
PRISONERS AND THE EARTH

by Edward P. Echlin

We are aware that exclusion of prisoners from the rest of the community, with the bare necessities of shelter, food, clothes, and exercise, resembles denial. A less noticed exclusion, however, that begins well before prison, and before people offend, is the separation of young people from the rest of the earth community. In offenders earth illiteracy, or eco-autism, is endemic. They, like all too many contemporaries, have been earth alienated, anthroposolic, all their lives. Dysfunctional young people, enraged because unloved, often unacquainted with their biological fathers, unleash rage against trees, plants, and animals, against other people, and against their built environment. Significantly, at an American university where I taught theology for nine years, assaults on trees, plants, and flowers often occurred immediately after grades, including failing grades, were released. Eco-autistic young people, in taking revenge on other living beings diminish themselves.

I want to suggest that restorative justice, or rehabilitation — in a word, holistic healing — includes more than reintegration into human society. Earth literate prisoners, and former prisoners, are invaluable to the whole earth community. For restoration of mutually supportive relations between people and the earth is the defining issue of this century. Holistic healing — of prisoners *and* ourselves — is a matter of life or extinction. Eminent life scientists, here and abroad, expect our species to self destruct this century, probably by climate disruption, extinction of biodiversity, or bioterrorism. Ecologically rehabilitated prisoners can perform an ecological service, even survival assistance, when they teach, and encourage the wider human community to live sustainably.

Christian theology insists that earth creatures are just that, dependent and inter-related creatures under God. Psalm 145, for example, exclaims ‘thou satisfieth the desire of every living creature — let every living creature praise his name for ever and ever’ (Ps. 145. 16, 20). And the psalms conclude, ‘Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!’ (Ps. 150.6). Jesus, according to Matthew and Luke, praises

God as Creator of all creatures, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth’ (Mt. 11.25; Lk 10.21). Within the same Jewish tradition, the first Christian writer, Paul, preached to the Lystrians, ‘a living God who made the heavens and earth and sea and all that is in them’ (Acts 14.15). God incarnate in Jesus is at the centre of our earth, the beginning of a new creation. Jesus, incarnate and risen, invites all of us to enter more deeply the earth community, and to relate to the earth’s needs. As Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ, writes, ‘The incarnation does not provide us with a ladder by which to escape the ambiguities of life and scale the heights of heaven. Rather it enables us to burrow deep into the heart of planet earth and find it shimmering with Divinity.’ God invites us, with all our fellow earth creatures, to praise Him, like an icon letting God’s glory through. Prisoners, if close to the heart of planet earth, can help one another and us outside to relate to the earth in its fragility. This literally vital ministry can begin — and with some cases has begun — in prison itself, with chaplains, teachers, guards, governors, visitors, family and, not least, with each other. An act of earth healing within a house of correction ripples outwards.

My own experience with prisoners is slight and sporadic, but has perdured all my life. Since the day my lawyer father took me, as a schoolboy, with him to a lock up when he questioned police about a case, I have realised that a significant part of our community dwells within prison walls. I remember a prisoner, hands on bars, studying us with interest, because children, like young women, rarely crossed his narrow path. My pictorial memory of that strong, lonely young man gazing from his cell has remained always with me. That picture is a parable of the often crippled relatedness of offenders to the whole earth community.

Decades later, as an eco-theologian I challenged a prison chaplain about the separation of inmates from the rest of the earth community with which they, and we, are inter-related. He explained the difficulties in, for example, permitting terracotta plant containers, tools, propagators, sprayers, even, in some cases, seeds and compost.

He also told me an incident which combines with my picture of that lock up prisoner of my boyhood. The chaplain ministered to a hardened lifer whose family had long ago abandoned him, and he in turn rejected them. The prison staff had recently allowed prisoners to have budgie birds in carefully crafted cages. The lifer requested, and received, a budgie. The fragile little

bird had been a cellmate with him for many months, and had recently died. He was so distressed that he sent for the chaplain. The little bird had been the first dependent companion he had ever had, her companionship was the first time he had been known, loved and trusted, by another living being. And for the first time he suffered grinding bereavement. Whenever he awakened from sleep, he was in an eerily empty, lifeless cell. Comforting him was as important a ministry as comforting a prisoner after loss of a human friend. That incident confirmed, and illustrates, my conviction that we need to 'rehabilitate', and 'restore' prisoners to the earth.

