
**BIBLICAL THOUGHTS ON
PRISONER PASTORAL
CARE**

by **Johannes Beutler**

Impressions of Prison

For 11 years I have regularly passed through the reception area of the Women's Detention Centre III in Frankfurt-am-Main. Its threshold is the dividing line between the world 'outside' and the world 'inside'. 'Outside' is the world of unlimited space in which people can go wherever they want, the world of those able to choose whom they want to meet irrespective of the time of day. 'Outside' is also the world of relationships, the world of families, jobs and leisure. 'Inside' is different. Freedom to move is severely restricted, right down to being locked up in a small cell for a long time every day and every evening. 'Inside' is the world of limited contact, regulated visiting times, forced togetherness of people who otherwise would never have dreamed of sharing living space. The keys we are given as chaplains are tools that divide these two living spaces. The 'inside' space offers chaplains insight into the concentrated misery of the world, its hardship, loneliness and despair.

Whenever we sit in the detention room or the visiting area of the chaplaincy centre the same question arises time and again: 'Where is God?' Many prisoners feel very strongly that they have not only been deserted by people but also by God. In their response they read psalms and together with the writer they lament, as did Jesus: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34) For prisoners God seems to be 'outside', not here 'inside'. The thick prison walls have left God 'outside'. Perhaps part of it is their utter disappointment. Perhaps God is closer to those who are successful, kind and productive than to those who have been disadvantaged throughout their lives and have been found guilty for their actions. On Sunday mornings they hear the bells of the Catholic church

across the yard, a sound calling ‘good’ Christians of the neighbourhood to church, while those ‘inside’ ask themselves whether they should attend the service ‘inside’, a service they are escorted to in groups, where they are watched closely and from which they are accompanied back to cells. They wonder if that is still the church they used to believe in, or if there are not two churches, the church ‘outside’ and the church ‘inside’.

In many countries this ‘threshold’ will be experienced in different ways. People are imprisoned not just because they have broken the law but because they became too difficult. Many people, even in so called ‘civilised’ nations, often have to wait years for their trial while others are held without charge. Many have lost freedom simply because they spoke out when it would have been better to stay silent or because they acted while others only watched from the sidelines. We all know of examples from every continent. Amnesty International knows many of the individuals concerned but cannot know each and every case. Even today, there are western industrial nations where conscientious objectors are sent to prison. Not only in South East Asia are people fighting for their human rights locked up in prison cells. Not only in Latin America do the lawyers themselves working for the poor sometimes lose their freedom and occasionally their lives. Such cases make us ask: ‘Where is God? From a Christian perspective one might also ask: ‘Where is Jesus?’

The Perspective of Scripture

The New Testament offers a surprising answer to the last question: Jesus is ‘inside’! We all know the scene in the Last Judgement as told in Matthew’s Gospel (25:31-46). The righteous people are separated from the cursed. The important criterion for the final decision is the question whether a man has helped the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and those in prison and has been with God on the side of the underprivileged. In those verses we are told: ‘Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, ‘Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me’ (Matthew 25:34-36). ‘I was in prison’ is a statement that should surprise us

and make us think. How does this fit into the ambiguity of the world we experience every time we cross the prison threshold: the world where the ‘righteous’ are outside and the ‘sinners’ inside? The Gospel challenges those who observe this double life. ‘Did we ever see you suffering, sick or in prison?’ Jesus replied that he identifies himself with ‘the least of these my brethren’: ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me’ (Matthew 25:40). Those who look at the face of the poor, the suffering, the sick and the imprisoned will recognize Jesus. If it is necessary to divide the world between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ then Jesus is definitely ‘inside’ and with those imprisoned.

This view has parallels with many pictures the Bible draws of prisoners and imprisonment. Almost all the representatives of God’s people — patriarchs, kings or prophets — are imprisoned. They are often not guilty. The longest and most memorable story is told in Genesis 39-41. Joseph’s brothers sold him into Egypt. He ends up a prosperous man at the court of the Pharaoh but is noticed by the wife of the captain of the guard. When he refuses her advances she accuses him of improper behaviour. Joseph is sent to prison. Much later he is set free and has his entitlements reinstated. Samson’s story is similar: he is innocent but is still imprisoned by the Philistines. Technically, he should be called a prisoner-of-war. When unable to free himself he causes the collapse of the house covering him and hundreds of Philistines. This demonstrates not only his strength but also that of the God of Israel (Judges 16).

