

MY CHAINS FELL OFF – IMPRISONMENT AND RELEASE IN THE WRITINGS OF THE WESLEYS

by Tim Macquiban

*He preacheth Christ, and doth God's word deliver,
To all distressed, to comfort men for ever*

Introduction

Dostoevsky once commented that the soul of society ‘can be measured by its prisons’ (Snyder, 2001:2). In today’s British society with its rising prison population and growing tensions this is a sad indictment of the current state of law and order which seeks to imprison ever greater numbers despite the alternative options available to magistrates and judges. Snyder characterizes this as a ‘spirit of punishment’ which pervades the penal system, in which the churches collude through the imposition of a Protestant notion of grace. This has a greater stress on total depravity and the individual’s need to appropriate the redeeming work of Christ compared with a more positive view informed by a gracious God whose justice restores rather than condemns (Snyder, 2001:11-15). Yet the continuing presence of clergy and lay people from churches in prisons bears witness to the engagement of Christianity with issues of the care of humanity imprisoned by society for a variety of reasons.

Prisons in the eighteenth century were primarily places of containment, ensuring the safe custody of suspects arrested, those condemned to die or waiting for transportation, or those to be coerced into repaying debts. Very few expected to be incarcerated for a long fixed term. They were places of ‘unrelieved misery, sexual promiscuity, disease, squalor and extortion’, guaranteed to reduce the will to live and an ability to recover. To some Christians, the social and moral conditions of prisons caused concern. John Howard was prominent in his call for reforms to the system (McConville, 1981:49- 54). The place of the chaplain was limited and often neglected. ‘His business was not to seek to reform the living ... but ... to administer to those appointed to die ‘the consolation of religion’ (Kingsmill in 1834, quoted in McConville, 1981:74).

From 1688 to 1820 the number of hanging offences rose from 50 to about 200. Those so convicted and executed were mainly the victims of a social system in which the pressures of poverty and incidence of crime were clearly linked (Rule, 1992:227). There was a scant use of imprisonment for criminal offences. The gallows was the indispensable tool for maintaining the authority of the criminal law. 'It, not religion, became the chief ideological weapon which, in the name of equality, could facilitate and justify the hegemony of an elite' (Rule, 1992:240, 245). As Hay has demonstrated, the Tyburn tree was at the heart of this ideology, to protect the property of a privileged elite (Hay, 1975:13). Such public punishment was pure theatre, 'didactic theatre .. to provide lessons and warnings for other would-be transgressors of the Law'. Large crowds gathered to witness the scenes of impending death, to inflict further pain on the condemned or sometimes to rescue their self-declared heroes in defiance of the authorities and ruling classes who had condemned them (Emsley, 1987:259). Here was a supreme theatrical moment for religion to intervene and demonstrate its power, a chance for criminals to repent, to blame others and to seek forgiveness, a chance for evangelists to shine, using this moment of drama to intensify the opportunities for life-saving conversion not merely to those condemned to hang but also to all convicted sinners who gathered to gape and tremble at human weakness in the face of death (Emsley, 1981:260).

One example will suffice here. John Lancaster, born in Whitechapel in 1726, attended the Foundry charity school and was apprenticed to a velvet weaver from whom he stole some pieces at the Bartholemew Fair and fled abroad. When he returned years later his habit had not been broken. He was discovered selling the cloth he stole to a Jewish fence in Houndsditch. He was convicted and sentenced to be hanged. In the Newgate Gaol (later to be the scene of the prison visiting of the Quaker Elizabeth Fry) where he was held prior to execution, Sarah Peters, a Methodist, visited him and supervised his conversion. The procession to the gallows at Tyburn, according to John Wesley's account, was more like a revival meeting than a hanging match. The condemned sang a Wesley hymn, *Lamb of God whose bleeding love* before he died. Wesley deduced signs of divine intervention from the fact that Lancaster's face was neither bloated nor otherwise disfigured. The body, taken off by surgeons for dissection, was rescued by eight sailors and returned to his mother who gave it a decent burial, sure evidence that the conversion was efficacious. Like the dying thief on the Cross, in the words of the Wesley hymn:

O remember Calvary,
And let us go in peace.

