From England

OFFENDERS AND THEIR BELIEFS

by Jane Clay

'What religion are you?' This is one of the questions that prisoners are asked when they are received into a new prison. The answers can be as varied as there are religions, but in my prison, a women's prison in West Yorkshire, most people say Church of England, Roman Catholic, Muslim or, increasingly amongst our younger prisoners, 'Nil'.

One of our chaplaincy team visits them very soon after they come to us and one of the things we have to do is to check whether or not their religion has been recorded correctly. Often the confusion and distress they feel when they first come to prison means that they say anything that comes into their head or even perhaps what they may have heard the person in front of them say. Those who have answered 'Nil' often admit to a clear belief in God but have an unwillingness to own allegiance to a religion or church. Others are very sure that one of their family, often their grandmother, 'nana', is a Christian: so they would like to be counted as that while they are in prison, perhaps as an insurance policy, more probably because they know that 'nana' is praying for them and they want to be part of that.

Prayer is very important to many of our prisoners. They are powerless and are devastated by their inability to care for their families. Most of them are mums. Some of our 16 and 17 year olds have two or three children. (Of course, they are children themselves - we look after girls as young as 15). They love their babies and feel that if they can do nothing else they can pray for them. I have said this to some Christian groups and have been challenged. 'If these women really cared about their families they would not have broken the law in the first place.' If only it was that simple. They are offenders and their offences have led to heartbreak and confusion for their children, but they still love them dearly and one of the few things that they can do is pray for

them. They pray in the quietness of their own room. They pray in corporate worship. Well over half the prisoners come to chapel services and woe betide the chaplain if she forgets to leave a time of silence in the prayer time for individuals to remember those they love. They may not know how to pray, but they know that naming those they love in the sacred space that is the chapel, is naming them before God and so is prayer.

They long to do something to express this prayerful concern and so we light many candles. Candles for joy, but more often for sorrow - candles for birth but more often for death. Always the candles are for love and take on a deeply spiritual conviction when lit in the chapel with prayer and placed on the altar to burn for several hours. Usually the prayer is put into words, sometimes by the prisoner, sometimes by the chaplain. I was praying with Nichola, who had lit a candle for Heather who had died when injecting heroin into her groin. Nichola was crying too much to say anything herself and so I tried to express something of what she might be feeling in a prayer. During a pause when I was struggling to find the next words, she said 'That will do Jane.' It was the best way of saying 'amen' I have heard for a long time.

Many have a deep-rooted conviction that God will hear their prayer for other people. For many there is an equally deep-rooted conviction that he will not consider their prayer for themselves. This is strongly related to their attitude to forgiveness. I think my colleagues in male prisons might have different stories to tell about this, as about many other things in this paper, but women are often racked with remorse. They can just about understand that some victims may offer forgiveness (though forgiveness is not something any of us can ever require of another human), but the prisoners cannot forgive themselves for what they have done. This is not necessarily through empathy with their victim, they often lack that, which is why victim awareness work is so important. What they are completely aware of is the terrible effect their crime and imprisonment has on their families. One of the important roles a chaplain plays is to talk about the forgiveness of God freely offered to those who are sorry. An understanding of God's love and forgiveness may lead them to be able to forgive themselves and then to forgive others who have hurt them

and so contribute to a healing which may lead to a crime free life on release.

I am constantly moved by the depth of their prayer for each other. One way of surviving in prison is to become selfish and uncaring of those around you, but many women choose to reach out to those who need love and care and develop a deep generosity. They may only earn a few pounds each week, but will give each other cigarettes. We make endless cups of tea and coffee for people who come in for a chat. The prison does not supply that; we rely on the generosity of local Christians and especially on the Mothers' Union. Often a prisoner will bring some of her own hard earned supplies. They pray out loud for each other in a way which does not break confidentiality. They often cry for each other. When a woman who has been part of our chapel family is leaving, we always send her out with prayer. She comes to the front of Chapel after our Holy Communion service and one or two (or sometimes a whole crowd) gather round her and lay hands on her and we send her out with God's blessing. Recently we have been joined by some Jamaican women who have taught us that everyone in the group should stretch out their hands towards the one who is leaving. So that is what we do, without any self-consciousness and with as complete an understanding of 'laying on of hands' as any Christian group of which I have been a part. Touching and intimacy are very important to us. Many women in prison have been abused and touch can feel very dangerous to them. In Chapel, we are restrained and careful about hugging, but rarely does someone shrug off a gentle touch on the arm. It seems important to reach out literally to someone who has just told you some intimate part of their life story, somehow to acknowledge the privilege that has been. All the people who are part of the chaplaincy team here at New Hall feel that we receive so much more from the women than we give.

