in the way I've discussed the general vision. Prisons not only form a selfcontained 'culture' in terms of dress, behaviour patterns, authority systems, a culture deliberately alien to the communities that nurture basic identities; they also inevitably work in ways that easily suppress or neutralise certain kinds of memories. If you conceive of punishment as the payment of a debt, which I suppose is still probably the commonest and easiest image, the temptation is to set two 'lumps' of history or experience side by side, the one offsetting the other. Recovering what has been done as a personal act with roots and consequences, human costs, human diminishment, is not at the top of the agenda. Here, then, there is a particularly important role for the 'remembrancer', opening up a variety of relationships and decisions that form a person. Vital to this is

precisely that variety: in such a context, it matters considerably that people remain aware of different kinds of relation, nudging, pulling in different ways; different sorts of memory: so that the story that emerges is not one of linear, inevitable progress towards one disastrous or violent moment. It is a process comparable to the role of creative arts in a prison; a way of asking, 'Who am I when I'm not a 'criminal'?'

Forgiveness

Theologically speaking, one of the important things about forgiveness is the discovery or proclamation that the past is not a system that determines the future absolutely. And, as forgiveness is worked out in a believer's life, part of what is going on is the reclamation of aspects of the past that seem fixed, determined, and their rediscovery as in some way open to a future after all. And for this to happen is for a person to let go, to some degree, of whatever constructs now dominate his or her self-presentation. One implication of this in turn is that the chaplain needs a certain awareness of religious fluency in the person seeking pastoral help. All those who have been involved in pastoral work in prisons will agree that a recurrent feature is the assumption made by inmates that the chaplain is interested in hearing religious noises being made; more seriously, they would agree that a phenomenon all too frequent in prisons is the adoption, in all sincerity, of a new religious attitude that may, again, have no living connection with the complexities of a person's history. There is a difficult and thankless task for the chaplain in challenging whatever self-deceptions may be going on here. But this demands a response that is not too sceptical or dismissive; it may mean a slow and none-too rewarding persuasion to go on talking in a secular way for a bit longer, so as to bring more to light in a context and idiom not overcharged with premature religious interpretations. Only so will the entirety of a person's history be open to what God might do.

Reconstruction of Story

The kind of change for which the chaplain labours, then, is not instantaneous and dramatic conversion, or even the articulation of repentance in the first instance. It is something more like the reconstruction of a person's story, without which the language of conversion and repentance is going to be another image or fiction taking them further away from real needs and real resources (inner and outer). The chaplain is a demythologiser; s/he has to earn the authority for this by his or her own openness to God, and refusal to retreat behind a pseudo-professional distance. There is a real and potent challenge involved in working in this way; it is not describable simply as uncritical affirmation. What it affirms

is — to put it boldly — what God affirms: that the wholeness of a human biography is the material for God's work, nothing less. Above all, the chaplain is going to need that kind of imagination that is a sort of analogue of God's love: the freedom to communicate to someone else that they are more than they seem to themselves — more than they can easily imagine when placed in a context that easily defines them primarily in terms of the limiting and damaging consequences of one set of conditions and decisions in their past. The gospel here begins in the ability to say, 'You are also shaped by other relationships and these are as real and significant, even when they are distant. You are also the person with these gifts or interests, these human bonds and values which are obscured or sidelined in this institution, but which are the essential and raw material for whatever lies ahead — whether or not you want to talk of God in this connection'. But for the Christian pastor, it is God who 'holds' the lost or suppressed memories of all, God who grounds the patience and hopefulness that fuels the slow groping after an honest way of presenting oneself.

Corporate Prison Life

The inmate of a prison is, as I've suggested, someone whom the institution as such defines in a particular way; and the pastor will be working in some ways at an angle to this. Not that any halfway decent penal institution relates to its inmates exclusively as criminals; but the logic of the institution demands that this is bound to dominate. The purpose of prison, at the simplest level, is the containment and regulation of law-breakers. You are there because you are a lawbreaker. How then does the chaplain relate to the institution itself? It is all too easy to see oneself as pastor to inmates, not the institution as such — just as in a hospital, you sometimes find a chaplain who sees it as his or her task to minister the patients, ignoring or even battling with clinical staff, who are seen as intervening between the pastor and his or her people. But the challenge is to be a pastor to the structure as a whole, to staff, to the systems of authority. If this does not happen, there is once again a breakdown of truthfulness. The prison inmate is more than a generic criminal; but s/he is also part of a present system of corporate life, official and unofficial, within the institution. S/he is involved in relations with staff, with other and remoter legal authorities, with other prisoners. And the character of these relations is very tangled indeed. Relations with staff are marked by a range of techniques whose effect is to infantile the prisoner; relations with other prisoners are frequently a matter of anxious hierarchical struggle. As has been pointed out by those within the

system more than once, the most secure way of establishing power or leverage in such an atmosphere is to establish a capacity for violence — itself again an infantile strategy. There is nothing to be gained from ignoring this.