The account is a powerful piece of religious propaganda supporting the evangelistic opportunity available through prison and beyond, offering the desire for peaceful translation of the soul from this life to the next. But the Wesley brothers' regular missions to Newgate and other prisons from 1738 onwards often provoked opposition from the authorities and the crowds (McConville, 1981:74). Were the Wesleys through their involvement in prisons challenging one of the 'chief ideological instruments' of the ruling class (Emsley, 1987:10)? Or was their involvement an instance of the social control sought by evangelicals in reclaiming the ground stolen by secular authorities?

The origins of the Methodist involvement in prison work and in the evangelistic ministry to the condemned lie in the decade earlier when John and Charles were in Oxford. I will seek to demonstrate that such practical engagement in this work had a significant effect on their sermons and writings, becoming a leitmotif in the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) they framed as a distinct Arminian contribution to the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. The fact that even today *And can it be* remains the best known and sung hymn of the Wesleyan movement is indication of the way in which this personal Aldersgate experience of the Wesleys became encapsulated in the imagery of imprisonment and freedom which their practical ministerial work had taught them.

The Wesleyan Context

Prison visiting, concern for prisoners and the experience of being in prison was central to the Wesley family. When in 1705 Samuel, Rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire, was cast into Lincoln Castle gaol for debt, he took the opportunity to write to the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge to obtain books to distribute among the prisoners as well as lead services for them, reflecting that 'I am getting acquainted with my brother jail-birds as fast as I can'. His eldest son Samuel wrote to his mother Susanna to comfort her in the family difficulty (Edwards, 1949: 19, 103). This Samuel, then a scholar at Westminster School, later wrote a poem, *The Prisons opened...*, in honour of James Oglethorpe and fellow members of a 'Committee .. appointed to inquire into the state of the Jails of this kingdom' in 1728. Oglethorpe was a great friend of debtors and felons whose conditions he highlighted. Samuel Wesley voiced these in his poem:

Piecemeal alive they rot, long doom'd to bear
The pestilential foul imprison'd Air.
As if the Pris'ners were condemned to dwell
With Pains with Darkness and with Fiends of Hell
(Wesley, S, 1729:1)

Out of Oglethorpe's concern came the great project to create the colony of Georgia, suggested to his mind by the situation of those 'whom he had rescued from the fangs of the jailer and the horrors of imprisonment'. His colony became a haven of hope for over a thousand whom he enabled to find asylum abroad (Jackson, 1849: viii-xxvii). Samuel Wesley senior supported his endeavours and tried to find recruits for the work of evangelism. Ironically it was his own two sons, supported through their years at Oxford by their elder brother Samuel, who were sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel after Samuel's death in 1735, perhaps with the encouragement of Dr Burton, President of Corpus Christi College Oxford, a Trustee of the Colony.

It was at Oxford that John and Charles first became involved in the sort of prison visiting that their own father had engaged in whilst at University. Encouraged by William Morgan in August 1730, they began to visit first the Castle Gaol (for felons) and then the Bocardo (for debtors) preaching and praying and caring for the prisoners (Heitzenrater, 1995:40). These activities soon earned them opprobrium and the nickname of 'The Holy Club' the title of which Samuel senior urged them not to disdain nor give up the work (Edwards, 1949:35). For Charles Wesley such visits were central to the social concerns embodied in the evangelistic works of mercy they engaged in and the pastoral context out of which was forged the theology of the hymns and sermons which flowed from their pens and hearts. Charles, as ever under the shadow of his elder and more prominent brother, was no mean theologian in his own right, 'of not insignificant ability in his attempt to explain the plight of the human condition' (Newport, 2001:48). A number of sermons which have survived were preached by him and his brother John at the Castle, particularly the first post-Pentecost sermon of 1738 on the text 1 John 3 v.14 in August of that year (Newport, 2001:132), marking what he regards as a change of heart in the optimism of conversion compared with his earlier soteriological pessimism (Newport, 2001:57).

