

From the USA

SOME ELEMENTS OF A PRISON THEOLOGY

by **Pierre Raphael**

What desert, or rather what Kafkaesque castle is it in which a Christian has lost the sense of forgiveness while keeping that of sin! For the worst thing which can befall a person is to believe in sin, whereas there is no other Credo than that of the remission of sins. It is really the reversal of the spiritual world. A civilization where the preaching of sin has replaced that of pardon, where a narrow juridical notion of the defense of society outwardly coincides with a pitiless practice of competition and profit - such a civilization without generosity is the territory not only of unreal guilt but of a lack of exculpation.

Paul Ricoeur

If you look at a detailed map of New York, on which the street numbers are given and monuments identified, Rikers Island in the East River with its more than 13,000 inhabitants is simply a white space without any detail. A parish in these parts has no visibility, it does not exist in the official structures of the archdiocese, even though the approval of the chancery is required for the appointment of Roman Catholic chaplains. Every year the seminarians come to Rikers, meeting with prisoners once a week and thus beginning to make contact with them. Their time is too much taken up by other things for them to be able to join in our celebrations. They are in training here. Their presence is marginal but undoubtedly not without its interest for future pastors. This parish is no longer required to keep any registers. For example, it suffices if baptisms are registered at a neighboring parish on the outside. I have already done that a number of times. And there is one pleasant feature here: no collections.

Despite the deficiencies and impossibilities, to the extent that one gets close to the place one quickly sees that its ecclesial character is incontestable. What difference does a place in itself make when we find here men and women who live, believe, suffer and pray every day? Indifference or a superficial glance at the whole is not adequate. There is too much human

reality at Rikers for the chaplaincy to be merely a job, a task like any other within an administration that is often rigid and abstract, as if it were condemned to impose itself on others: “Prisons have always existed and will always exist. . . . You just have to put up with it. . . . Whether you like it or not, prisons are a business like any other. . . . You can make a career here and even build a future.” But without getting involved in the commentaries of sociologists, legal experts or even the ordinary citizens of New York, let me say that it is the church at Rikers that interests me, the flesh and blood people I meet every day and who, little by little, have become my theological locus, a land of the gospel, a land of surprises mediated by all its histories, its faces and voices.

The Trappists of Holy Cross Abbey at Berryville, Virginia, have a large library. I have been there often in the course of a number of visits to the abbey, in surroundings that are remarkably different and, for that very reason, extraordinarily helpful for my ordinary life. Their lamp bums all night. They are praying. They are an oasis. At present, as I am writing, they are involved in litigation with a group of promoters who want to build a golf course right next to the monastery. At stake is a lot of money and a lot of noise against the reality of a prayerful presence. We hear that the case has been delayed. These people do not understand that the monks in this place have dedicated themselves to a life of prayer which prevents the world from suffocating. The monks are the anti-stress factor, and such things are not for sale.

At any rate, I was hoping to find some literature about prisons in their library, to see whether they had any studies, any “theology of prisoners” based on the Bible, stemming from the experience of incarceration, a theology for the poorest of the poor, so to speak, a theology of liberation worked out together with them, and growing out of the realities in which they are immersed. I thought I would be able to go straight to the source and would easily find what I was looking for. But instead, little by little, I became aware that on these particular questions there was a veritable famine of articles and of material. I had to change my tack. So I undertook to collect some references from an index, but still without finding what I was really looking for. I only had four questions in my head, by way of a methodical beginning:

- (1) What people in the Bible were put in prison?
- (2) Why?
- (3) What happened to them?
- (4) What (good or bad) consequence resulted?

