Prisoners’ Week, 21-18th November 2010

Theme: More than a Number

1. Sermon Notes, Suggested Readings and Hymns

2. Prayers for use in and around Prisoners’ Week

1. Sermon Notes, Suggested Readings and Hymns

Jesus said to her “Mary”  
John 20:16

Prisoner Number 24601 has to be one of the best known numbers of anyone who’s ever been in jail. It’s a fictional number, and therein lies a clue. You may even have hummed it to yourself!

The phenomenal popularity of ‘Les Glums’ or ‘Les Mis’ has projected Prisoner Number 24601 onto a world stage.

This autumn has seen the 25th anniversary of a show that has taken Victor Hugo’s story Les Misérables around the globe with flowing lyrics set to stunning melodies from Herbert Kretzmer and Claude Michel Schönberg respectively. Set against the historical backdrop of a rebellion led by young men in the poverty stricken Paris of 1832, the main theme follows the life of Jean Valjean. After serving 19 years in prison for stealing bread, Jean Valjean, desperate and embittered, steals a pair of silver candlesticks from a Church. When he is arrested on suspicion of the crime unasked for grace is shown to him by the Bishop of Digne who makes the silver candlesticks into a gift to Jean Valjean. This undeserved compassion has a pivotal effect upon his life. Later, Jean Valjean has become the mayor of a town and the owner of a successful business through which many have come to depend on him. But along the way Prisoner Number 24601 has broken the terms of his parole and he is relentlessly pursued by Officer of the Law Javert.

"Men like you can never change  
No, 24601  
My duty’s to the law - you have no rights  
Come with me 24601  
Now the wheel has turned around  
Jean Valjean is nothing now."
In large organisations people can be overlooked, all too easily, and individuals can feel as though they do not matter. Many of us will have felt something of this whenever we’ve been part of a large crowd, the sense of being herded, of being lost in the masses, of feeling that there’s no chance of your voice or personal choices being heard. Most of us only catch a glimpse of that, thankfully, like when we’re attending something like a sports event or a concert or a venue where ‘crowd control’ measures are required to ensure the safety of all. Imagine, though, if you lived everyday feeling that the ‘you’ who you are is being overlooked.

From schools to social services, from large businesses and factories to transport, from hospitals to prisons, everyone is given a number. Ticket numbers, employee numbers, benefit numbers, National Insurance numbers, student numbers, license numbers, passport numbers,... numbers are never far away! Maybe you keep an array of numbers in your head which you use every day – your home telephone number, your mobile, a password to access your computer, PINs for cash or credit cards, a vehicle registration number and so on. Numbers, it might be said, have taken over!

The 2010 Prisoners’ Week theme “More than a Number” expresses a nagging doubt which many of us may feel, living as we do in the kind of society where data about every one of us is bought and sold on the internet. We are each of us are more than a collection of statistics, more than a number, and perhaps it is good to have the occasion to say so! It is, in fact, vital that we do.

When society chooses to lock people away it is important that all of us are aware of the danger of people being forgotten. Long time ago one form of prisoner cell in use in Scotland was known as the oubliette, from the French word to forget. People were simply thrown in there and forgotten. At the heart of Prisoners’ Week there is the invitation to “remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them” (Hebrews 13.3). There has been a drive towards community care in our society, underway for many years in healthcare, which used to provide large residential institutions where people might stay and be lost to the rest of us for years, and in some cases for the whole of the rest of their lives. ‘Care in the community’ has countered the worst effects of institutionalisation. The same might also be said for those who receive Community Sentences within the Criminal Justice System, and this is but one of the reasons why moves to enhance Community Sentence provision are so important. Writing before the ‘Care in the Community’ movement got underway, the sociologist Erving Goffman spoke of a process called the ‘mortification of self’ that can occur in large institutions - a slow process of dying, of losing motivation and purpose, of declining self-esteem and hope, of increased isolation and relationship breakdown, which can happen within any institutional setting.

All who make that leap of the imagination and sense what it would be like for them to be inside one of Scotland’s overcrowded prisons begin to care for those inside. Those who care in such establishments offer a counter-force to the depersonalising
effects that come from so many people living in close confines together. They demonstrate that, in the words of a Prison Officer ‘behind every prisoner there is a person’. Every person in prison is a unique individual and like all of us immeasurably ‘more than a number’. When we care for persons as individuals, with their unique past, present and future, when we consider all who are a part of their lives, their partners, children, parents, when we take time to get to know people as persons, not by a number but by their name, we offer the kind of context where people can rediscover who they are, dare to reach out for something new and discover their true talents.

The numbers of those in Scotland’s prisons are staggering. Presently 7852 people are in custody and there are a further 400 persons on Home Detention Curfew, the ‘electronic tag’ as it’s known. There were 27,144 admissions to prison during the period from 1st April 2009 to 30th March 2010. These statistics are considerably higher than in most European countries.

Prison also impacts on those who are a part of prisoners’ lives. It is estimated that there are more children affected by the imprisonment of a parent than those affected by parental divorce.

Many people are made victims of crime and experience the impact an offence or injury has had on their lives, family or community. Victim Support Scotland had 86,140 referrals to its Victim Service in 2008-9.

Behind every statistic there’s a human being with a story to be heard. Thankfully integrated ways of working now help to ensure more individualised care and planning for a person’s return to the community, bringing together various disciplines including social work in prison and the community, nursing and mental health professionals, prison officers and sometimes chaplains with the opportunity for the prisoner and, if he or she wishes, to have a family member present with them on various occasions.