In that same year, Charles moved away from Oxford being the sole theatre of good works and evangelism to the larger cities of Bristol and London, and then beyond, fired by the Aldersgate spirit. For several intense periods in

1738 and the years following, he concentrated on the prison at Newgate in London where he ministered to condemned prisoners in July and September 1738, February 1739 and January/February 1741, according to his journal accounts. The encounters in the cells and the death scenes at Tyburn are evidence of the importance of this aspect of his ministry in these early years after conversion (Jackson, 1849: 117-23, 130-45, 303-06). It was there that the 'spirit of faith' came upon him again as he preached to the malefactors and offered them salvation (Jackson, 1849: 117). The night before the executions, as they sang *Behold the Saviour of mankind* in July 1738, Charles described it as 'one of the most triumphant hours I have ever known' (ibid: 120). And the next day at the hanging scene he described the condemned as 'all cheerful, full of comfort, peace, and triumph; assuredly persuaded Christ had died for them, and wanted to receive them into paradise' (ibid, 120).

Themes of imprisonment in the writings of the Wesleys

The hymns:

The motif of the dying thief is a powerful trigger for much of the concern for such condemned prisoners and the offer and promise of salvation for all people, irrespective of their human condition. In a typical hymn published in 1749, taking up the themes prevalent in the Journals of Charles in 1738-39, the subject is the penitent thief. In it the condemned malefactor asks (Rattenbury, 1941: 248-49):

Hast thou not wrought the sure belief
I feel this moment in Thy blood?
And am not I the dying thief?
And art not Thou my Lord, my God?

Forgive, and make us fit to die,
Alas! We are not fit to live.

Watson reminds us of the way in which Wesley uses strongly physical metaphors for the spiritual state. Metaphors of melting and breaking the stony hearts of the unredeemed individual are central. So for Wesley the dying thief or the condemned prisoner becomes a metaphor for the human condition dependent on the mercy of God for life or death. Christ's redeeming work on the Cross demonstrates that offer of grace. We need to prepare ourselves for the inevitability of death in the hope of the promise of eternal life which relieves us from the threat of eternal death. (Watson, 1997: 261-62).

While the cords of sin and death bind the unbeliever, the chains of sin and death can be loosed by the offer of eternal life to those who believe in the atoning death of Christ upon the Cross. Charles Wesley's birthday hymn of 1741 is a throw back to the conversion experience of 1738 which has confirmed him through the power of the Spirit as a newly liberated soul, aware of the New Birth or New Creation, who is now not bound by sin and death but a 'prisoner of hope': (Rattenbury, 1941:253)

The tyranny of sin is past;
And though the carnal mind remains,
My guiltless soul on thee is cast,
I neither hug, nor bite my chains;
Prisoner of hope; to thee I turn,
And bless the day that I was born.

Wesley uses the figure of imprisonment under the law of sin and death as a legal metaphor for the human condition with all the awareness from the reality of its social impact on the lives of his contemporaries. This pardon of sin and deliverance from the forces of evil draws on the powerful images of freedom from the dark and from the dungeon of the prison, out into the light of a new dawn with no chains, no 'iron yoke', the 'fetters broken', as a 'Freeman of the Lord' 'to life restor'd'. (Rattenbury, 1941:240-42)

Of all the hymns included in the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, the most significant and universal in application in modern hymnals is *And can it be*, in which Charles Wesley likens his pre-Aldersgate condition to the 'imprisoned spirit' waiting for deliverance from the dungeon in which he lies 'fast bound in sin and nature's night'. The awareness of God's infinite mercy 'immense and free' brings him a sense of new freedom and the reconciliation with God which he sought (Watson, 1997:222). But the imagery is scattered throughout the collection, drawing on the rich veins of biblical allusions of deliverance from Isaiah / Luke 4 and Paul's letter to the Romans. The gospel of Jesus Christ sets prisoners free 'from the pit' (144.v7) which brings 'sweet release' (215.v3). All can find grace, even 'the foulest offender' (5.v1), even the 'outcasts of men ... harlots and publicans and thieves' for whom Christ 'came the lost to seek and save' (29.v5). As the second Adam, he has come to:

... set the plaintive prisoners free.
Bring forth out of this hellish pit
This dungeon of despairing grief (125.vv4-5)

The condition of such captive souls is hellish; they are ‘guilty spirits oppressed’, groaning souls’ waiting to be released (28.vv1,3).

