

From Sweden

BACK TO THE SQUARE

by Magnus Abrahamson

REFLECTIONS FROM THE CELL

“Does God forgive: murderers, rapists and paedophiles?”

During my first years as a prison chaplain I was often asked: “Does God forgive: murderers, rapists and paedophiles?” Initially I did not reflect so much about this question, but after a while I noticed that both inmates and staff asked me the same question. I was also asked this question by people outside the prison. I began to ask myself why do they ask this question.

For most people, I guess, it is nothing more than an interesting question that cannot be properly answered. (Saying this I have to remind you that I come from a Swedish Lutheran context where the idea that we are saved by grace is important.) If I say “yes” it is easy for a critic to say that I do not focus enough on the victims. If I say “no” I say something that is impossible to say as a priest in the Church of Sweden (and in most other churches as well). In 2008 I gave a lecture at a conference focusing on victims. During a break a woman came up to me and grabbed my arm saying. “You do not understand abused women”. I started the lecture again and when I was finished a man who had listened to the same speech said: “The way you talk makes you a hindrance for the grace of God”. I realised that the question of forgiveness is a hot potato when you link it to criminal violations.

Murder and sexual crimes against children represent the worst crimes that can be committed. The question of God’s forgiveness is for many people much more than an academic question. It is a question founded in a personal struggle. Some of those people asking the question might wrestle with other questions such as: “If there is hope for a person who has done something so serious there must be hope for me who has been unfaithful to my partner.” Then again: “What about my daughter who is condemned for murder” Alternately: “What about the man who raped me?” Finally: “Can there be forgiveness for me who has killed my neighbour?” It is a challenge to address the question of God’s forgiveness because it is founded on many different experiences.

Reflecting upon this, I can see that this also was my question. I needed a compass to orientate myself when I listened to stories about murder and sexual crimes. I remember the first year as being very heavy and my mind was often busy thinking of the tragedies I had listened to. I spent a lot of time searching for hope and I am very grateful to be here today so as to share some thoughts and experiences from that process.

I began to serve as a prison chaplain in 2006. I serve in a men's medium security prison and in a remand prison for both men and women. In the remand prison most of the inmates are isolated waiting for trial. "My" prisons are situated in Borås which is a town about 35 miles east of Gothenburg. I meet a range of people from those who only spend a few months in prison as well as those serving life sentences.

Before I became a prison chaplain I was a doctoral student in Uppsala writing about Rudolf Bultmann's and Wolfhart Pannenberg's interpretations of the resurrection of Christ. I also worked as a lecturer in Systematic Theology at Uppsala University for three years.

In one of my first days ministering in prison a young man asked me what I had done earlier in my life. I said that I had served as an ordinary parish priest for a short time and that I also had taught theology as a lecturer at Uppsala University. He was quiet for a while. His mouth was wide open and then he asked: "What have you done?" I could not help laughing and answered - nothing. I am happy to be here. Today I know that I made the right decision when I entered the prison.

A reformulated question

The question if God forgives: "murderers", "rapists" and "paedophiles" needs to be taken seriously. At the same time the formulation: "murderers, rapists and paedophiles" is problematic. First, I think it is better to begin a theological reflection with an overall idea of God and man compared to that of a specific group of men. I will start with the idea that God wants to forgive everyone. Second, I think we need to change the question if we want avoid a superficial discussion. Answers like "yes" and "no" are of no help if you want to deepen a conversation. Third, the question identifies the person with the crime she has done. Some crimes are like a baptism in the way they transform the identity of a person. The person committing them becomes someone else. The nurse and mother becomes a "murderer" and the engineer and brother becomes a "rapist". It is very hard to find a way back to the old identity.

It is risky to identify someone with a crime. I do not deny that our actions affect our identity but I believe that persons who have committed crimes should not be identified with their crimes to the point that they become: “murderers”, “rapists” or “paedophiles”. It is obvious that we do not want any murder or sexual crimes in our societies. What happens then if individuals are identified as “murderers”, “rapists” or “paedophiles”? Do they have any right to exist at all? What about other things they have done in life? A society where human dignity is defined by one’s deeds or success is not desirable. Instead I think that we should focus on the fact that all of us are humans and that means that all of us have a dignity which cannot be violated.

The focus in this lecture is about crime, forgiveness and the cross of Christ. Instead of asking if God forgives: “murderers”, “rapists” and “paedophiles” I ask what does it mean that God wants to forgive all who ask for forgiveness. The most basic idea in my understanding of God’s forgiveness is that God loves and wants to forgive everyone. I also believe that the forgiveness of God is a gift and not a reward for good deeds. Saying this I do not mean that God’s forgiveness can be used as an excuse for not taking responsibility for others. So my main issue today is to reflect about the idea that God wants to forgive everyone who asks for forgiveness.