I learned that imprisonment was not used as a punishment in the ancient world; it was only employed to hold someone awaiting trial. There were no prisons, as distinct edifices. Rooms or dungeons, as places of detention, were simply parts of or additions to other buildings. Joseph and his companions were kept in a dungeon, probably in Potiphar's house (Gen 40:15, 41:40). Samson was undoubtedly imprisoned close to a place where people were working. He had to turn a mill wheel (Jg 16:21-25). Micah was kept in Ahab's palace (1 Kg 22:27) as Hosea was in the palace of the king of Assyria (2 Kg 17:4). Jeremiah had some variety: Jonathan's private house, a guard room, and even a cistern where he was expected to die. John the Baptist was kept in a fortress, not to wait for trial or execution, but to keep him away from the people. The place where the apostles were imprisoned was quite close to the Temple. Paul was confined in a private house. He mentions prison as one of the perils of his apostolate (2 Cor 6:5). It often involved chains as well (Acts 16:26).¹

But what appears most clearly in the Bible is that many men and women of God—judges, prophets and apostles—went through this experience of the power of other people over them. And very often this place of ultimate testing became a place of revelation, of the presence of God, as the story of Joseph shows (Gen 3:47).

Joseph's brothers, jealous of their father's affection for him, decided to kill Joseph. He was thrown into a pit and then sold to one of Pharaoh's Egyptian officials, Potiphar. Joseph rebuffed the advances of Potiphar's wife because he would not sin against his God. Then the woman gave false testimony against Joseph, and he was thrown into prison.

But God did not abandon Joseph; he enjoyed a position of favor within the prison. He got along well with his guards, helped the other prisoners and interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's employees, who were also in prison. After more than two years of detention, Joseph himself was called to Pharaoh to interpret his disturbing dreams. When he heard Joseph, Pharaoh realized that Joseph had the spirit of God.

Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of all of Egyptian agriculture. Joseph stored up grain as a provision against the years of famine that were coming. He welcomed his brothers, after first behaving very rudely to them. It was a time of testing, a time of emotion. He reunited his whole family in Egypt, where they experienced the blessing of God, forgiveness and the hope of the promised land.

I went on thus with Sampson in the Book of Judges, some Prophets in Chronicles and in the Book of Kings, and finally came to Jeremiaiah.

Jeremiah is a gold mine, an extremely rich model, precious and unique for everything that goes on in prison. His loneliness, his depression, his sensitivity, his distress, his clinging to the thread of life that led on through all his darkness and suffering, his tragic destiny, his powerlessness, the anticonformist attitude he maintained, the God who erupted so rudely into his life ... all these have brought me to speak of him very often to the prisoners.

Studying Jeremiah, seeing him struggling at the “center of misery” as well as at the “center of mystery” is already a doorway, an exit from here. I believe that all the misery of the world, all the cries, all the patience of every individual are recorded and mingled in Jeremiah. He is a witness. He is a beacon. He does more than he seems to do: he “is.” He is impaled. This man of peace and tender friendships knew nothing on this earth but war and exile.

I admit it. It is only since I have been at Rikers that I have discovered Jeremiah, that he has become someone for me. It is as if we need certain situations and experiences to recover a message. As the prisoners often say, one after another, at those moments when the light begins to dawn: “But all that is what’s happening to me right now!” Even if we cannot push the identification too far, even if we have to respect limits and make adjustments, they understand very fast. They are in a state of receptivity that is rarely found anywhere else.

And then I turned to Paul, with his letters from captivity: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon.² Paul knew more than one captivity. Clement of Rome counted seven of them. The book of Acts, which mentions several, has no allusion to an arrest of the apostle at Ephesus. We only know that he had been in grave danger there, which he refers to as his “fighting with the beasts” (1 Cor 15:32). Only Paul’s letter to the Philippians furnishes us with precise details of that captivity, during which the letter was written. We also have his note to Philemon regarding a fugitive slave who had become a brother, whom Paul recommends warmly to his former master. We also know of his journey to Rome, in which he was a prisoner from beginning to end: arrested at Jerusalem, imprisoned at Caesarea, he was detained for two years awaiting a trial which did not take place. In spite of well-founded hopes that he would be freed, the possibility of martyrdom was never out of his view.