O let the pris’ners’ mournful cries
As incense in thy sight appear.
Their humble wailings pierce the skies
If haply they may find thee near.

The captive exiles make their moans
From sin impatient to be free;
Call home, call home, thy banished ones!
Lead captive their captivity!

Out of the dungeon of despair, and grief, and oppression, like Daniel in the den (156.v2), tied down by the ‘tyrant’s chain’ of sin and death, the believer is led as the Israelites ‘out of the house of bondage brought, and freed from the th’Egyptian yoke’ when ‘the open door of hope’ is offered (284.vv2,4). Paradoxically, the believer, released from one condition of imprisonment, becomes for Christ ‘the sinner’s friend’ (138.v1), ‘the prisoner of thy love’ (102.v3), a ‘prisoner of hope’ (119.v3) bringing ‘life and liberty’ (135.v2) to all ‘happy sinners’ (336.v1). Because Christ for the Wesleys has been found in the experience of meeting those who were prisoners and strangers, the outcasts of society shunned by conventional Christians of their day, they hold up the work of evangelism amongst the poor and oppressed for their followers:

The prisoner release
The stranger relieve
Supply all their wants
And spend and be spent in assisting his saints (482.v3)

Towards the end of his life, a collection of hymns *For Malefactors* was published which was indicative of the continuing importance of this ministry for shaping the spiritual development of the people called Methodists.

The Sermons:

Kenneth Newport in his recent edition of the Charles Wesley sermons has given us the detailed textual tools needed to make a more thorough analysis of the development of his theological thought (2001). This includes a greater awareness of how different was the pre-Aldersgate and post-Aldersgate preaching, and how significant was the context in which he and John found the exercise of their ministry. The social concern which characterized the

Oxford years remained. But the 'conversion' experience of 1738 reshaped and revitalized the sermons of Charles in the light of the 'new birth' he and John came to know. The regular visitation of the Castle prison to engage with the condemned prisoners was a particular concern in the 1730s. It contributed to Charles' attempt 'to explain the human condition' and to offer the 'optimism of grace' which he had come to experience for himself, dispelling the earlier gloom and soteriological pessimism (Newport, 2001: 48, 57). Contrast two sermons drawing on images of imprisonment. The first comes from the pre-1738 period, taking a text from Philippians 3:14-15. The darkness of Charles Wesley's own dungeon and the gloom of his attempts to strive towards perfection are evident as he seeks release both for those to whom he ministers and himself (Newport, 2001: 57). In contrast, his first surviving post-Pentecost sermon was delivered at Oxford Castle on 29 August 1738, 'preached to the poor prisoners', on a theme from the First Letter of John 3:14. The familiar motifs of darkness/light and captivity/freedom are clearly drawn from the context of prison ministry and given soteriological significance in the light of the preacher's own deliverance. Those in captivity are proclaimed by the modern day follower of Isaiah's prophecy (Isa. 61:1 and Luke 4) to be prisoners of hope, allowing the spirit of God to take them out of darkness into light, out of bondage into glorious liberty. He concludes:

Believe that he is able to do this!
Believe it according to thy faith.

(Newport, 2001: 144)

A similar sermon preached on 4 April 1742 at a time of intense prison ministry in London on the text 'Awake thou that sleepest' (Eph. 5:14) depicts the human condition as one of bondage; 'fast bound in misery and iron, he dreams he is happy and at liberty'. Such a delusion is exposed by the preacher who declares that all are 'under sentence of death', spiritual death which awaits the coming of the second Adam within human beings to raise them from death, the death of sin, 'pleasure, riches or honours' bound with two chains, the keepers before the door keeping the prison'. The image of Peter in the prison cell, 'lying in the dark dungeon between the soldiers', (Acts 12:6) is a metaphor for those 'fast asleep in the devil's arm, on the brink of the pit, in the jaws of everlasting destruction' to whom the angel of deliverance is to come to bring 'light (to) shine into thy prison!' and set the prisoner free. The preacher assumes the role of the angelic messenger with

the power of the Spirit of God to bring such deliverance. No longer is he enslaved by sin and death. He has found a sweet release which he wants to share with others in his evangelistic ministry.