Similarly, Hosea and Hezekiah, who were the last kings of Samaria and Judah, are prisoners of war (2 Kings 17:4; 25:7-25). The dual kingdom ended with their reigns. Matthew later counts the kings of Judah as Jesus’ ancestors (1:11).

The Old Testament repeatedly tells of prophets being thrown into prison. One of the earliest of those is Micah, son of Jimla. King Ahab plans war against Ramot-Gilead and consults prophets at his court. They all encourage him and promise victory. Only Micha ben Jimla acts differently. Consulted after much hesitation he forewarns the king of his impending defeat. He is thrown into prison and fed only bread and water. After Ahab dies in battle he is set free (1 Kings 22: 1-38). The prophet Hanani in the Southern Kingdom

suffers a similar fate when he remonstrates with King Asa (2 Chronicles 16:10).

Like Elijah, other prophets are sent into exile (1 Kings 19:3). Amos escapes from Ahab and his wife and heads for the Southern Kingdom and the desert. Amos is told: 'O thou seer, go, flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there: but prophesy not again any more at Beth-el: for it is the king's chapel, and it is the king's court' (Amos 7:12). During the confusion prior to the conquest of Jerusalem Jeremiah dares to prophesy the impending defeat of the city and the kingdom. As a result he is thrown into the dungeon (Jeremiah 38:1-13). When a friend takes up his case he is brought up again but kept a prisoner at the court of the king 'until the day when Jerusalem was conquered' (Jeremiah 38:28).

So we realise that prophets who speak the truth live dangerously and that those who proclaim their faith may lose their freedom and even their lives. This conclusion is summarised in the Epistle to the Hebrews where we hear of the former heroes of their faith: 'And others had trial of cruel mocking and scourging, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword' (Hebrews 11:36). The power of their faith was stronger than the power of those persecuting them and robbing them of their freedom and their lives. This view is also borne out by the experience during the time of the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 9:53; 13:12).

Imprisonment is a Metaphor for Persecution

A life in prison can serve as a metaphor for persecution and hostility. We know of many psalms telling of innocent people being persecuted, who then look for help from God. Many times we also hear in psalms of disease, either as a metaphor for a life of conflict or as proof that hostility both leading to illness in those being persecuted. In this context we also hear about imprisonment. In Psalm 142:7 one person who is innocent but still persecuted prays: 'Lead my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name.' It is not entirely clear here, whether the term 'prison' serves as a metaphor or is indeed the reality out of which the prayer is offered. In any case, life in

prison, which in Graeco-Roman times often meant life in total darkness, is a suitable metaphor for life in conflict and oppression.

At this point a brief word on the meaning of psalms for those visiting and caring for prisoners may be useful. When I started to visit women in prison who were from South America and who were convicted for drug smuggling, I soon realised that their Bibles, inherited from their predecessors, often had a black line through the middle. Initially I asked myself what that was supposed to mean but soon found the answer. More than any other book of the Bible these women read the psalms and used them as their personal prayer book, especially in the evenings and before going to sleep. They looked for inspiration during times of the day when they thought about their loved ones, children, parents, brothers and sisters. I was surprised to hear that some psalms were more popular than others and that the women read them again and again. They were the texts read as part of the nighttime songs in church. Their favourites were Psalm 91 and also Psalm 4 which closes with the words: 'I will lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety' (v.8). Another favourite prayer in prison is Psalm 23: 'The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want' (v.1). Many prisoners would surely find themselves in 'the valley of death' about which the psalmist speaks.

During their time in exile and afterwards the suffering people of Israel are promised deliverance from a life in darkness and oppression. The 'Servant of God' mentioned in the Book of Isaiah is told: 'I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house' (Isaiah 42:6-7). Later we are told more about this 'Servant of God': we are told that he will suffer humiliation, pain and death and that only through him and his patience will the vicious circle of violence come to an end.