All these periods of forced immobility were for Paul the occasion for reflection and an opportunity to present himself in full confidence as the “privileged revealer of the mystery of Christ to the Gentiles,” in solidarity with the other apostles. For him, his captivity was part of the plan of God. Called for the salvation of the Gentiles, he is now a prisoner of Christ Jesus for their sake (Eph 3:1). The sufferings he endures in his captivity are completing his work. After having been a minister of the church by his apostolic work, he completes, in his apparent inactivity, those things suffered by Christ (Col 1:24).

In captivity Paul remains the apostle who is always free. His presence at Rome, even in prison, marks a resumption of activity for the sake of the whole community. His disciples and friends find in Paul a powerful encouragement. He takes advantage of his personal influence for the interests of the gospel: “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear” (Phil 1:12-14). Even in his absence the apostle remains attentive to the daily sufferings of the Christian community, as well as to the passing crazes that endanger the purity of their faith. His captivity has made him understand that he is approaching the end of his career. He is finishing, in truth and fullness, what began one day on the road to Damascus. Jesus found him, and he found Jesus. Nothing can touch him now. He is free. This is not pride in oneself, but total confidence in Christ.

Paul’s imprisonment left him uncertain to the very end about the outcome. But that does not matter; he has renounced every thing for the perfect joy of union with Christ. He says so to the Philippians: for him, now, “to live is Christ.”

Approaching Paul from the prisoner’s point of view does not prevent, but on the contrary encourages us to look at his life as one wide open to unbelief and to borderline people. I like the fact that he went to Athens, and to the Areopagus. I like the fact that his letters and his thought take their departure from other people’s questions and the chains he endures, that he works in order not to be a burden to anyone, that he has a criminal past and a thousand disappointments. The conversion of Paul, the reflections of Paul the captive, are a fertile source for Rikers.

But to return to my prison theology, an inventory, even if systematic and detailed, drawn from the whole Bible still left me hungry. I did not see where to go with it. I had not been able to bring it together as a coherent whole. I felt I was marking time, and on the other hand that I had an inkling of something important. I asked some questions of my friends here and there, and wrote some letters, but again without result. How was I going to deal with what I was living every day in the “church in prison”? And then one day I stumbled on an article entitled “Custody and the Ministry to Prisoners”.³ I would like at this point to summarize the article, adding some commentary, because it gave me, black on white, just what I was looking for everywhere, without knowing exactly what it was.

First of all, the author establishes a point pregnant with meaning and understood so well by many friends here. It seems that neither the Bible nor the church’s tradition has anything particular or specific to say about prison, for the simple and unique reason that prison, normally, should not exist.

There is nothing in the Mosaic Law about imprisonment. Punishment, by the law of talion, consists of a penalty equal to the offense: eye for eye, tooth for tooth. There is a death penalty, too. One is obliged to make restitution. And if that is impossible, the debtor becomes a slave. There is also the penalty of flagellation. The whole system presupposes a society based on strong religious convictions, as well as a society that accepts slavery.

Nevertheless, from the beginning we read about people who are put in prison: those who are subsequently to be judged, or else those who are dangerous and from whom society needs protection. That very quickly becomes an established custom, even if, theoretically, prison is something abnormal, unknown to the law. It is considered a manifestation of an imperfect society and of circumstances governed by sin.

It is on this basis that we are to understand the messianic promise of Isaiah 61:1, which Jesus makes his own at the beginning of his public life: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. . . He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” It should be noted that this is not an envoy sent to act, but to proclaim: to proclaim the end of the established disorder a prison is. The Messiah is to announce liberation from all shackles and from all chains.

Revolutions in every age have always included among their first actions the opening of prisons. This is not to establish anarchy, but because prisons are the sharpest sign of the unjust society the revolution intends to change.