My reflection should not be understood as a recipe or a description. It is more like a painting without details. What I try to do is to outline an area where it is possible to move when you follow a person wrestling with guilt. I previously mentioned that I come from a country where Lutheran theology has had an enormous impact even on the non-Lutheran denominations. In Sweden many Christians are afraid of “gärningslära”. That means “deed-learn” or “theology of deeds”. So if you want to provoke someone from *a* church in Sweden and especially from *the* Church *of* Sweden you only need to say something like “you advocate a theology of good deeds”. It is very simple! I can guarantee that for the next hour you will be listening to someone explaining for you why she or he does not advocate a “gärningslära”.

Before I continue I will say a few words about my own position. I am a priest in the Church of Sweden and of course I am influenced by Lutheran theology. I think that Luther, Melancton and the other reformers made some good points. But at the same time I do not think that any of these individuals have all the answers. As well as other great persons from the history of the Church they are voices in a larger choir. The more voices you can discover the richer the theology you get.

Integration

I believe that theology is more than a “church business”. It does not belong in a corner where it can hide from the rest of the world. For me it is important that it is possible to criticize theological statements. But at the same time I also think that theology is a discipline that can challenge the society in which it is formulated. I do not discuss the forgiveness of God as an isolated event. Instead I relate it to a broader discussion of crime and forgiveness. This means that I discuss different views of punishment, shame, guilt as well as forgiveness between humans. I want to respond to the suspicion that belief in the forgiveness of God makes people escape their moral responsibility. A theology which makes people escape from unpleasant truths has failed. In the theology of forgiveness I outline the words: mercy, responsibility and moral stance as central. The theology I advocate has close connections with my ideas about criminal law. Those who are condemned for crimes must face both mercy and respect. At the same time they need help to understand their actions and to take responsibility for them.

Theology for Prison Chaplains

When I taught theology at Uppsala University I had some students who said that they were not interested in Systematic Theology and their goal was to become priests. As priests they were going to devote themselves to “själavård”. You cannot translate this word to proper English. In German you say “Seelsorge”. If you translate it literally from Swedish it means “care of the soul” or “cure of the soul”. I think the most common word in English is counselling.

Anyway “själavård” is what we as prison chaplains do when we have a confidential talk with someone. We are not neutral. We represent our church and the Christian faith. If we come from a Muslim congregation we represent the Muslim faith and so forth. Prison chaplaincy is founded in a religious belief. I think that all of us who are prison chaplains are guided by our faith. Theology is reflection about faith. We have to ask ourselves if we reflect about our faith and how our faith guides our counselling.

Is it not illogical to talk about the forgiveness of God?

Let us go back to the question of God’s forgiveness. Is it not illogical to talk about the forgiveness of God? If Peter hurts his wife Susan and Bruce shows up telling Peter that he has forgiven him we think that there is something

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This is a lecture he gave at the IPCA Conference in Magdalen College, Cambridge September 14th 2017 and is published with his approval.

It is based on a book that he published in Sweden in 2013. The title of the book is “Crime and Forgiveness” (published in Swedish).

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not to escape it. History does not change because someone is forgiven by God. The scars Susan received from Peter do not disappear when God forgives Peter. Peter's problems with aggression do not disappear either. If Peter needs therapy for his aggression he cannot escape by saying that his acts of violence are forgotten. The knowledge that he is forgiven and loved by God can help him in dealing with his violent history.

Sometimes forgiveness between two persons never happens. It might be too hard for the victim to forgive. In the same way the response of the society might lead toward the city gate. The consequences of the juridical process also sometimes lead towards the city gate. The response of the state, the society and theology belong to different but not separated dimensions. Even if the state, the society, friends and family point towards the city gate, God does not. You are always welcome back to the square of God. You are a human being created in the image and likeness of God and you cannot fall outside the love of God.

“This is my situation”

Prison chaplaincy is about more than pointing towards the square using words like: “Christ has also been outside the city gate”. As prison chaplains we sometimes need to follow persons outside the city gate. What it means to join someone on that journey might differ. In most cases it is of great importance in order to stop shame from growing. For me it has been of great help to have a compass needle pointing towards the square. I do not always know how to get there but I know at least where to go.

