

*From England*

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**BEATITUDES BEHIND BARS — FAITH  
BASED THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITIES  
IN PRISONS**

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by Jonathon Burnside

The subtitle of this book is: ‘Faith-based units in prisons’. The broad reference to ‘faith-based’ rather than ‘Christian-based’ reflects the fact that a few of the units explored in this book are ‘multifaith’ or ‘interfaith’. That said it remains the case that the vast majority of units explored in this book have an exclusively Christian basis. Moreover, even in those units designated by their founders as ‘multifaith’ or ‘interfaith’, the overwhelming majority of prisoners describe themselves as Christians. In addition, ‘multifaith’ and ‘interfaith’ units are managed by Christian staff and depend for their viability upon a volunteer force that is almost entirely Christian. All of this raises the question that was posed to us by a peer reviewer when this book was still in outline form, namely: ‘Why should Christians have anything to say about establishing community in prisons?’ This question may also be in the minds of some of our readers; hence this short Introduction.

A full and proper answer to this question is beyond the scope of this book. However in this brief Introduction we aim to provide an outline answer. There are a number of reasons why Christians might wish to be involved in establishing ‘communities in prisons’. Their reasons may be based on a set of distinctive Christian concerns which may be identified as follows: concern for prisoners; human decency; justice and just punishment; relationships and spiritual transformation.

**1. Concern for prisoners**

The first reason is a distinctively Christian concern for prisoners. No other founder of a world religion identified with criminals in the way that Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of Christianity, did. Shocking as it was, Jesus chose to be classed with criminals and to suffer the fate of a criminal. The New Testament describes how the vocation of the Messiah<sup>1</sup>, when fully played out, was to be identified with lawbreakers in his life and to be counted

among them in his death. Revealingly, when St. Luke describes the Crucifixion in his Gospel he refers to Jesus and ‘the two other criminals also’ who were crucified (Luke 23:32; italics added). The only individual to whom Jesus promised eternal life during his own earthly life was to a violent robber who was crucified with him. ‘... Today you will be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:43). A pair of criminals on a hill outside Jerusalem formed one of the first Christian communities. Jesus warned his followers to be ready to meet a criminal’s end (Mark 8:34-35). In fact, so thoroughly does Jesus identify with prisoners that Jesus nominates caring for the imprisoned as a criterion of judgement and one of the ways in which Christians may encounter his presence (Matthew 25:31-46). Authentic Christianity thus has a deep-rooted affinity with prisoners. This is one reason why Christians might wish to be involved in establishing ‘communities in prisons’.

## **2. Concern for human decency**

This distinctively Christian concern for prisoners as prisoners is part of a more general conviction that human beings are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Psalm ??) in ‘the image of God’ (Genesis 1:27). This belief, also common to Judaism, is further enhanced by the New Testament claim that, in Jesus Christ, God ‘appeared in the flesh’ (1 Timothy 3:16). This ‘hallowing of our humanity’ means that authentic Christianity must be critical of policies and institutions that violate the *imago Dei* (‘image of God’) in the human person. Whilst there is debate as to precisely what the *imago Dei* means (Westermann 1994, 147-158) it is frequently taken to include human qualities and capacities, including relationships, choice and responsibility.

Imprisonment is designed to take away relationships, choice and responsibility, at least those that might endanger the public (cf. Pryor 2002, 1). ‘[Imprisonment] is therefore necessarily de-humanising. That must sit uneasily with the professed aim of prisons to treat those sent by the courts with humanity’ (ibid.). In addition, imprisonment may also take away relationships, choices and responsibilities unnecessarily and to a greater degree than is necessary to ensure that prisons can be run safely. This raises the broader question whether the practice of imprisonment is consistent with government claims to protect the public and to deliver justice (ibid.). The Christian obligation to see the *imago Dei* in all others, including prisoners, may make it difficult for Christians to accept aspects of modern penal practice as legitimate. This is a further stimulus to reform and to Christian engagement with prison regimes.