In the New Testament and the church's tradition, a ministry to prisoners has always been recognized and encouraged. Since the days of Jesus there has been a solidarity in principle between Christians and every victim of human sin, whether voluntary or involuntary. "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them" (Heb 13:3).

There has never been, in the tradition, any trace of embarrassment regarding the attitude one ought to take toward prisoners, as if there were some kind of choice to be made between punishing and forgiving, or as if this ministry risked interfering too much with a judgment already given.

Little by little, in the course of history, something happened as the church realized that it was not merely responsible for ministry to prisoners, but was involved in the organization of prisons themselves, and in their reform and betterment.

It is not possible here to go into the details of this history, its evolution, or the debates that are still going on. Christians who serve in prisons are involved in them in every way, in the name of what their faith demands of them. Even if the Bible says nothing about the purpose of prisons, there are principles that remain as beacons for our conduct and the way we view them. Several things are certain:

(1) A ministry to prisoners, if it is Christian, is not just a gratuitous and inoffensive gesture simply to be tolerated. It is demanded by Jesus: "I was in prison and you came to visit me." It is found at the beginning of the church's apostolate. This ministry is not specialized; it is nothing exceptional. It is only one ministry among others. Still, in our day it is neither very common nor widespread. A hospital has a much better chance of finding a chaplain.

(2) Prisons are not the only places where we can find dehumanization or absence of liberty. An unemployed person, an undocumented alien, a vagrant, a prostitute—all are victims in differing degrees, in one way or another, of pernicious circumstances that result from human sin. My experience at Rikers from the very earliest days showed me this quite clearly. People are alike, and I could meet on the street the whole complex of people I see here. I believe that I received that perception as a shock and an encouragement: a shock because of the human vulnerability and fragility (someone asked a prisoner: "Why are you in prison?" and the prisoner answered, echoing Thoreau, "Why aren't you?"); encouragement because of the possibility of contact and the promise of a life that is never completely extinguished.

(3) This ministry has a dimension proper to itself. How can one accept the liberty for captives promised by Christ when one is in prison? What chaplain has not had to ask himself or herself that question?

Proclaiming liberty for captives means announcing a situation in which there are no more prisons. But is that something that is already accomplished or will it only come later? As with the reign of God, we need to answer: "It is here and not yet here." It is here in those transparent moments, for example, in certain meetings, celebrations, retreats, and events when, if the group seems to be something more than the individuals who make it up, one sees, realizes, understands the significance of the words repentance, conversion, communion. Even if it is always necessary to make discernment between instinctive impulses, passing emotions, and a work of the Spirit that creates a rebirth of the J brothers and sisters in and through their crosses and their joys, these blessed moments are flashing instants in which there is no more prison. On such a day we travel far, and the unthinkable becomes realistic: a society without prisons.

The liberty for captives is not yet here when there is no other possible alternative for criminals except prison.

It is not a question of a pendulum balancing between utopia and good, solid common sense, but of knowing how to nourish within oneself the certainty that prisons will one day cease to exist because human beings will have accepted God's view of them, because they will have found their center.

The article speaks of experience as a means of fortifying within oneself this certainty of the end of prisons. This goes to the depth of our hearts, with their heavy resistance and acquiescence. The keys are personal repentance, generosity and a living church that is discovering and following its own road.

We are here far removed from the ideas about prisons to be found in the newspapers or in the media. Without devaluing in any way the attempts that are being made here or there to improve or change approaches to correction, we still need to say that the truth about each of us must be plumbed in all its depth if we are to arrive at total liberation. When someone has reached absolute bottom, the point at which he or she has nothing more to lose, the church, which has in itself the treasures of life, is the only organ that is truly a friend and capable of response. Every other presence, every other voice may fill the air with music and the ocean with waves, but in the final analysis it can only be incomplete and leave us unsatisfied. Because they have been

wounded at the heart, because they have seen too much, prisoners will be quick to discern watered-down reality, the poseur within the witness and even the traitor in the faithful friend. Many have surprised me with their quick understanding. There is an intelligent instinct in the prison because it is the instinct of the poor.