Prison chaplaincy is often lonely work. But at the same time we are part of a greater community. In the tradition of the Church, as well as in other traditions, there are collections of experiences from different times and eras. Even an empty church mediates a message beyond words. It mediates a message of a loving God who wants to forgive. Often we only follow someone on a limited part of her journey. The role of being a fellow wanderer should not be underestimated. In times of darkness it is liberating to be able say to someone: “This is my situation”.

Prison chaplaincy is not about carrying someone else's burden or by words convincing someone what God can do. It is about trusting that God is outside the city gate. As prison chaplains we can be fellow wanderers, but in the end it is up to God to show the way back to the square.

that Bruce does not understand. He does not act in a logical way. He cannot forgive Peter because Peter has not done anything to him. How can we then talk about God's forgiveness in relation to Peter?

The forgiveness of God is not the same as forgiveness between two human beings. You can be forgiven by God without being forgiven by the one you have hurt. Talking about the forgiveness of God it is important to remember that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. In the same way we should not forget that God has good intentions with his creation. The fact that all of us are humans gives us a unique dignity.

If someone breaks in to my house destroying the valuable painting hanging in the living room he does not only hurt me but also the artist who made the painting. (If anyone wonders I do not own any expensive art. This is just an example.) The painter would probably not have sold it to me if she knew that it was going to be destroyed. The person breaking in to my house both destroyed my painting and the good intentions the artist had in creating the painting. Therefore it is not illogical if the painter comes to him saying that she has forgiven him. That does not mean that I, the owner, have forgiven him. Even though the painter has forgiven him I can still hate him. The same can be said about Susan, Peter and God. When Peter hurts Susan he does not only do something in relation to Susan. He also destroys the good intentions that God had in creating Susan. It is perfectly possible for God to forgive Peter even if Susan does not. So there is nothing illogical talking about God's forgiveness when it comes to crimes.

The forgiveness of God is misinterpreted if it stops us from facing real problems or makes us escape reality. On the contrary it can help us to not act like Adam and Eve. It can be a help not to hide from the things that we have done wrong or to blame others. Instead it can give us the strength we need to see and listen to the person we have hurt. When we have done something wrong it often takes a lot of courage to see the victim and to see ourselves. The forgiveness of God shows that a person stands in a new relationship with God and has a place in the world God has created.

The Norwegian theologian Paul Leer Salvesen has interviewed women who have been sexually abused. He says that the Christian idea that we need to forgive in order to be forgiven can be an extra burden for victims. One of the women who has experienced pressure to forgive says:

Too many Christians have asked me to forgive and forget, to put everything behind myself. RUBBISH! I must remember, hate and feel in order to fully forgive. Then I receive peace.¹

If Susan cannot forgive Peter no one should force her to forgive him. Forgiveness is a process and sometimes it takes time. Even if Susan cannot forgive - God can. Maybe Susan never answers Peter when he says that he regrets what he has done. Then Peter somehow must accept that Susan has not forgiven him. But he can still be forgiven by God.

When we talk about forgiveness in church, at least in Sweden, we sometimes say that what God has forgiven is thrown in the Ocean of forgetfulness. This might sound appealing but if we think twice it is problematic. We actually remember our lives. Forgiveness and forgetfulness are two different things. I prefer to say that everything God forgives is thrown in the Ocean of grace.

AT THE SQUARE

Human forgiveness

What about interpersonal forgiveness? I believe in the power of forgiveness and Jesus encourages us to forgive. All of us fail. I do not think that a community without forgiveness can exist. Can you imagine a family without forgiveness, a convent without forgiveness or a friendship without forgiveness? I cannot.

I do not think that it is easy to give an exact definition of forgiveness. All of us agree that it differs from vengeance. I think that forgiveness is a social phenomenon that helps us to deal with guilt in a complicated world. When I ask someone to forgive me I want to be free from guilt. Perhaps we can say that forgiveness is about breaking the logic of retaliation. Instead of repaying back with the same coin we try to break a negative development by introducing something new.

If Susan was seriously hurt by Peter and Peter says that it was not that bad and that they should go on with their lives he does not ask for forgiveness. Instead he denies what actually happened. In the same way it might be easy for victims to deny violations. Forgiveness is not about denial or excuses. If Peter says to Susan that he is sorry for hurting her but at the same time says that he cannot help it because it was an accident he does not ask for forgiveness because he does not take moral responsibility for his actions. When we ask for forgiveness we have to admit that we have done something wrong that we can be accountable for.

The communion around the altar - God's Square

Eating together with others is an expression of fellowship. Receiving the bread and wine is for many the centre of Christian spirituality. Jesus is present in our midst. The Holy Communion expresses a deep connection between God and man.