Truthteller

So the chaplain has to be a truthteller for the entire institution. For prison staff, his or her task may well be to remind them that the professional encounters of their work are formative of persons, not just the discharge of a neutral duty. The structure pulls towards a negative and potentially destructive pattern in all sorts of ways; and the chaplain has to be clear about how this works. Yet I think that his or her presence as part of the institution means that s/he is unable to say that there is no integrity in the institution as such, or that it is impossible to do the jobs required by the institution in good faith. As in comparable chaplaincy contexts, the task of the pastor is partly to keep alive in the institution the purpose that is its justification. This is where the chaplain needs a theology of punishment and penance — here rather than in the more immediate contact with prisoners. And a Christian trying to deal with this is bound, surely, to be reflecting on crime as a collapse of trustful relations in community, a sort of breach of 'covenant' in society, and thus to see the penal institution as existing for the sake of honouring and restoring trustful relations. There is inevitably, then, an element of protest in the chaplain's presence when the penal situation is one that consistently undermines trust in its own operations, in the sense of assuming that inmates are properly treated as a kind of infant. There can be little or no restorative element in this; but a Christian cannot be content with a view of punishment that is essentially about 'containment' — not least because of the nature of personal pastoral work within the institution as characterised earlier in this paper. To say that there is potential conflict around this is to state the obvious. But I suppose that the respect a chaplain may need to earn in the life of the institution overall (without which s/he will have no effective authority as a critic) depends on a visible commitment to the purposes of the institution — not simply as defined from day to day, but defined in relation to intelligible goals for a society of which prison staff too are members. The chaplain should have the capacity to connect the conduct of business in the institution with what those involved in it take for granted as goals in their relations elsewhere and what they consider to be desirable and intelligible conditions in society at large. In other words, the pastoral role here is remarkably similar to that exercised with the prisoner — to

recall relations other than those that prevail within the penal institution, and to question any tendency either to isolate relations in the prison from what's taken for granted elsewhere or to make relations in the institution 'normal'.

Prison Staff Problems

Just as the chaplain works persistently at reminding the offender that his or her life is shaped by a variety of factors, and that God is not to be served or encountered by isolating one set of relations and denying or burying another, so with staff: the work is to keep in view the complex pattern of other styles of relating that form the identity of a prison staff member — bearing in mind the low esteem that society generally has for its 'jailers', and the temptations to compensatory violence and arbitrariness that easily arise in consequence. To speak with prisoner or staff member about the domestic or the imaginative or the recreational aspects of their experience, about relationships neither professional nor shadowed by systematic violence, is arguably the most important basic activity of the chaplain from a theological viewpoint. In both kinds of encounter, the chaplain denies a kind of 'moral closure' and renews contact with the contingent, even chaotic, world of community outside the institution in the conviction that it is in contact with this sort of contingency that the crippling narrowness and polarisation of prison life can be relativised in a way liberating for both staff and inmates. Pastoral ministry here naturally works closely with those practices in the institution that allow some space for relativising or opening the community's experience — family centres, lay visitors, the development of channels for negotiation and discussion of disputes and tensions within the prison.

Rightness of Chaplaincy Presence

All this suggests is that the 'chaplaincy' role in respect of a whole institution is quite a complex one. It is not that of an uncommitted 'prophet' repeatedly confronting the very rationale of the institution: institutions will not readily listen to someone demanding that they constantly produce justifications of why there are there at all (especially if they are paying the 'prophet's' salary ...). The chaplain is there because s/he accepts the rightness of the job being done — the defence of society, in the case of the armed forces, the punishment of offenders in the case of a prison. There may well be room for conscientious disagreement between Christians about the role of coercion in both contexts; but I assume that, if you are there at all, it is because you have, with whatever reservations, agreed that there is a legitimate task to be done. The specifically Christian and pastoral perspective is found in the constant struggle to connect

what is decided day by day with what the place is for, what is actively and reflectively wanted in terms of human life together. A person is given a custodial sentence because he or she has offended against certain features of what we think of as desirable relations between social agents: but it is bizarre to try and show our 'abhorrence' of this by creating a structure that imposes a set of relationships in many respects equally at odds with what is assumed to be healthy or desirable. The chaplain activates this wider awareness not by a regularly adversarial stance — though you will all know that there must and will be points where protest is appropriate and necessary — but by what I have been calling the ministering of truthfulness, the recalling of people to the full range of their experience, the reality of their vulnerability and the true direction of their desires.