Chaplains, counsellors, teachers, other prisoners, and visitors have privileged opportunities to remind convicts that, as they say in Appalachia, 'we's kin' with the earth, that, as the budgie recognised, we thinking creatures are like client kings entrusted with God's earth creatures, leaders who are not strangers but brothers within the earth fraternity. 'One from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother' (Dt. 17.15). We're here with all other earth creatures to praise God, to let His glory through, to make sacraments in that small part of earth, our own habitat, entrusted to us. Prisoners, when they are in touch with nature, can, like ourselves, learn from the earth's wise order, as did Jesus who found birds, wildflowers, and gentle rains wise teachers. Birds and flowers did not live in food anxiety. Living with, and not abusing, the climate's rhythm, they trusted in One greater than they. Hens protected their chicks under outstretched wings. Vines and figs had their seasons. The wisdom of earth creatures, adapting to God's order, instructed Jesus and illustrated his teaching.

Prisons can be — some already are — leaders in local sustainability. Individual prisoners can associate themselves with what their prison, as institution, is doing for the earth. Inmates should know, and take pride, when they are local leaders in alternative energies, in roof panels, wind turbines, energy efficient lighting, insulation, recycling and composting. By purchase of local food and materials they are supporting local farmers and not damaging the climate by air and lorry miles. Prisoners, and chaplaincies, can belong to Christian Ecology Link, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, or to the Jewish Noah Project. Prisoners and the prison can endorse Christian Ecology Link's Operation Noah campaign on climate change. (www.christian-ecology.org.uk/noah). Water, like energy, is precious. Every prison, and home, needs water butts.

Harvested water can be used in gardens, with house plants, and for washing up. Where possible prisons should harvest from roofs rain water for underground cisterns from which water is pumped into buildings for everything but drinking, kitchen, and infirmary use, which latter is still purchased from the regional water company. Domestic hydrology can be explained to inmates, who in turn can explain it to visitors. When they leave prison they can take with them an appreciation of energy and water, and the relation of both to climate. Prisons, no matter how small their gardens, and especially when (more sensibly) they have in William Cecil's famous words, 'a little land around them' can assist threatened wildlife and biodiversity. When land space still permits, prisoners can create and tend small ponds and wildlife friendly plants. They can feed birds and provide bird baths, again with harvested rain water. Assisting fellow creatures, especially those whose very existence is threatened, also assists and heals the assistants.

Christian ecology 'gathers to a greatness' in food growing. The challenge, wonder, discoveries, satisfaction, education, and sense of accomplishment and creativity in successfully nurturing fruit and vegetables from soil, is a singular form of rehabilitation for anyone. The asset stripping of prison farms and land has been as earth illiterate and economocentric as the asset stripping of 'privatised' railway land. Working with and not against nature's ways to grow food organically is a way of repairing damage done to the earth. Organic growing in itself is wildlife friendly (barring slugs and aphids!), and can make one feel religious about the earth. When possible, a small plot, even 'square foot gardening', entrusts an inmate with a part of planet earth with which he, or she, can cooperate, let be, beautify, and make productive. Food growing helps us appreciate kitchen compost, green manure, soil, water, frost, and biodiversity. Young men and women everywhere should grow some food. Prisoners can learn to save seeds, perhaps 'adopting an orphan' vegetable from HDRA's Seed savers, thereby helping preserve our genetic diversity. (HDRA Seeds Savers, National Organic Gardening Association, Ryton Gardens, Coventry CV8 3LG.) When land is available either at the prison or nearby, we can encourage prisoners to learn about, plant, tend, protect, and harvest soft or top fruit, perhaps growing plants from cuttings, thereby multiplying fruit in their bioregions, and reducing fossil fuel addicted dependence on imports.

Conclusion

As a *tekton*, a craftsman, Jesus lived close to nature, and grew food in family fields, in partial self-sufficiency. From his sayings preserved in our gospels we know he shared the received wisdom ethos of his culture. Wise persons aligned themselves with nature's rhythms, working, like organic growers, with the natural world and not against it. Significantly for our time of own goal food insecurity, Jesus observed that birds and wildflowers were not anxious about food and clothing. Because they observed God's order, the harmony of nature, God fed and clothed them. The ox knew its owner, the ass its master's manger, the stork knew the times for migration. Rivers, or living water differed from harvested water, but both, in different ways, were precious. When prisoners restore mutually supportive relationships with the earth, especially when they grow some food, and see and touch God's creation, they are, or can be, Christian ecologists with personal relationships to Jesus. For Jesus of Nazareth knows what it's like to be limited to a relatively small area, he knows how weeds interfere with seedlings, and that fruit trees enjoy compost. Long before human induced climate disruption, Jesus noticed the literally vital importance of God's ordered climate. Prisoners who restore mutually supportive relationships with the earth do not walk with other humans alone.

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