According to Christian faith the Holy Communion was founded just before Jesus started his way towards the cross. Jesus and his disciples were close to Golgotha. The Gospels do not talk about a nice farewell party. The disciples argued about their low status duties. No one wanted to serve the others. Later one of them leaves in order to betray Jesus.

In the Eucharist our eyes are directed towards the altar. We meet a Christ who shares the life outside the city gate and at the same time is risen. In the Holy Communion the holy of Holies becomes visible. When we go to the Holy Communion we enter a greater context. We are invited to communion with God and other humans. God's presence outside the city gate calls us to the community around the altar which is an anticipation of the heavenly communion. We are invited to God's square.

The opening question

I started by stating the question whether God forgives: "murderers", "rapists" and "paedophiles"? I reformulated the question and asked how we can talk about a merciful God who forgives everyone asking for forgiveness without trivializing the responsibility of men. If the forgiveness of God means that the one asking for forgiveness gets a restored relation to God and that the forgiven person has a place in creation there will, from a theological point of view, be no hopeless cases. God can forgive everyone.

Going back to Genesis we can see how man ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Man wanted to be like God. All of us know the story. Adam and Eve had to leave the garden. Using the symbolic language I have used earlier man was forced to pass the city gate and to live outside the city wall. In one way you can read the Bible as a story where man in the beginning passes through the city gate but in the end (in Revelation) returns to the fellowship at the square eating from the tree of life.

The intention of this talk is not to give any detailed answers about how God's forgiveness shall be interpreted. Instead I have tried to paint a theological canvas where you can move as a prison chaplain. I have used symbols to show how the forgiveness can help people in a broken world -

What Bonhoeffer means is that we cannot use the grace of God as a presumption in life. If grace is a presumption then it does not matter how we live. Then it does not matter if we follow in the footsteps of Jesus or not. The consequence of this is that actions that are morally wrong (the sin) will be justified instead of the person who has acted wrong (the sinner).

I believe that the grace of God is the basis when God forgives us. Forgiveness and justification are acts of God and nothing we deserve. This belief cannot however be an excuse for not living responsible lives.

At the Church door

In Sweden we sometimes use the expression “she/he is not the best child of God.” You can hear people say that those who are in prison are not the best children of God. Saying this we need to remember that all of us who belong to the church are God’s children. And all of us have failed.

In 1280 Sweden enacted four laws of peace concerning homes, women, courts and churches. It was strictly forbidden to use violence in the church. Weapons had to be left outside. If someone was escaping his enemies they were not allowed to harm him if he entered the church. It was actually enough to touch the iron ring at the church door to be protected.

Entering the church door you often come from the west. Churches often have their main entrance in west and the altar in direction towards east. There is a symbolic meaning of this. West has been understood as the direction of death and east as the direction towards God. The sun will rise in the east and the sunset will be in the west. When you enter an old church, at least in Sweden, you often see pictures of wild beasts on the western wall. They have come from the west but are now stuck on the western wall. The western wall protects the church. Inside you are protected. The presence of God outside the city gate points towards the church door. The church door can be seen as a symbol of Christ. You enter the church through Christ. When you open the door you will see the altar. This corresponds to the holy of Holiest in the Temple of Jerusalem. When Jesus died the curtain was torn apart and it was possible to see in to the holy of Holiest. This happened when God had revealed himself in Jesus and walked between the cell and the square and finally died with the outcasts outside the city gate. The cross does not only point to the church door. It points all the way to the altar.

It is important for Peter to understand what he has done if he asks Susan to forgive him. In the same way it is important for Susan to know what actually happened if she forgives Peter. It is also important that they agree on what actually happened. If Peter thinks that it is a “simple” push and Susan sees it as a severe beating, Susan cannot forgive a “simple” push because she does not think it is a “simple” push. When Peter asks for forgiveness he also says that he will do what he can to avoid the same situation in the future. He can also offer Susan some kind of compensation. When Peter asks Susan for forgiveness he gives back the control of her life which he stole when he mistreated her.

Three arenas: the Square, the Cell and the City gate

In order to illustrate my ideas I will now talk about three arenas: the square, the cell and the city gate. The square and the cell are two rooms that people who are condemned or suspected for crimes have to move between. The town square has a central place in the history of the Western world. It can be described as a public living room. People come to the square to do business, to meet others and so on. In ancient Athens the square is the place where democracy started to grow. At the same time the square is also the place where peaceful demonstrators have been shot and a place for military parades, stock punishments and executions. The square is also the place for trials. From an historic point of view the square is a place where penalties have been announced and enforced.