Brother John's sermons are more extensive and wide-ranging in scope. He too has his post-Aldersgate preaching shaped by the reflection on the spiritual experience in the light of the prison ministry he continues to exercise. His sermon *Salvation by Faith*, preached at St Mary's in Oxford on 11 June 1738, takes the text from Romans 8:1 and proclaims that there is no condemnation for those who believe in Jesus Christ. They are saved from guilt and fear, the 'fear of punishment .. of the wrath of God' (Sermons I:122-24). In *The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption*, developing the text in verse 15 of the same chapter of Romans, Wesley describes the three states of man; one natural, as man is burdened by original sin; one is legal, as man is subject to the Law and is fearful; one is evangelical, as man discovers his salvific hope in Christ. The images of darkness and captivity are crucial to the contrast between the latter condition and the former. By his own he is unable to break free:

The more he strives, labours to be free, the more does he
feel his chains, the grievous chains, wherewith Satan
binds him ... his servant he is.

But the Spirit of Adoption replaces the Spirit of Bondage and overcomes the 'sin and misery' of the human condition without God (Sermons I:253-58). This comes about as human beings find themselves forgiven. Then the 'chains fall off' and there is no condemnation (*Sermon on the Mount* sermon, I:386). In other sermons (eg. *Origin, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law, General Deliverance*) similar images of chains loosed and bondage ended are used.

Unlike Charles, John seems to have enjoyed a more optimistic outlook on the ability of human beings to respond to the offer of a transforming grace. We know from surviving notes that John preached at regular weekly intervals at the Castle Gaol, often using notes abridged from the sermons of others for over 30 minutes.(Sermons IV:525) In his sermon *In Earth as in Heaven* preached in Oxford Castle in April 1734 he has a high doctrine of human potential for goodness and truth. This enables him to preach with confidence, despite the wretchedness of the conditions of the condemned and their expectations, of God's love for them. In *A Single Intention* preaching on a

text from Matthew 6:10 he contrasts the terrors of the deep and darkness with the light of God's abundant providence. He exhorts them:

Be ye likewise new creatures! Let God be your aim and God only! Let your one end be to please and to love God!

(Sermons IV: 371-77)

Conclusion:

The importance of the prison ministry in shaping the early theological development of the Wesleys' preaching can be seen in the inclusion within tracts published in 1745 of *A Word to a Condemned Malefactor*. This continued to inspire the bold succession of Methodists who engaged in prison visiting, Sarah Peters and Silas Told to the Newgate in London, John Valton, and others who include this aspect of ministry in their service for Methodism (Church, 1949:195-203).

Clearly this had an abiding influence within Methodism and the Evangelical Revival. John Fletcher, at one time thought to be a candidate for the apostolic succession in the Methodist movement, published in 1773 a tract entitled *The Penitent Thief*, commending ministry among those condemned with a stirring narrative of the visitation to John Wilkes in Stafford prison prior to his execution. With the inclusion of penitential prayers and hymns, the evangelical outreach work was put within a liturgical context within the established church with a powerful apologia delivering an implicit critique of the social quietism of organised religion in the eighteenth century:

Does it become us, wantonly, to *drive the cart* of our compassion from under the poor dying criminals? And is it either humane or reasonable, to *turn them off* from us with pharisaic abhorrence, as if we were creatures of a far more excellent species than they?

My reader and myself are as certainly condemned to die for sin, as any felon in the world, on whom an awful sentence of death is already past. And tho' I hope we shall not die so shamefully, yet a death a thousand times more lingering and painful probably awaits our perishing bodies. (JF, 1773:35-36)

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