### **3. Concern for justice and just punishment**

The question whether imprisonment delivers justice leads naturally into a third concern, namely for justice and just punishment. Again, Christians may offer a distinctive perspective. Modern political debates are dominated by questions about public management, efficiency and accountability. They are thus apt to style ‘justice’ as a ‘commodity to be measured and delivered, like healthcare and education’ (Stern 2004). From this, managerialist, perspective the function of this service is to serve ‘customers’ in the form of victims and witnesses. Thus conceived, ‘justice’ becomes synonymous with prosecution and punishment (ibid.). Escalating the number of sanctions increases the quantum of justice. In this context, criminal justice is dominated by ‘the familiar instruments of government policy or public management — legislation, circulars, directories, targets, performance indicators, contracts, systems of inspection and audit’ (Faulkner 2002, <sup>1</sup>). Such an approach tends to exclude ‘organic... dynamic and more inspirational’ (ibid.) beliefs about justice, including those found in the Bible.

The Hebrew prophet Amos speaking roundabout 760 BC said: ‘...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (Amos 5.24). This Biblical image sees justice as both organic and dynamic. Justice is seen as something mighty and surging, like the Jordan River in full flood. Justice is not a static state but an intervening power: it strikes and changes, restores and heals, and brings life to a parched land. Justice is an active power that breaks into situations of evil to bring freedom. Justice involves retribution upon the sources of oppression but it is not complete without the liberation and restoration of the oppressed. It is a rescuing action by God that puts things right.<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament affirms this picture of justice by describing the crucifixion of Jesus as the fullest expression of God’s justice (Romans 3:25–26). The cross is understood as the ultimate act of God’s justice in the Bible because it deals with oppression and restoration in the broadest possible sense. The New Testament understands the cross as the place where God wins the victory over evil and everything that holds his good creation in bondage to corruption and decay. The cross is also understood as the place where Jesus is enthroned as King. Christians believe that on the cross Jesus successfully overthrew the ultimate oppressor of humankind (namely, ‘the Satan’,<sup>3</sup> who is opposed to God’s good purposes) and bestows freedom

from Satan's tyranny (Romans 8:14–17; Hebrews 2:15–16). The cross itself cannot be separated from Jesus' resurrection and ascension which together amount to God's 'vindication' of his people and his peoples.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the Last Judgement described in the book of Revelation is presented as an act of divine justice that finally brings the victory of Israel's Messiah on the cross to bear eternally upon the whole of creation. In the Last Judgement there is both eternal retribution and eternal restoration. There is judgement upon evil (the 'lake of fire'; Revelation 19:20–21; 20:10, 14–15) which paves the way for healing, transformation and restored relationships, in the closest possible sense: 'And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Revelation 21:2). Everything that oppresses God's creation is overthrown and everything that seeks freedom from bondage is fully liberated.

To sum up, the Bible presents Christians with a challenging picture of justice that invites critical reflection on some of the narrower ideas about justice in modern public services (Marshall 2001). From a Christian perspective, justice is increased not by building more prisons but by rebuilding more prisoners. For this reason Christians may wish to be involved in faith-based prison regimes which they believe offers the chance of change, healing and restoration.

#### **4. Concern for relationships**

The need for a more organic and dynamic approach to justice leads us into a fourth area of concern, namely the importance of relationships and community for human well-being. Christianity is a 'relational' religion, with relational presuppositions and relational doctrines (Cole 2005). The distinctively Christian belief that God is a Trinity of Persons underscores the conviction that reality involves relationships. As Knox (1988) writes: 'The doctrine of the Trinity is the glory of the Christian religion. It tells us that ultimate reality is personal relationship. God is ultimate reality and is the ground of all other reality, and yet God is not a single monad or an impersonal absolute, but God is relationship... Father, Son and Holy Spirit... Through the revelation of the Trinity we learn that the living God... is a God who has relationship within Himself and that the values of relationships ultimately belong to reality in its most absolute form.' As noted in 2 above, imprisonment takes away opportunities for relationships and, even where opportunities for relationships remain, imprisonment tends to inhibit real relating, including vulnerability and self-disclosure. Consequently Christians

may seek faith-based prison units as a means of promoting more ‘relational’ prison regimes where prisoners’ relationships with their children, families, representatives of the community and one other are developed appropriately.