Recently a group of the younger women started to come to Holy Communion. On Sunday well over half the prison comes to Chapel; this is not uncommon in a women's gaol. On Monday night Holy Communion there is a smaller group of more committed people. On one occasion, some new younger women were being a bit disruptive, nothing serious, simply giggling, and being silly. The older women valued the peaceful, safe atmosphere in Chapel and I held a separate

meeting with them and offered to have a separate service with the younger ones. They were adamant. The young women must stay and we must change to accommodate them. I know that most churches would welcome any of our women who might want to join them, but I wonder if they would be as willing to change and accommodate those women as are our own prisoners.

I have pondered long on why so many come to Chapel on Sunday morning. It is certainly not because they have all become committed church-going Christians, but it does have something to do with discovering spirituality. For many of them it is the first time they have stopped and thought about their lives. 'On the out' they have hectic, often chaotic, lives all too often consumed by their drug or alcohol addiction. In prison, they become clean from drugs; the responsibility of their families is taken from them; they do not have to 'graft' for their next fix and in this space they discover they are spiritual beings. They come to Chapel to see if the chaplains can make sense of this, perhaps even give them a vocabulary to express what they are feeling. Most churches know that strangers who drop in for a service are often at crisis point. All women in prison are at crisis point; they come to Chapel to see if the church or even God has anything to say to them in their dilemma. The Chapel is a place of beauty and stillness and offers peace. I visited some of the women on our Detox Unit who had just arrived and were withdrawing from heroin and cocaine. I invited them to Chapel. Other women in the room made a better job of inviting them than I did. 'Yes', one said, 'come to Chapel, you will forget your rattle (withdrawal symptoms) for a little while'. There is something very strong about the power of a caring community and a sharing of vulnerability. My mother died from cancer. While she was ill I asked the women to pray for us. Their fervency touched me but not as much as their care did when I returned to work after her death. I could not walk a few yards in the prison before someone came up and said how sorry they were and gave me a hug. They understood because loss and bereavement are often major parts of their lives. Their prayer is so natural. If someone does not wish to receive the bread and wine at Communion she will receive a prayer of blessing. I was praying with someone one day and at the end she looked me straight in the eye and said 'The same to you, Jane.' I felt very prayed for! Often when a woman reaches desperation point she asks to come

to Chapel. It is because of the atmosphere of prayerfulness in the building, the sense of community and the practical way they show care to each other. I do not meet so many people in the church outside prison who really need the Christian family in the way some prisoners do.

Each Sunday we pray for the staff of the prison. Only once did someone hiss at this and the others soon let her know that her reaction to praying for staff was completely unacceptable. On many occasions prisoners will ask for prayer for a particular officer on the wing whom they know is experiencing a difficult time. One of our officers died recently. Some prisoners donated as much as 20 per cent of their meagre weekly earnings to a charity his wife had chosen.

For some prayer is regarded as having magical properties. 'I go to court this week, Jane, pray that I will get off'. My response? 'No chance, but I will pray that you are treated with justice and compassion'. My Roman Catholic colleague is plagued with requests for rosary beads (called rosemary beads by everyone). There is a strong superstition around the possession of the beads which he works hard to combat. Often the women's approach is simple and superstitious, but for many of them it is a tentative moving towards God, which it is our responsibility as chaplains to nurture.

Occasionally someone comes to Chapel who seems to understand only too well the power of prayer. I remember one woman who was convicted of a particularly nasty violent crime. She came to Chapel with a strong Christian faith and a total conviction that God would open the prison gates for her in much the same miraculous way that he had when St. Paul was in prison. Part of our job in the chaplaincy was to enable her to find a real freedom by facing up to her crime and truly repenting.

Every Sunday in our worship we say together a prayer in which we acknowledge what we have done to hurt other people, hurt ourselves and so hurt God. That prayer always includes the congregation, the person leading the services and even the officers at the back, although I am not sure they always appreciate it! One Monday morning a woman asked to see me. She had been in the service and she said something strange had happened to her. She had suddenly realised the

true impact of her offence on her family and had become overwhelmed with sorrow. She continued 'Then I felt a real sense of everything being OK and a sort of warm feeling right over my body and I knew that God loved me.' It was my joy to tell her that she had experienced something that I never had, the physical presence of God through his Holy Spirit. I wish I could tell you what happened to her but she left the next day. The good thing is that we have never seen her again!