There are living and explosive forces here, full of question marks for a society that is too simplistic. How can I be a member already told me so many lies? I am reminded of that great film from the fifties, "La Strada." If so many prisons are full of Zampanos, hunting tigers roaring in their cages, we need just as many Gelsominas to explode their armor and free the child within the most hardened of them. In a situation of dereliction, malice and intense anger, only the gospel is able to disarm, to restore and to make possible a new dawn. The story of John the Baptist in prison, of the criminal on the cross alongside Jesus, the original words of Christ and of all the witnesses who followed him pierce the walls and bars of Rikers. Here is the fragility of an elementary and vague unbelief that does not know where or to whom to turn. Here is the confused and cringing sound of faith finding whatever gestures it can, reaching out for relationship and for simplicity, and seeking in darkness and the desert for living words. "My mother always said to me: 'You are going to end up killing me' Now here I am in prison, and yesterday she died. She died because of me! Please help me!" (These were the words of an inmate to the community during Mass) A wise person has said: "Something is lacking in anyone who has never known unhappiness, illness or prison."

So a prison theology cannot be a theology of ordinary days, of the necessary commonness of existence that is called normal, that is recognized and naturally integrated into society. That is not to say that such an existence is without problems or surprises; the world is too full of mystery for that. In any case, in prison, it very quickly becomes a theology of the cross and the resurrection against the forces of death, a theology of conscience, a theology of life. It takes its departure from that massive reality of suffering and sin, from the radical questions. That is why it can only originate with these people, with those who know or have known what it means to be in prison. Jesus' concern moved beyond people's actions to their hearts: "Your faith has saved you." And in prison, everything boils down to the story of that faith.

If the history of human violence, however deep and however real, goes back to the world's earliest beginnings, back to Cain, it ends at the cross. To triumph over it, nothing less was needed than the death of God. And Jesus died between two criminals! I ask myself whether the "happy Good Friday" I heard this year at Rikers is not trying to say exactly that. The men associated with his suffering and death were criminals. One of them made his exit in a divine way, moving from defeat to absolute victory, the first one to be saved, the first one canonized by the death of Christ. The other enclosed himself in his own refusal.

It is also for that reason that prison theology, which heals by fixing its view on the cross of Christ, cannot fail to include the past and thus, in a great many cases, the innocent sufferers, the victims. The silence of graves, the sorrow of broken families, the contempt for collective or private rights—no one can trivialize or lightheartedly accept this state of affairs. To return to communion with God and others, even if it has nothing to do with human justice or the world's opinion, cannot involve an avoidance of responsibility for restitution or reparation, what the church calls expiation. It is the rediscovery of the treasure so often hidden in every life, namely, conscience. Sharing to the extent possible in the irremediable act one has committed, bearing the marks of it before God, is also the way of salvation. This is one of our lasting reflections at Rikers. We never have communal prayer without mentioning the victims.

Here I might insert, as a counterpoint or alternative view by way of balance, the words of a father whose daughter had been strangled by a sadist. He found the strength to say to the newspaper people who were storming his house in New York: "Don't waste your time replacing love with hatred."

The time lived in prison is dead time, or time alone with thoughts, with the coming and going of faith and its appearances, of refusal and acceptance, of doubt and conviction. "Even in prison, if you are with God, you are a giant," says Jimmy. In the streets, in the prisons, there are surprises: unawaited presences where God is hidden or revealed.

For those in prison, far removed from the normal responsibilities which are also the sign of one's dignity, the leaden casing of evil and sin presses down horribly. I have already spoken about Jacob's struggle in the dark. We have no grip. The weight of silence makes us bum to hear something. We are obsessed with time. Everybody here watches the clock or the calendar. The

same questions are raised again and again: “How long have you been here? How much time did you get? When is your trial?” Life in prison could easily be represented by the hands of a clock. And yet, my task is to say that life is not reducible to the hands of a clock that it can change, even for a prisoner. You know, you see that evil exists. You have your feet in the mud here. But you have eyes, too. You see that life is something quite different, that it is much greater, that there is someplace else.