The cell differs from the square. The cell is the place of loneliness. No one sees you and you cannot go anywhere. In medieval Stockholm “Kåken” was in the middle of “Stortorget”. “Stortorget” was one of the main squares. “Kåken” was a low-rise timbered building. On top of it there was a pillory. “Kåken” had no windows. On the side there was a little door where the captive could enter by crawling. “Kåken” is the place where the square meets the cell, where public life meets loneliness. Everyone could see “Kåken” but the person inside was lonely.

There are handcuffs on the pillory. The pillory was used for public flogging and other brutal kinds of torture. People were also executed here. Sometimes the convicted were banished from the city. A brand was burnt on the shoulder or on the forehead before they had to leave. If someone was convicted for sexual relations outside of marriage and was not executed, she or he might be sent away from the city. In order to make it even more shameful they had to walk towards the city gate naked.

The city gate is the third room I will focus on. This is the place for all those who are not welcomed in the fellowship of the society. The city gate is the symbol of exclusion. If the square is the public living room, the city gate is its opposite.

The ideas about crimes and punishment have changed since the Middle Ages in many countries. Despite the differences between medieval European society and ours, those who are suspected or convicted for severe crimes still move between the square and the cell. Many of them are still at a place where public life meets loneliness. During a trial a lot is made public (which is inevitable if you want legal certainty). The one who is accused stands at the square. If a person is found guilty the judge will not sentence her or him to a public punishment. He or she has to go back to the cell for a longer or shorter time.

My question is: Where do we want the person in the cell to end up when it is time to leave the prison (or “Kåken” which also in modern Swedish is a slang expression for prison)? Do we want this person to come back to the fellowship at the square or do we want him or her to live as an outcast outside the city gate?

My answer is simply “back to the square”. This is my overall vision for criminal law and for public reaction to crimes. It is also my theological vision as a prison chaplain. In the latter part of this lecture I will focus on my theological vision, but first some words about criminal law and public reactions.

A “good” punishment

In Sweden all political parties advocate the existence of prisons but the motives why we have prisons differ. (I think this can be said about many other countries as well.) Some think that prisoners should be punished in proportion to the harm they have caused. Some that prisons deter from committing new crimes. Others that prisons prevent those who are convicted to commit new crimes. Some that prisoners should be taken care of and rehabilitated inside the prison. There are also those who argue for a restorative justice where the damage caused by the crime should be repaired as much as possible.

In my book *Crime and Forgiveness* I discuss these different motives in detail.² I think that there are insights beyond all of them but I also think that all of them are limited. For instance I can agree with a person arguing for

as his neighbour was starving. Some of his followers in later generations thought that Christians should not use curtains.¹² When you lose the context this prohibition becomes unintelligible but when you know the motive of Leastadius’ actions you also know what he really meant.

Some people ask if there is a risk of “cheap grace” if they try to avoid a moralistic concept of sin. By “cheap grace” I mean the idea that it does not matter how I live my life because the grace of God will save me anyway.

The German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has formulated a well-known critique towards cheap grace in his book *Discipleship (Nachfolge)* which was written in Germany during the Nazi era (1937). He says:

Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church: Our struggle today is for costly grace.

Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basements goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church’s inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without costs. It is said that the essence of grace is that the bill for it is paid in advance for all time. Everything can be had for free, courtesy of that paid bill. The price paid is infinitely great and, therefore, the possibilities of taking advantage of and wasting grace are also infinitely great. What would grace be, if it were not cheap grace?¹³

Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God’s love as merely a Christian idea of God. Those who affirm it have already had their sins forgiven. The church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace upon itself. The world finds in this church a cheap cover-up for its sins, for which it shows no remorse and from which it has even less desire to be set free. Cheap grace is, thus denial of God’s living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God.

Cheap grace means justification of sin but not of the sinner. Because grace alone does everything, everything can stay in its old ways.

sun come. It is sometimes said that we live in a time of enlightenment. We do not believe that trolls cause problems for us anymore. The question is if we still believe in monsters.

Beyond cheap grace and “catalogues of sins”

Beyond the concept of grace lies an idea of human nature and sin. The word “sin” is often understood in a moralistic way today - at least in Sweden. The word has become a taboo. Sometimes it can be used in an ironic way and then it has positive connections. Who will not become curious if a colleague on Monday morning says she has sinned during the weekend? Many will probably think that she has admitted herself some kind of pleasure. The connection between pleasure and sin explains why the word both can have a positive and a negative meaning.