According to one of the later texts in the Book of Isaiah it will be the Messiah, who will give freedom and new hope to oppressed people. 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to

proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Isaiah 61:1-2). According to the gospel of Luke (4:18ff) Jesus reflects on these words from Isaiah in his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth in which he describes his future mission. The gospel tells us that Jesus knows he has been sent to preach the gospel to the poor; 'he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord'. In Luke the good message for the poor and the promise of freedom for the captives belong together.

In ancient times there were no detention penalties. People were incarcerated because of war, because of debt, which had to be paid, or because of an investigation ending in a sentence, which more often than not was death. Sometimes Jesus speaks of a debt tower, a prison, into which people could be thrown (Matthew 5:25). Otherwise, when the New Testament tells us about prison it is in connection with a court hearing. Few texts tell us about people who are not part of Jesus' group. One example is in the scene of the Passion, in which the Jews of Jerusalem are asked to decide between Jesus and another prisoner, Barabbas (Luke 23:18 ff), and they chose the latter. In other texts we hear how Jesus or members of his group are imprisoned or held captive.

John the Baptist is the first of the well-known prisoners. Even from prison he sends a message to Jesus (Matthew 11:2). Due to the mood swings of Herod John meets his end in prison (Mark 6:14-29). For us as readers of Mark this fate must have some paradigmatic meaning: John the Baptist dies an innocent man and is buried by his disciples with all honours. The same fate awaits Jesus.

The New Testament records the arrest of Jesus when he walks to the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:43-49). This could be interpreted as being imprisoned on remand. In comparison with today the circumstances in New Testament times were very different because personal and human rights, as we know them, were unrecognised. There are scenes of ridicule and maltreatment, even the guards get involved before Jesus is sentenced to death and nailed to the cross. (Mark 14:65, 15:16-20).

Following Jesus' death the history of the early church offers many examples of imprisonment and death. It was Jesus himself who foresaw these events (Mark 13:9-13). Stephen is lynched and dies without trial (Acts 7:59ff.). Most of the apostles fare slightly better. Like Jesus they were also in conflict with the High Court of the Jewish people and were detained because of belief in Jesus and proclamation of his name. Initially only Peter and John are arrested (Acts 5:8). Then the entire group of 12 were arrested (Acts 5:18). In the earlier case the apostles defend themselves and are set free. In the second case they are freed due to the intervention of God. Having been detained again Peter relives the experience (Acts 12:3-18), while Paul and his followers find themselves in a similar situation in Philippi (Acts 16:19-40). The doors of the dungeon open and the prisoners are allowed to move out freely. They immediately use the opportunity to proclaim Jesus to the prison guard and to convert him to become one of the believers.

Pursuing a theological agenda, Luke repeatedly tells of the miraculous liberation of the proclaimers of the Christian faith. He shows that God's word is stronger than human chains. This conviction draws strength from the death of John the Baptist, messenger of the faith. The long chapters in the Acts (21-28) in which Paul is first imprisoned and then makes his way to Rome lead us to a focal point, the death of Paul following imprisonment. At the end of the Acts, even when faced with Paul's impending death Luke stresses that Paul was able to spread the word of God freely and without trouble (Acts 28:31).

In the 'Letters from Prison' Paul speaks in sober tones about his imprisonment. He draws strength not from the miraculous experience of God's help but rather from his weakness, of which he is proud (2 Corinthians 11:30). In two authentic letters (The Letter to the Philippians and The Letter to Philemon) dated approximately 55 AD, Paul describes himself as a prisoner. We assume that Paul is imprisoned in Ephesus. In the Letter to the Philippians Paul draws the reader's attention to the fact of his detention. He describes himself as 'in bonds', tied up or in chains (Philippians 1:7,13,14,17). Detention in a Roman prison cannot stop his proclamation of the Word of God. On the contrary, having been imprisoned Paul uses the occasion first to defend himself and then to 'confirm the Gospel' (Philippians

2:7,1:16). In this way his message reaches everyone including the entire commander's palace (Philippians 1:13).

In the short letter to Philemon Paul tells his friend of a similar experience. Paul seems to be in the same detention centre. From this dungeon he asks Philemon to look after Onesimus, his erstwhile slave, and to forgive him and set him free. Paul is in prison for 'the sake of the Gospel' and is unable to invite Onesimus to his own house. During the initial exchange of greetings Paul describes himself as 'a prisoner of Jesus Christ'. It is those two letters from which the early Christians received their perception of Paul as the 'prisoner of Christ'. The long detention of Paul in Rome as told in the Acts and other earlier sources also played an important part.