### **5. Concern for spiritual transformation**

The fifth concern is the most important although it cannot be separated from the others. This is the distinctive Christian belief that spiritual transformation is possible through faith in Jesus the Messiah. Christians believe that in the life, death and resurrection from the dead of Jesus of Nazareth, the purposes of God for his chosen people, Israel, and through Israel, to the world, reached their climax. Christians believe that in the Crucifixion, Jesus freely identifies himself with the plight of sinful humanity under the reign of death and pays the price for doing so. They believe that on the cross God absorbed the sin, rebellion, pain, suffering, shame and guilt of the world. The New Testament claims that those who put their trust in this story and who rely on Jesus’ accomplishments will experience deliverance from evil and from the judgement of God. Christians also believe that the resurrection and ascension of Jesus provides proof that Jesus has made a unique way into the presence of God. Those who follow him belong to a new and different world and to a new way of living that is empowered by the gift of God’s Spirit. ‘Being himself freed from the chains of death, [Jesus] now lives to free others from all that enslaves them’ (Wright 1999, 100). With this in mind, it is understandable why Christians might be motivated to provide an environment where this spiritual transformation can take place and where Christian prisoners can be encouraged to ‘walk out’ their healing.

The above concerns have been a longstanding part of traditional Christian social action. In recent years, in England and Wales, there has been growing recognition of the significant role that churches and faith communities play in social welfare. The thinktank Demos claims that ‘much of the best innovation in the provision of local health, homelessness, community regeneration and drug-related services is now being shaped by people with strong religious beliefs’ (Jupp and Mulga, 1997). Government policy now invites greater participation of distinctively religious groups in social welfare arrangements. In particular, government has paid increasing attention to the role of Christians and other faith groups in delivering public services.<sup>5</sup> In this context the Christian faith is viewed, not as something that is imposed from outside, but as a response to a need.

These new opportunities for Christians to engage in public life are in part a response to the more diminished role of the institutional church in regard to formal social provision. Longley (2000, 29) has described how the Church of England traditionally saw its duty as being to support the state which meant that, particularly during the twentieth century, '[the church] no longer needed to make its own separate investment in health, education, child welfare and so on'. The ideology of the welfare state became 'part of the complex network of church-state relations' (ibid.). Instead of having Anglican hospitals and Anglican prisons, Anglican chaplains went on the payroll of state-run hospitals and prisons, with the Prison Act 1952 establishing a full-time Church of England chaplain for every prison.

However, increasing secularisation has made the 1945 settlement on public services appear increasingly outdated. Religious population figures show that the proportion of prisoners professing to be Christians continues to decline. The number of Christian prisoners has fallen from 75 per cent of the total population in 1993 to 59.5 per cent in 2000. Prisoners professing no religion were an important minority at around 30 per cent of the total population. This was also the fastest growing group, almost doubling (181 per cent) between 1993 and 2000 (Guessous et. al. 2001). In recent years there has been a movement towards a multifaith Prison Service Chaplaincy with the appointment of the Prison Service's first Muslim Adviser in 1999. The diminishing formal role of the institutional church in public institutions such as the Prison Service has meant that Christians have had to seek new spiritual outlets.

To conclude, traditional Christian concerns for prisoners; human decency; justice and just punishment; relationships; community and spiritual transformation may lead Christians to become involved in reforming prison conditions. In England and Wales, recent trends in religious belief have lead to changes in the relationship between church and state in terms of welfare provision. The result of this is that whilst there is now a smaller role for institutional Christianity, current government policy favours establishing partnerships with faith-based groups. One result has been the development of faithbased, and largely Christian-based, units in prisons in England and Wales.

It is to the outworking of this approach, both in the UK and around the world that we now turn.

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## Footnotes

- 1 Literally "the anointed one" or God's 'king'.
- 2 For this reason some versions of restorative justice acknowledge Biblical justice as their source of inspiration. E.g. Van Ness and Strong 2002, passim.
- 3 Literally, "the Accuser".
- 4 We owe this observation to Jonathan Chaplin.
- 5 A series of 'Faithworks Lectures', explicitly affirming the role of faith and Christianity in public life, was delivered by each leader of the main political parties in early 2005; [www.faithworks.info](http://www.faithworks.info), accessed 30 March 2005.

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