In Sweden we sometimes talk about “syndakataloger”. You can translate that as “catalogues of sins”. This term “catalogues of sins” mainly developed in different Christian revival movements. The catalogues were often oral descriptions of how a Christian should act when there were no simple answers of right and wrong. The purpose was to give moral guidance.

The “catalogues of sin” differed depending on where they were formed. In northern Europe were a lot of people used alcohol in order to get drunk, alcohol was often forbidden. In other parts of Europe drinking alcohol was more accepted but here gambling could be more problematic and so forth.

The Norwegian priest Per Arne Dahl writes about a Danish deaconess who met some Norwegian deaconesses. Some of the Norwegian deaconesses were wearing earrings. Our Danish deaconess became so upset that her cigar fell out of her mouth.¹¹

It is easy to understand why the “catalogues of sin” arose. In societies where alcohol or gambling were huge problems for many families something needed to be done. At the same time I think we have to admit that the guidance which the “catalogues of sin” gave definitely had its weak spots. The world in which we live was often understood as black or white. The “catalogues of sin” did not give much space for the grey zones in life. Instead they sometimes became criteria to decide if someone was a Christian or not. Christian faith tended to appear as a set of rules that should be obeyed.

This became obvious when the context where the rules were formed was forgotten. For instance in the 19th century the Swedish priest Lars Levi Laestadius said that he was not going to use curtains in his windows as long

retributive justice when she says that the punishment shall be in some way proportionate to the crime but at the same time I think that retributive justice is problematic because it does not give any attention to the life of those affected by the crime or those involved in it.

Reflecting on “good” punishments we need to know which problem we are dealing with. The main problem I see is that something is broken and my overall objective is that those involved or affected should find their way back to the square. In order to achieve this I think that the penalty shall be characterized by: mercy, responsibility and moral stance.

When I prepared this presentation a friend of mine who is from Australia read this text. He said that he did not agree with me. When he was twenty a friend of his was raped and killed. The persons who committed this crime were husband and wife. They also raped and killed three other young women, while another woman escaped and ran to the police so as to finally have them captured. The couple drove around the streets of Perth looking for victims. My friend said that they never showed any remorse. They would kidnap young women: he would rape them, while his wife would watch and become sexually aroused.

My friend said: “I do not want to meet them in the square - I wish that they were both thrown to the sharks.” My friend also commented that he would not feel responsible enough to make a decision to sentence this couple, but that he would hope society would be aware of its duty to protect the innocent from harm - and to ensure that any punishment was cognizant of the victim’s loss and suffering, and the loss to society of an innocent member. He says that he often meets his murdered friend’s now widowed father walking by himself along the streets.

From a psychological point of view I can understand my friend. Murder and sexual crimes are horrible crimes and they affect us deeply. I must admit that there are a few people in prison whose way back to the square I have difficulty seeing. This is however not a reason to abandon the overall vision of the square. Penalties can still be characterized by: mercy, responsibility and moral stance.

What shall people say?

When someone leaves the cell in order to enter the trial there are often journalists present. In Sweden they are not allowed to take photos inside the court so they often try to get a photo when the accused person enters the

court. He often covers his head with a jacket or a blanket because he does not want to show his face. This is about shame. A person who is full of shame wants to hide. Shame is about feeling inferior. It is about being revealed as someone else than the person you want to be.

We do not use pillories and we do not let convicted people walk naked down the street any more. But it is not the whole truth that people who are convicted for crimes do not have to stand at the square any longer being shamed. If you are mentioned on the headlines of your local newspaper or a national tabloid everyone knows. On the Internet, information will be disseminated rapidly and it is impossible to delete. The Psychiatrist Donald Nathanson writes:

... arrest, trial and imprisonment of any sort, public spanking or reprimand, any form of punishment by exposure to public censure - all these are but the merest hint of the catalogue of punishments made all the worse because the culprit is denied the recourse of privacy. Shame teaches us the value of privacy; the privacy that protects us from shame, and the private place to which we must repair when humiliated. Just as shame follows the exposure of whatever we wish to keep private, the wish to withdraw provides a reasonable compensatory stratagem.³

The Swedish psychologist Börje Svensson talks about Rasmus. A boy whose father was condemned for rape. Svensson says:

When I met Rasmus I felt anger and powerlessness toward media's ruthless reporting about the sexual crime his father had committed. Did they not understand how hard the family is hit when the father publicly is painted black? When pictures of the house where the family lives are published. When neighbours, colleagues and friends of the family are interviewed in the name of public interest. The shame of having a father who is in prison because of a sexual crime is a hard burden to carry for a child. The publicity and the rejection of people will only increase the burden.⁴

I think that the public reactions to crimes are of great importance. I think that it is even more important than the prison system. If the prison system points towards the square but your neighbours, friends and media points towards the city gate you will end up outside the social community.