Should one search for God in sincerity or just turn over a new leaf at the lowest cost? There are moments of truth, those of life and of prayer really shared. There are signs, words, and gestures that do not deceive, people used to playing rough who get broken along the way and lay themselves bare.

I have prayed in C 95 with a man, still young, who had killed his mother. It was a crazy, horrible crime. He was very pale and looked like a lost man, crushed by the misery that had fallen upon him. He complained of constant headache and said he had nothing left. Today he left Rikers; he went to an upstate prison to serve his sentence. I do not know whether he has kept his faith and spiritual life, but when I was face to face with him, I knew by his attention and the quality of what he shared with me that we were in what believers call the invisible kingdom.

A priest from Mexico confided to me one day his strong conviction that “mentally ill people always understand when it’s a question of God.”

But aren’t there good reasons to be skeptical? moments when the confessions sound false or penitence is only a pretence? The test, as in everything, is endurance. When you are building on rock, you have to begin very small.

In these conversations there are not only failing tears or bleeding hearts. There is often also an unconscious desire to equate human justice with God’s justice. “Because I am being punished by human beings, I am being punished by God; God has put me in here for some reason.” And here again I have to help them understand that people can punish, but God can forgive, and that God knows that I have sinned even if people wipe it from the record. Human justice and God’s justice don’t necessarily overlap. I repeat this to them over and over again. Teresa of Avila said, “I know when I commit a grave fault. If I put myself in hell, I can’t hide it from myself. I don’t need other people’s opinion to know it and to judge myself.”

Forgiveness

Now I come to the heart of my theological reflections on prisons. I have already touched on it, but I want to speak of it in a more concise and developed way, because it is only the lack of it that causes the death of everyone at Rikers or elsewhere. I am speaking of forgiveness. Even the Christian who is “just”, who is no one special, is first of all a forgiven sinner. Forgiveness is my passion. After twenty-eight years of priesthood, what I still value most, what I have really discovered here, is forgiveness. From the depth of my soul and conscience, I would say that it is this that brings me to the center of what the church entrusted to me in 1961. For me, as for the majority of people, I am sure that it is both the place where the enemy is vanquished and the locus of the greatest revelation of God.

There is the experience of pardon in the Old Testament. (4) It came to pass that God “was sorry and grieved to the heart” to see the wickedness of human beings on earth (Gen 6:5-6), but even so, after the deluge, God announced: “I will never again curse the ground because of human beings” (Gen 8:21). Even before it is pity, God’s forgiveness is a will to give life.

After the episode of the golden calf, when Moses begged God to pardon the people even at the cost of his own life (Ex 32:32), God responds with a self description: “A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex 34:6-7). God is capable of anger, but anger does not define who God is. The explanation of God’s anger is the weight of sin, its capacity for destruction and death, all at work in creation. But there is no proportion between that power of death and the strength of life and salvation which comes to us in Jesus (Rom 8:38-39).

Abraham’s great prayer of intercession for Sodom (Gen 18:23-32) and Amos’s prayer for Israel in mortal danger (Amos 7:2-6) not only express a profound notion of human solidarity, but are both provoked by a divine intervention. For example: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (Gen 18:17). Hosea’s experience was exceptional. God ordered this prophet to take back his adulterous wife even though, according to the letter of the law, she should have been put to death together with her lover (cf. Jn 8:5). In the demand that Hosea forgive his wife we see a partial revelation of who God is: I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I

will not come to destroy” (Hos 11:9). It is impossible to know how Hosea came to understand that what was true of him was true also of God, that here was a God who suffered and was in pain because of the infidelity of God’s people. He saw that God’s forgiveness is a fact. For the sinner, it is always an encounter, a new birth.