In our Christian Chapel we always use Christian names. The women are sometimes called by their surnames and they always carry a number, but that is never referred to in Chapel. One Maundy Thursday service several years ago was attended by a governor who was a Christian. We all went round and said our first names and he simply said 'Mike'. A sense of oneness was created and no one ever took advantage of that gift he gave them that night. Prisoners, however, can be very good at taking advantage. They sometimes take advantage of each other and can be very cruel to each other. On Ash Wednesday I offered each woman a tissue before she left Chapel to wipe the ash from her forehead. I feared that they would face ridicule on the wing. None chose to take one, but all went back proudly wearing the Christian badge.

Tissues play a big part in our ritual. Chapel is a safe place and women often cry there. So do the chaplains. Prayer can unlock tears and when women weep there is always someone who will take the initiative, even in the middle of a service, bring her the tissues and comfort her. It has become just as important a part of our rite as sharing the peace is in other places.

In prison it is very easy to become very inward looking. We have a team of volunteers from local churches who are part of the chaplaincy team and remind us that God's church extends far beyond our prison fence. Our volunteers are marvellous. Some come in for a day a week and share in the enormous pastoral workload that there is. Women in prison bring with them all their concerns and hopes and fears and they frequently want to talk. Sometimes they need professional intervention from our colleagues in the Probation or Psychology Departments, but often they just need a break, a cup of coffee (nice coffee and proper milk in the Chapel), and someone to listen and care.

Volunteers try to support them when things are rough with their family. They are there (along with the many other caring staff in the prison) when the women discover that they will not be allowed to care for their children when they are released. They share with them when they receive bad news from home, especially if it is a news of a death. The volunteers listen when they talk about the abuse they have suffered. They try not to judge when they talk about the grim things they have done. They pray with them when they come to Chapel to light a candle. They spend hours with them if they loose their equilibrium and end up on the segregation unit. The chaplaincy could not do this without the volunteer members of our team and the prisoners often appreciate talking to someone who is not a paid member of staff carrying keys. Other volunteers help lead groups or conduct worship. It is refreshing to have new ideas, different styles, other influences. A third group of volunteers come to join in worship and to let us know that we are part of Christ's worldwide church. I would like to pay tribute to the Mothers' Union which offers us enormous support in Chapel. We have a MU branch which two outside members lead. We run a parenting group which MU members' support. The diocese gives us great support in this. It is led by the diocesan Family Life and Marriage Education officers. One of them is a man. I cannot exaggerate his importance or the importance of the other male members of the chaplaincy team. The women at New Hall need to meet safe men. The FLAME officer spends a great deal of time in the meetings modelling fathering. Many of our women have never been parented adequately themselves and so have no real insight into how to parent their own children. Indeed they may have had horrendously negative experiences at the hands of their parents. Because of this I used to worry about talking about God as 'Father'. One day I was talking to one of our very committed Christian prisoners about my fears. I thought it would resonate with her because I knew she had received terrible treatment at the hand of her father. However she was absolutely clear that she could easily understand the goodness of God's Fatherhood and that her understanding of this in some way helped to compensate for the terrible experiences she had.

Last June one of our long-term women came rushing into Chapel clutching a letter. It was from a little girl who lives in Vukovar. Every year we join in 'Operation Christmas Child'. We pack shoeboxes full

of gifts to send to children who would not otherwise receive a Christmas present. In the past our gifts have gone to the former Yugoslavia and last year they went to Afghanistan. Michelle had written a Christmas card for one of the boxes and included her name and address. Maria had written back to say thank you. It was a thank you to all of us, and of course we all cried! Nearly everyone in the prison takes part. Some knit or make beautiful hats, scarves, gloves or toys; some give sweets, toiletries, crayons and paper; the young offenders group make stunning Christmas cards; the workroom covers the shoe boxes in Christmas paper given by members of staff who also bring in toys. By the time we sent our gifts to the local depot last year there must have been enough to fill nearly 200 shoeboxes. This is yet another example of the women's generosity and it also helps us to remember that although many of us are shut away we are still part of a much wider community and the women here want to give what they can to others who are suffering too.

We sing a lot in Chapel We have a choir. There are no auditions, everyone who is willing is welcome. This sometimes causes problems. If the choir is sounding really good, as it often does, and we are sometimes then joined by a 'groaner' some of the choir members feel that the music is spoilt. It is important to explain the inclusiveness of the choir in terms of the inclusiveness of God's kingdom. I used to worry that we had such a limited repertoire of hymns. We seem to sing the same ones over and over again and the same half dozen are always chosen if we have a request slot. I was walking round the prison one day and I heard one of the women singing one of our all time favourites, 'Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are mine. You are mine, O my child, I am your Father, and I love you with a perfect love.' I realised that they would probably forget most of what they heard in Chapel but they will not forget the words of the songs we sing so often that they become part of their being.