I do not want to interpret the crucifixion as one single event. It is part of a pattern where God reveals himself in a human life. God shares everyday life and feasts. He shares tears and laughter. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' parents flee with him to Egypt because of king Herod. Furthermore Jesus lived in a country occupied by a foreign army. The Roman Catholic theologian Gerald O'Collin S. J. says: "When crucified between two criminals, Jesus ended as he had lived - in solidarity with society's victims rather than with society's successes."⁹

The Incarnation also includes the Resurrection. In the end God is stronger than death and evil. Even if a person is seen as hopeless in the eyes of society or by his family this cannot be said from a theological perspective. In the eyes of God no one is hopeless.

The image of a monster

The idea that man is created in the image and likeness of God is important in Christian anthropology. This means that every human being has a dignity that cannot be violated. The reactions are sometimes hard towards people committing crimes. Some crimes have a repulsive nature. Those who commit brutal crimes risk being identified more as monsters than humans. Dehumanizing can be tempting for a group of people that is upset. It is so much easier to push a monster through the city gate than a human being.

Myths about monsters can give some logic when it comes to tragedies. "The one who committed the crime was not one of us - he or she was a monster". It is easier to send away a monster than a son, a daughter, a mother or a father. Evil comes closer if we see it in human beings compared to if we relate it to monsters. It is tempting to send the monsters away from society. There is only one problem - monsters do not exist. Man is capable of both good and evil. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God also enters the myth which says that some humans are monsters in order to demythologise it.

In the message of the Cross there is no nourishment for the myth of monsters. All humans have a dignity. In Jesus God comes from below to make sure that no human loses her or his dignity. Because God reveals himself in Jesus dying at Golgotha there is no city gate outside which God has not been.

Reading newspapers we sometimes see that "the monsters" live in prison. It is like the trolls of the fairytales living in the wood. The Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie says that no one tries to rehabilitate a troll.¹⁰ In some fairytales the trolls are turned to stone or cracks when the rays of the

The stories of the Gospels about Jesus' death and resurrection can be understood as stories in which ***God identifies himself with a human who has been at the centre of the square, tasted the loneliness of the cell and finally vanished outside the city gate. In the message of the Cross we see a God who has identified himself with the most despised and who himself goes the way that points toward the city gate.***

Gethsemane can be interpreted as the cell. When Matthew, Mark and Luke talk about Jesus' agony and the disciples who fell asleep there are similarities with the loneliness and exposure of the cell. When Jesus leaves Gethsemane (the cell) he goes to the court of Pilate (the square). At the square Jesus received his sentence. The Roman authorities sentenced him to crucifixion. During the trial Jesus also experienced the merciless attitude of the people watching the trial. It is easy to join the screaming mob and then hide in the anonymous mass.

At the residence of Pilate the square meets the city gate. When Jesus is tortured he is also mocked. A thorn-crowned captive who is accused of having called himself a king is someone to laugh at. The shame inflicted on Jesus is immense. When he receives the sentence he literally leaves the square at the residence of Pilate through the streets of Jerusalem towards the city gate. Then he has to pass the city gate to finally end at Golgotha. At Golgotha he is crucified together with some other men. For Jesus there was no way back to the square. There was no place for him in the fellowship of his society. Furthermore he was forsaken by God.

In the Gospel of John a few words are said about the perspective of the family. Mary (the mother of Jesus), some other women and John (the disciple) watch Jesus die. We can only imagine the pain of a parent watching her or his child being tortured and executed. Mary becomes a symbol of all those who watch someone they love being forced through the city gate.

The message of Jesus' resurrection says something paradoxical about God - at least from a Christian perspective. We have a crucified God who is castaway from human fellowship asking why God has forsaken him. Jesus had preached that the Kingdom of God was coming. For those seeing Jesus crucified the message was clear. God had turned his back on Jesus. In Jesus, God shares the darkest parts of human life when he dies outside the city gate. If we picture God as judge of humanity we see another paradox. The judge identifies himself with the convicted.

My experience is that it is very hard for many who have committed serious crimes to take an honest look in the mirror. At the same time I think you need to be able to look at yourself if you want to change your life. This is much easier if you are surrounded by love and mercy compared to hate and shaming.

This is the reason why I think mercy is important when it comes to crimes. Love and mercy makes it easier to understand why a crime is morally wrong and motivate a change of life. Mercy, responsibility and moral stance are still three central words.