The two most important letters in the Pauline School refer to the theme of Paul as a prisoner. They are the Letter to the Colossians and the Letter to the Ephesians. The letter to the Colossians (4:18) closes with the words of Paul: 'The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you'. We feel reminded of the German resistance fighter, the Jesuit Alfred Delp, who, imprisoned in his cell, handcuffed and facing death still managed to write his last letters and notes. In the letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:1) Paul describes himself as a person imprisoned for Christ, virtually as a 'prisoner of Jesus Christ' (3:1). Through his imprisonment the fate of Jesus himself is repeated and also the new fruit is created through the spirit of Jesus.

It does not come as a great surprise that Paul in his pastoral letters to his disciples Timothy and Titus, repeats the idea of himself as a prisoner. In the Second Epistle to Timothy (1:8) he writes 'Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God'. Here is a positive connection between detention and the proclamation of the Gospel. Although Paul was detained because of the Gospel imprisonment helped spread the word of the Gospel.

If the apostles, like John the Baptist and Jesus himself and also Peter and Paul, had to suffer animosity and imprisonment because they proclaimed the Gospel it is not surprising that the New Testament treats imprisonment

as an almost daily experience for Christians in the first century. A good example would be the Epistle to the Hebrews. In the final part of the letter the writer repeats what Christians should strive for in life – namely love of brothers and sisters or hospitality. The writer also reminds them: ‘Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body’ (Hebrews 13:3). In this letter the connection between detention and maltreatment stands out and will be recognized by everyone working as a prison chaplain.

In his seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor John the Divine expressly talks about the impending imprisonment of members of the church. In the letter to Smyrna he says (Revelation 2:10): ‘Fear none of those things, which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulations ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life’. We assume that the anticipated actions of an overzealous authority refer to the arrests of Christian during the time of Domitian. The Roman governor, Gaius Plinius the Younger, in his exchange of letters with Trajan reports similar developments in northern Asia Minor. Christians, male and female, were to be interrogated and perhaps even tortured. Unless they renounced their faith they were to be killed. But if they worshiped the Roman Gods they would be set free. Such documents reflect the reality of Christian life in the eastern part of the empire at the beginning of the second century. We know that the persecution of Christians in all parts of the empire followed in the next two hundred years. This historical review shows that imprisonment and death were part of the Christian way of life up to the time of Constantine, when things changed. The post- New Testament literature tells especially of two Christian martyrs whose imprisonment and death were memorable. They were Ignatius of Antiocha, whose seven authenticated letters tell of life in prison while he awaited death as a martyr, and Polycarp of Smyrna, whose violent death is well documented in Christian martyrology.

New Ways of Looking at Imprisonment and Prisoners

Reading biblical texts and reflecting on them can lead to new ways of perceiving imprisonment and prisoners. When Jesus said: ‘I was in prison and you visited me’, he is ‘inside’. I meet him every time I visit a prisoner.

I meet Jesus when I come face to face with a prisoner. I do not look at a prisoner and see Jesus. That is something we occasionally hear from some pious Christians who express their particular spiritual vision. Rather I experience Jesus through gazing at a real person, a person who identifies himself or herself with Christ and suffers with him.

The long line of prisoners who were predecessors among God's people mentioned in Scripture leads me to the conclusion that Christ is 'inside'. The early people of Israel were imprisoned like kings and prophets. Furthermore, John the Baptist, Jesus himself, his apostles and the early martyrs not only show solidarity with prisoners, they were imprisoned because they did not renounce their faith or their message. This is especially true for John the Baptist. Rulers can ill afford to allow insistent teachers daring to criticise their lifestyle to remain free. In the end John does lose not only his freedom but also his life. Jesus himself is imprisoned because he announced an empire that would not be ruled by human despotism but by the word of God.