Some will never come to Chapel. They tell me that they did not bother with God before prison so they will not take advantage of him now just because they want something. They treat God with enormous respect. They treat God's house with respect. People rarely swear in Chapel. If they forget themselves other women soon correct them.

Older women care for the younger ones; they do not bully but they do exact a discipline in Chapel to which the younger ones respond.

If prayer is real to the women, so is the reality of the story of Jesus. His story is so much more theirs than mine. Consider one who was 'grassed up' by a mate who was a paid police informer. He was then arrested during a police raid in the middle of the night and subjected to intimidating interrogation. He was brought before the court and remanded in custody. His friends abandoned him. He was brought before the court again and at some point subjected to police brutality. In the final trial, the judge who condemned him was weak and corrupt, intimidated by the prosecution and finally persuaded to pass the death sentence. In the light of Jesus' experience it is easy to see why prisoners relate to him so readily. They come to the Bible without any preconceptions, indeed they barely know the story of Jesus' life. On one Good Friday I told a group of women the story of Jesus betrayal and death and finished the service by talking about his dead body being held by his mother. Then I said, 'But this is not the end, you will have to come back on Sunday to hear what happened next'. As they left Chapel I could hear women saying 'I'm going to come back to find out!' Many of them do not have the first inkling about the resurrection of Jesus. Imagine my privilege of being the first person to say to them 'He is not dead. He is risen'.

We had a Bible study group one evening when we looked at the story of the young Jesus being taken to Jerusalem by his parents for the feast. The group was predominantly people under 18. Bible study in the prison is so stimulating. The women are not afraid to say exactly what they think, because unlike a lot of other Christian groups they are not afraid of giving the wrong answers or of looking foolish. They do not know that there are any right answers! Their openness in a group is a joy. Having read the story I simply said, 'Well?' When preparing Bible studies in the prison I do not have to cudgel my brains to create stimulating open-ended questions to persuade reluctant participants to say something; the responses come tumbling out. The story relates that Mary and Joseph lost Jesus for three days. At least two women in that group had had their children taken into care because the authorities deemed that they neglected them. Their response was poignant. 'Mary and Joseph - rubbish parents!' This is

exactly what had been said of them in the past. Then we came to the part of the story recording Jesus' reply to Mary's challenge about his disappearance. 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' This was too much for Jamie who exclaimed 'Blimey, (or a similar word) cheeky bugger wasn't he?' Of course he was, but have you ever heard that expressed so clearly in church? Absolute honesty may not be the hallmark of much of the rest of their lives, but in discussion they specialise in being completely straightforward. Recently one of the chaplains led a beautiful and powerful meditation which engaged our imaginations. After we had finished people began to talk about what a rich and moving experience it had been, but after a while one young woman who has mental health problems said 'I could not do it. It took too much concentration and I cannot do that'. She said it without judgment or rancour, with no sense of inferiority and she took the pressure off the rest of us who were feeling rather left out of this wonderful experience which the others had had. I wish I could have been as honest in some of the groups of which I have been a part.

On another occasion as part of baptism preparation we were discussing what baptism was for and came to the conclusion that it had something to do with our response to the way God deals with sin in our lives. We looked at the story of Jesus and had a deeply theological and passionate discussion about whether or not Jesus had sinned. They did not know the church's teaching and simply talked about the Jesus they knew. The discussion was inconclusive. Some were positive that he had sinned because they had such a grasp of his humanity, they felt that he was so much like them. Not long ago in a service I was telling them the story of Lazarus. Almost every Sunday the sermon is simply a retelling of one of the gospel stories. I told them all about a Jesus who understood human grief, about Mary and Martha who felt let down by a Jesus who healed all sorts of strangers but did not make the effort to arrive in time to heal his friend. I then described the scene by the tomb. When I said that Lazarus came out of the tomb alive one of the women who had been completely engaged in the story could not help herself. She snorted out loud in derision. People do not come back from the dead. I treasure that honest response. The women I help care for totally understand the crucifixion. It is Easter Day they find hard to swallow.

Stories have the power to change lives. The story of Jesus is the most powerful of all. The challenge is to show that resurrection can be as real for our prisoners as the pain and the suffering and the loss and the death are, so that Jesus' story can even more compellingly be theirs.

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This article was originally published as a chapter in The Future of Criminal Justice *published by SPCK 2003.*