In forgiving, God says who God is. “With everlasting love I will have compassion on you .. for this is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you” (Is 54:8-9).

The people who heard and who wrote these words were a people who were vanquished, deported, dishonored. They had lost everything, their king, their temple, their law, their land, and suddenly they had realized that salvation was at hand. Their attitude was not so much an imaginary leap into the future as a certainty that their God was active on their behalf. If a ray of hope remains in the midst of catastrophe, it comes from this God who does not accept the sin, but wills that the sinner should live (Ezek 18:23-32).

And, of course, there is Jesus and the experience of forgiveness. One of the notable features of the beginning of the gospels, in the scenes with John the Baptist and Jesus, is that many sinners came to be baptized and receive pardon for their sins (Mk 1:5; Jn 3:23). It is only after the arrest of John the Baptist that Jesus moves out to proclaim the message of joy, the good news. John the Baptist announced the advent of Jesus by saying that he would be a terrible threat to sinners (Mt 3:10). Jesus proclaims that his coming is a joy for everyone (Lk 2:10). That is why he cannot remain in any one place, and always has to go elsewhere to proclaim the gospel.

“Elsewhere” means primarily among those people who have no way of knowing this good news. Concretely, sinners are those whom honest people reject and exclude, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. Nearly all the words of forgiveness in the gospels are addressed to sinners. Every time, that pardon changes everything. “Do you see this woman?” (Lk 7:44). Take a good look at her and you will understand who God is and what forgiveness means.

In forgiving, God tells us why God is there. Jesus goes out of his way to encounter sinners and welcomes them so warmly primarily because it is for them that he has come, and for the sick and those who have no one (Jn 5:7). If he does not come to see them, these people are condemned to perish. For

Jesus' forgiveness is the revelation of sin, its power to paralyze and to kill. But death is something God cannot stand, and Jesus has come to prove this, to seek out and save that which is lost. (Lk 19:10).

To lose something, whether a sheep or a piece of silver, is a dramatic event, especially for the poor, and finding it is a joy. The gospel purposely emphasizes Jesus' intention in giving these examples: It is to respond to the accusations of those who say that he "welcomes sinners and eats with them"(Lk 15:2).

The words "your sins are forgiven" tell us what it means to receive forgiveness. It is Jesus' recognition of faith, of that personal movement toward himself which happens in an encounter, a dialogue, a word received from someone.

"Forgive that your Father may forgive you"(Mk 11:25). "Forgive us as we forgive others" (Mt 6:12). Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Mt 18:33). No matter what form it takes, the Lord's command is categorical. To enter into the divine secret of forgiveness is to find oneself obligated to share it. The life saved, the healing, the end of a sentence or a condemnation cries out and proclaims itself. In chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel we see that the gospel community is founded on forgiveness. There is no real community unless all those present are willing to be brothers and sisters. The church, in its early days, lived this forgiveness. The moment of crisis was the entry of Gentiles into the Christian community. They were admitted in the name of forgiveness, the imperative law and the hope offered to all humanity.

But forgiveness may not fly in the face of justice. Anyone who pardons without weighing the injustice and seeing the evil in it forgives badly, refusing to relieve the human heart of its wickedness. But there is no justice without moderation. It is not a question of abolishing it, but of moving toward that more abundant justice that is presented in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:20): "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." We are talking about entering into a new world, where relationships broken by evil are restored. Forgiveness always has a collective dimension. It touches other people. We forgive that we may be forgiven (Mt 6:14-15). But we are not talking about making calculations, as if I could pay for my pardon through the pardon I give my enemy. Instead, it is a question of truthfulness. If I

ought to forgive, it is because I myself need to be forgiven. I am a sinner. Moreover, every fault, no matter how secret, touches other people. Sin wounds the world, the church, the body of Christ.