In a similar way we can trace up to our times those who were imprisoned for their faith. It makes us think. In western democracies we meet conscientious objectors who are detained for no criminal reason. The trial of a few good friends of mine comes to mind. They were protesting against the storage of medium range missiles with atomic warheads and blocked the approach to a barracks. They were taken away, had their IDs checked and were brought to court. When they appealed against their conviction I witnessed how prosecuting lawyers tried to convince the court that they had been motivated by unworthy principles and I witnessed how they were treated in a manner normally reserved for terrorists. They were sentenced to 30 days in prison. This was not an isolated event. When I meet cases like that I ask myself why it was not me sitting there. Like my friends, I was a member of a peace movement. Together with them I had said prayers at the gates of the barracks. Together we had placed candles on the iron gates of the barracks during vigils at Christmas and Easter. I could have been imprisoned. Maybe I was not courageous enough to go one step further and demonstrate genuine public disobedience, which would have landed me in jail. So I asked myself sometimes: 'What have I done wrong to be free while others are in prison?' Had I been silent when I should have spoken out, had I failed to act when

others became active? Many of us have been asking ourselves similar questions, perhaps when we visit prisoners of conscience, even in our western democracies.

I believe that such thoughts can help us to stop thinking in black and white, stop thinking of a world in which the goodies are 'outside' and the baddies 'inside'. We will always find cases where everything is the other way round. Pointing that out cannot, and must not, be a reason for arrest.

Of course, not all prisoners are heroes or saints. The large majority of prisoners are not being detained for political reasons. Even then, we don't have the right to be judgmental. My particular area of experience is ministering to those people who have carried drugs like cocaine from Latin America or Africa to Europe. Under German law they are tried for illegally importing drugs and sentenced to long periods in jail. On many occasions I had opportunities to find out how these prisoners see their sentence. Some admit that drug smuggling would not have been the only way to clear their debts. Many have told me that they had been financially destitute. Many of them have come from countries with rich economic resources. Like Nigeria, Colombia is not a poor country and is rich in oil reserves. However, that wealth is not distributed evenly; the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. This is similarly true on an international level. The wealthy countries of the globe get wealthier while the debt burden of the poorer nations keeps mounting. At the same time pressure is exerted downwards; often the poorest of the poor bear the brunt of such injustice and struggle to survive from day to day without work, without education for their children and without care when they fall ill. So I ask: Who are the criminals? Is it those people, who because of their poverty do not know which way to turn and in their desperation decide to smuggle drugs to break the vicious circle of debt, or is it those who helped to get them into their desperate state in the first place?

I remember a discussion with a woman from Colombia, who had lived for some time in the US and was able to express herself succinctly. She asked me: Why is drug running treated in exactly the opposite way to arms running? In the fight against the trade in illegal arms the buyers get punished but not the producers and suppliers. The western industrialised nations do not get punished. In the drugs trade the exact opposite is true. Producers and suppliers

get punished and buyers go free. If you think about why this is so, the answer is clear. Whatever the situation, the industrialised nations of the north are always the saints while the developing nations end up in the dock.

Such reflections help me judge actions of others more carefully. Certain actions will carry a penalty under the law although when examined more closely in the light of international justice turn out to be attributable to unjust structures for which the poor in the southern hemisphere cannot be held accountable.

Often women are the exploited link in that chain. Most of the women I have met during the last decade have children but not a husband. In such cases the man who fails in his responsibility for his children should go to prison, not his wife whom he left with the sole responsibility of caring for their children. In poor countries the legal structures for enforcing joint responsibilities for children in separated families are sadly missing, but even if they existed the enforcement of financial support would surely fail, as many men are without jobs and income. Often women said: 'I would not accept a single penny from that man' because many of their relationships have a history of violence and deception. Many women would rather resort to unconventional means to look after their children than run the risk of being humiliated again.

So we realize that the framework according to which the good people are 'outside' and the bad ones 'inside' has its faults, not just when we think about the Bible message but also when we reflect on the causes of guilt and punishment in modern society.

So, how will I face imprisoned people in future? I know that it is not up to me to judge the guilt of others before God. Jesus does not remind us in vain: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged' (Matthew 7:1). We cannot see into the hearts of people. We do not know the motives that led to their actions. We know, however, that it is often poverty that causes actions. Often I am part of the cause of poverty myself. I live on the sunny side of life and have perhaps failed to take an interest in those living on the other side, those who with their misery pay for my wealth.

When I face someone guilty in prison I must always recognize the untouchable dignity of man and always see the face of Jesus, who said of himself: ‘I was in prison and you have visited me’.

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