Restoring Diversity and Arbitrariness

Some years ago, a very remarkable book appeared by a French Dominican (Jacques Pohier) under the title of God: In Fragments. Its final section was headed 'God is God, so God is not Everything'. What I think Pohier is saying in these pages — among other things — is that the life of faith paradoxically involves doing something of what God does as creator, letting things be themselves. Only if we do this can we realise what it is for God to be God, to be truly other than us, and thus capable of making a difference to us. If we begin by trying to treat God as 'everything', as the focus of all we are and all we want, the danger is that we make God part of ourselves, the particular system or systems that we are operating. It is our needs, or the gaps in our understanding, that God is there to fill, to make good. It is only a God that has made us to be different from divinity, to have our own contingent and untidy being, who can actually come to us as a stranger, with a new and genuinely joyful word that is not limited in advance by our moral or philosophical shopping lists. Something of this theological vision underlies what I have said here about the chaplain's ministry of truthfulness. S/he is the enemy of what Pohier calls 'totalitarization', the narrowing down of human meanings to one set of relations, one chain of causes, even and especially when such a strategy is carried through in the name of religion. The pastoral priority is to restore a sense of diversity and even arbitrariness in the way people see and tell their histories. God enters in, not as a supremely organising principle, but as the presence giving space for truth, space and time for all of a complex and painful history to be looked at and reflected on. In an institution that can hardly avoid being a

'total' environment, the pastoral role of the chaplain is the maintenance of a perspective we might call 'catholic' — that is, a perspective in which persons are opened up to more than local or linear determinations of who they are. And this is perhaps where the chaplain's ministry in a limited and limiting institution such as a prison brings into particularly sharp focus a central aspect of the whole work of the ordained ministry itself, though in a way clearly different than that of the parish pastor. This is, of course, not to suggest that such a job in the institution is restricted to the ordained — just as the ordained person's task overall is not to minister something different from what the ministry of the whole community is meant to be; but that takes us further afield than our present concerns.

Scapegoating

There is one final point that might be drawn out in this connection. Prisons are natural places for scapegoats: they are places where society can very easily deposit its projections of its own interior sicknesses, externalising these wounds and weaknesses so that they can be 'expelled' in what's supposed to be a therapeutic purging. As I've hinted already, this may mean that the entire institution, not only the prisoners, may be the victim of the society at large. To the extent that the penal institution is so often conceived by those outside as essentially punitive, as somehow quite outside the discourse and practice of 'ordinary' corporate life, the whole institution carries a set of strongly negative expectations. We, as a society, do not look to a prison to work at healthy or therapeutic relations, at nurturing responsiveness or responsibility (which is why we should not be surprised by recidivism). We thus collude in the creation of a totalizing environment, where the style of relation taken for granted is divorced from or at odds with the style of thought of as normal or desirable elsewhere. Everyone in the institution suffers as a result of this, staff and prisoners. I suspect that, increasingly, part of the chaplain's ministry will also be to the wider society's perspectives — and it is again a ministry of truthfulness.

The separation and scapegoating of prison is a denial of the presence of disorder and violence in society, a refusal, just as damaging as that of the prisoner or prison employee unable to confront violence or guilt, to bring to light some of what shapes social identities. I've suggested that the prisoner often needs to be sprung from the trap of internalising the images of worthlessness and moral fixity that being a prisoner can entail; needs to recover the memories of healing or non-violent possibilities, so as to be able

to face more truthfully the distorted nature of criminal choice or action. Something like the reverse seems to be true for the wider society: here, what needs to be excavated is the unwholesome or destructive shadows surrounding decisions and policies and acts that we are accustomed to regarding as normal or harmless. This may emerge in various ways. When prominent figures go to jail for large-scale fraud, for example, as in Britain in the eighties, questions may and should be raised about the expectations built into financial institutions at a time when rapid and spectacular profit making is virtually a social imperative, and when human relations and patterns of conduct within such structures are dominated by an idolising of short-term success at whatever personal cost to self or others. More painfully and controversially, the sexual offender's history should prompt us to look at structures of sexual power and imagery in society, at those relations of dominance or exploitation whose presence plays at least some part in preparing the ground for sexual violence or outrage.