It was when Jesus called the woman in the garden by her name that her life was transformed. “Mary,” was all Jesus needed to say for her eyes to be opened. Mary could then see a new reality and she began a journey where life would take a different course. We can imagine the tone with which Jesus spoke, how quickly or slowly her name was said, and with what feeling it was imbued. Perhaps he spoke her name as he always had and Mary knew then that this could only be Jesus who was with her. And how remarkable was that! She was in the presence of the living Lord ‘who, in the words of Isaiah, ‘calls us all by name.’ Even in the midst of times of deep sadness, challenge or testing, when we traverse the hardest parts of life’s journey, we need not be anxious because we are known by name and with Christ by our side we are on the path that leads to redemption. Interestingly, Isaiah’s words, come to reassure a people who are making the transition from exile and captivity to a new beginning.
It was in a garden that Mary met the risen Jesus. Gardens are such hope-filled places! Thankfully, all our prisons have them. They are signs of growth and new beginning, signs of grace like the grace shown to Prisoner Number 24601 when he discovered that Jean Valjean had so much to give. No matter what, every child of God is created in God’s image and the way to life in all its fullness is open.

Those of us in the community can offer such person centred care to all who have been affected by crime. Offering support to the families of prisoners as they face the challenges of life for a time without their partner, son or daughter, father or mother can help sustain relationships and make a difference for all concerned. Those who have been made victims of crime and their families are also glad of understanding and support; it may take time to find healing and the ability to move on.

“More than a Number “– it makes all the difference when we take the time to get to know people as people, in our prisons and in our communities. It offers hope and grace and, as with Mary, the wonderful realisation that Jesus, the risen Lord, is with us.

Suggested Readings: Isaiah 43: 1-7
Hebrews: 13:1-3
John 20: 10-18

Suggested Hymns from the Church Hymnary 4th Edition:
279 Make way, make way, for Christ the King
559 There is a Redeemer
191 Do not be afraid
694 Brother, sister, let me serve you
396 And can it be

From Revd Bill Taylor, Chaplaincy Adviser (Church of Scotland) with the Scottish Prison Service.
2. Prayers for use in or around Prisoners’ Week

An Opening Prayer

Call to Prayer

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

(Psalm 139: 7-12)

Spring comes, not with a fanfare or shout of acclamation, but with the melting of a single snowflake.

(The Kite Runner)

Let us pray:

Lord God, your presence turns the cell into a cathedral, lonely isolation into a glimmer, a glimpse, of resurrection hope. From the shadows we worship you and gather in your light. We do not enter your presence, you invade ours. Like the empty tomb, you are present when you are absent, there when we do not see you, free when we seek to confine you behind stones of faith and rocks of religion.

We who seek you in solitude and privacy, welcome you reluctantly as you contaminate our sacred spaces by arriving with the sick and dispossessed, the feared and the excluded, all those we have made strangers. You undermine our pride and liberate us.

We present our Sunday best and you unnerve us by loving the people we have worked on hiding. You mess up our theology, desecrate our systems. You leave us confused between God and neighbour, you call the last first and the first last.
The hand you hold out to us is ugly with the marks of confinement, beating, execution, imprisonment. You are the outcast, the prisoner, the victim, the blamed, the culpable, the crucified. We can see no other God. You come to us as the living God, the God of Jesus, weak in crucifixion, confusing in resurrection, unattractive and offensive. You are the Prodigal Son, the injured man on the Jericho road, unclean as a leper, profane.


May we live the truth of the kingdom now, experience future hope today.

The Lord's Prayer....

**A Prayer of intercession for Prisoners’ Week**

Lord God, our prayer is a prayer for ourselves and for others, for prisoners and for victims, for those on the “inside” whose confinement is obvious and for the many on the “outside” whose imprisonment is subtler, to do with money and pride and lack of self awareness. We do not pray from a position of strength.

We pray for the prisoner knowing that human divisions are false, that this is not the innocent praying for the guilty or the right praying for the wrong but people praying for people, the hurt remembering the hurt, the failure reaching out in love to the failure in a single community reaching out in grace.

We pray for the victim knowing that we do not have the luxury of black and white, the simple answer or the easy question. While we remember victims of crime on the outside so do we remember the countless victims on the inside, casualties of uneven playing fields and false and difficult starts, dreamless futures and nightmare pasts.

For the child who cries at night for his father or her mother, tears of loneliness, loss, incomprehension, and for the children who bear the shame created by other people’s judgement, we pray in the quietness of our worship.

We remember the whole criminal justice system and process, those caught up in it, those at every side and in every moment of it. We remember those involved in Throughcare, those who seek to change difficult life stories, midwives of hope and agents of grace.

We remember the staff in our prisons, those who guard and those who care, an army of ordinary people working in an extraordinary community of ordinary people.
We commit to being the answer to our own prayers, to being there for those for whom we pray and to living, speaking and thinking in ways which are compatible with the kingdom.

Christ said that it is through love that others will know us and that it is through our attitude to and care for those who are regarded as least that we serve him.

As we turn from prejudice and division, open our eyes so that we may see you and serve you.

In silence, we remember those who most need the prayers of the Church, without words we name them and raise their needs before you.

Amen

*Prayers by Revd Neil Campbell, Chaplain at HMP Dumfries*