Guilt and shame

Thus far I have argued for punishments and public reaction that point towards the square without trivializing the crime or responsibility of those who have committed the crime. I think it is of the highest importance that we as prison chaplains also consider the victims when we talk to prisoners. Those who have been exposed to crimes also need to find their way back to the square.

People sometimes ask what the inmates most often want to talk about. Very often our conversation touches the issue of shame. It is more common that we talk about shame than guilt even though we often talk about guilt. Often shame and guilt are mixed with one another. If you attend a Mass there are liturgical answers to shame and to guilt. The shame is met in the blessing where the face of the Lord is turned towards us. God sees me: "The Lord bless you and watch over you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look kindly on you and give you peace. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." The shame is also met when we say peace to one another. Guilt is handled in the prayer of confession.

GOD OUTSIDE THE CITY GATE

A brutal symbol

In the Christian tradition the cross is a symbol of shame and guilt as well as of hope and life. Crucifixion is cruel. The one who is crucified is not welcomed back to the square. During the time of Jesus it was common that people were executed through crucifixion. The Romans used it as a way to control conquered people. The crosses had many different shapes. Crucifixion had a physical, a social, as well as a religious dimension.

Crucifixion should maximize the physical pain. The crucified person was tied by ropes and nails to the cross. No vital organs were injured. Sometimes a stick was fastened on the cross so the crucified could sit. This was not

done out of mercy. It was meant to extend the pain. The physical condition of the crucified and the torture he had undergone before the crucifixion decided how long he had to wait for death. Death came when the crucified was too weak to breathe.

The social dimension of the crucifixion is about shame. Everyone should see the crucified. Romans only, with a few exceptions, crucified people from the lower classes. It was very rare that Roman citizens were crucified. The crucified should be totally annihilated. There should not even be a body to bury. The dead bodies often remained on the crosses and were eaten by wild animals.

If we continue to the religious dimension people thought that a crucified person was cursed by God. In Deuteronomy (21:22-23) we read that if a man is executed and hanged on a tree his body shall not remain on the tree overnight. It needed to be buried the same day because anyone hanging on a tree is cursed by God.

Just before dying (and I think that this is one of the best known quotes of Jesus), Jesus says: “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” Christ, the crucified was surrounded by darkness. This must have been a shock for the followers of Jesus. If you wished to destroy a religious movement it was an effective ploy to crucify their leader. The idea that the Son of God had been crucified was not only absurd in the Jewish world but also among the Greeks and Romans. Paul says:

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-24, RSV)

In Rome there is a drawing of a man worshipping a crucified person with an ass's head. This is a parody of Christian faith. St Augustine of Hippo talks about a man going to an oracle asking the god Apollo what he should do to make his wife abandon the Christian faith. The oracle answers that it is impossible. She will continue to pray to a God who received a fair verdict, who died in humiliation in the prime of life.⁵ Using the words of the New Testament German scholar Martin Hengel. “There was no room for a positive understanding of the crucifixion in the ancient world.”⁶

The meaning of crucifixion

In modern theology there are different ways to understand the meaning of the cross. It can still be a controversial symbol. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann talks about the situation when the survivors of World War II returned to the university. He says that a theology that does not talk about God as abandoned and crucified would have been meaningless to them.⁷ In feminist theology questions have been asked how a brutal execution can achieve liberation. The theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker are for instance critical of a theology where the death of Jesus gives salvation. According to them God becomes someone who misuses children or watches child abuse. They say that we have a confusing relation between God the Father and Jesus the Son where violence is mixed with love.⁸

I will not go any further into this discussion. My point is that we need to handle the stories of the crucifixion with care. I think that everyone understands that if a confidant talks about an abusive parent it is not suitable in that situation to respond by talking about Jesus as a positive model who was tortured and killed in order to please his father.

There are many theologians who have tried to explain the meaning of the Cross. There are different models of the atonement. I think that no one can fully grasp the meaning of the cross. It can, and should, be interpreted in many ways.

The Incarnation

When we speak about God's forgiveness relating it to the death and resurrection of Christ I think it is important to be aware of the Incarnation (the idea that God became man). Our understanding of Easter needs to be interpreted in the light of Christmas.

I have talked about how persons who have been found guilty of crimes need to act in relation to the cell, the city gate and the square. My question is: do they end up at the fellowship in the square or as outcasts outside the city gate. My objective is to show a way back to the square. I think that there are good reasons for our courts to give sentences which point towards the square. In the same way I hope that the public in general point towards the square and I hope that those involved in the process of forgiveness will find their way to the square.