Public Awareness

Examples could be multiplied. It is easy to mock the approach that seems to be saying, 'We are all guilty'; and indeed, that is a formulation that can blunt the edge of judgement, and, by claiming all are responsible, end up denying that anyone really is. But, just as the prisoner needs a ministry of truthtelling to assist in putting him or her in touch with relations with positive potential, so there is a corresponding role in relation to those outside the institution, to put them in touch with the negative possibilities that the existence of a separated, enclosed penal institution makes it easier to forget. If those outside the prison can remember that the prison services the health of the whole social order, they may be less inclined to ignore injustices and immunities in the conduct of the institution, more willing to see a continuity, however stretched, between desirable relations in the wider world and what happens within the prison walls. Prison can then be understood not as a dump for our negative and destructive elements (think, by the way, of what is implied by that rather chilling term 'criminal elements' — as though destructive wrong-doing could be located in specific groups or persons, unconnected with other 'elements' in society), but as part of our recognition of social unwholeness and an expression of our willingness to work at it; and this would in turn involve asking how the practices and structures of prison life could work towards reintegration into a constructive engagement with the wider community.

Church Awareness

The chaplain, if ordained, has some possibility of raising this sort of question in the context of clerical colleagueship with pastors in parishes and other contexts; and perhaps also in the public forum of discussion.

Everything I have been discussing in this presentation assumes that the chaplain is fundamentally concerned with holding on to the continuities between contexts of action and thought that are easily pushed apart where penal institutions are concerned. Just as the Church itself, I believe, increasingly has a responsibility in the public arena for keeping alive the question of what commitments a society is actually making in its treatment of persons, so in this particular setting, the chaplain is in a privileged position to ask about commitments and priorities, and to maintain not so much a critical stance towards the institution in which s/he serves as a critical eye on what society expects from its specialist institutions, the kind that involve the sort of quasi-monastic separation from society at large that I outlined at the beginning. I need hardly say that this holds for the hospital, the school and the factory as strongly as it does for the prison.

Summary

To sum up, I have proposed:

i. That there are distinctive features about the kind of ministry we designate as 'chaplaincy': it occurs in contexts where sets of limited and specialised relationships obtain, relations different from those that most fundamentally form us as persons;

ii. That the chaplain therefore has the responsibility of preserving the awareness of these more basically constructive relationships, in the name of a God who desires to relate to persons in their wholeness, including their vulnerability;

iii. That the chaplain himself or herself must therefore be in touch with and know how to handle vulnerability, and be prepared to risk what some would see as professional reserve;

iv. That, in the prison context, this 'stewardship' of a wider network of relations is as significant for prison employees as for inmates;

v. That a similar ministry must in some way be exercised by the chaplain in regard to society itself, to work against the 'scapegoat' tendency in those attitudes to prison that see it as a place of expulsion from all

habitual forms of power, redress, development in maturity or sharing in the making of decisions — a place 'outside the law' in a paradoxical sense, a sense commented on by, for example, a writer with prison experience like John McVicar (quoted in Kimmett Edgar's excellent article on 'Quaker Peace and Prison Violence' in Theology for March/ April 1992, p. 107), who argues that the internal violence of prison life is connected to the absence of procedures of appeal, redress or accountability.

Much of this is contained in the idea of ministering truthfulness at various levels. I shall end simply by repeating a point made earlier. Such a ministry is plausible only when conducted by people who are them selves committedly truthful about their vulnerability and about their fallibility, about their own involvement in social patterns that are not life-giving. Involvement in the structures of a penal institution is itself, inevitably, an ambiguous matter, given the corrupting possibilities at work in a totalising environment. But what sustains must be a belief that prison can be a witness to a positive commitment on society's part, and expression of the willingness to work at corporate and individual failure, to confront wrong and to enable offenders to confront it; and also, more significant in the ultimate perspective, a belief in the kind of God who gives space for what may sometimes feel like a very secular discovery of a fuller self, however fractured — the kind of God who, for us as Christians, is embodied in the pastoral practice of Jesus in life and death.

Rowan Williams is Archbishop of Canterbury.

This article was originally an address to prison chaplains in April 1994 when he was Bishop of Monmouth.