Repentance is impossible unless human beings accept their responsibility before God. It begins with the words of confession: I have willed what is evil and have done it (cf. Psalm 51). This is done in openness and honesty, in interior clarity. It is impossible to con the gospel.

Christian confession liberates. Anyone who is bound by his or her mortal guilt cannot really be re-created except by a powerful word coming from outside. The “I absolve you from your sins” of the sacrament of reconciliation is that liberating word. It originates in the will to heal chosen by Jesus, the physician, a will and a choice that consisted of nothing less than taking on himself our own sickness (Mt 8:17).

If there were no pardon for the sinner or hope for a new future, I would have left Rikers long ago. What kind of hope is there in prison? When a person hits bottom, weeps, has lost everything, searches in the dark, how can we not think of forgiveness? As long as there is life and breath, I am infinitely certain that a person can change, even in prison. Sin is a hindrance to liberty, a hindrance to love, an open wound, a sickness to be given to God.

The boy whose two brothers had been violently killed, and whose other two brothers are in prison like him, lives, prays and hopes. It was he who said to me: “I have learned my lesson. I want to get out -and this time, with God.”

The AIDS patients in the hospital have a lot to think about, Some of them are exhausted and have lost all their strength. Their neighbors, companions in misfortune, help them as best they can. “We are crutches for each other,” says one of them.

If a human being does not know that he or she is forgiven and loved by God, if hope is cut off, that person is like a walking corpse, a breathing death. And that is the worst kind of death. It is even worse than being killed, cut down by a firearm. Because it is final. In this short life there are some rays of light that can touch it. They come from the possibility of forgiveness the church gives. The church has a treasury of life that lasts forever. There is no failure and nothing is hopeless for those who begin to love again.

**A Note on Jesus’ Words in Matthew 25:36
‘I Was in prison and You Came to Visit Me’**

Since my first days at Rikers I have lived through several interpretations of these words. Perhaps now it is the time to say how I understand them today. Because things are clearer now. Experience is always an ongoing education. I can never pretend to be a prison specialist. Every day is a new world. Every person is a new world. I have said it before and I will repeat it: You cannot meet a prison population; you can only meet persons.

I used to think when I started going to Rikers that Jesus could be found everywhere and in whomever in prison, that it was sufficient for a person to be a prisoner in order for him immediately to be the object of compassion. I have learned that to approach people from this angle is to wander aimlessly, to manipulate the Word of the gospel. I had to bring the stern and saving message of the gospel to everything I saw in prison. Then came the realization that here there was too much evil, too many enemies for me to deny their reality. The evidence of too many bad habits and the absence of remorse could not be hidden.

What the gospel, and especially St. Matthew says to me is that I can only hope to meet Jesus in his brothers, the least of them, his disciples who follow him in real life and profoundly in those who struggle to stand up again after they have fallen, in those who are here through an injustice. Such persons are sources of light and examples of the beatitudes. I am convinced that there are such people at Rikers Island. I will be judged by how I have responded to the grace here in this place.

No one can live without responsibility., we are all responsible for our choices. The one who chooses evil, who imprisons himself in it and keeps playing a game cuts himself off and falls into an abyss. I do not possess the last word in these situations. Even in this place of seemingly endless misery there will always be the necessary prudence, common sense and compassion. I have learned that in prison excommunication is self-inflicted by those who consciously and deliberately choose to say no. If I don't reject the evil I hear or see or do, I then reject God and his mercy. I place myself out of reach of forgiveness, which reaches out for everyone. Jesus is not everywhere. He cannot be in what is evil. Jesus is in the least of his brethren and he waits for all of us there.

Notes

1. The above information is taken from McKenzie Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
2. The following material on Paul relies heavily on Lucien Cerfaux, *L'Itineraire Spirituel de St. Paul* (Paris: Cerf, 1966).
3. A. E. Harvey, "Custody and the Ministry to Prisoners" *Theology* 78(1975)

1. The following material was found under the word pardon in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualite* (Paris: Bauchesne, 1984).

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