

Matthew 25:36. I was in prison and you visited me.

Prisoners' Week

We had had a really good meal. I had chosen the chicken and the pavlova and it was a good choice. I knew three of the others at our table and the other two turned out to be interesting and enjoyable companions. When the coffee cups were pushed away the speaker began. We all settled down comfortably and expectantly, because she began very well. She was smart and funny and a first-class communicator. It was turning into a really enjoyable evening. And then she told us something completely shocking. So shocking that she told it to us twice, to make sure that we understood.

Last year more children in Scotland experienced the imprisonment of a parent than experienced the divorce of a parent. Last year more children in Scotland experienced the imprisonment of a parent than experienced the divorce of a parent. The was the recent Morningside Parish Church Speaker's Supper, where our guest was Professor Nancy Loucks. Professor Loucks is an academic, a professor of criminology; and she is the Chief Executive of Families Outside. Families Outside is a charity which exists to help children and families affected by imprisonment; and last month she took many of us to places we had never been before.

We hardly ever think about the families of prisoners. My first experience of entering prison was as a young minister going to visit Tommy. I knew him through Jennifer, his wife, who sometimes came to church. He told me on that visit how much he depended on Jennifer and on her support: faithfully she would parcel up the children to travel

the hundred miles bus journey from Greenock to Perth to visit him every time she was allowed. I came to know the family quite well. But Jennifer never came back to church and the children never came back to Sunday School because she was ashamed. No encouragement from me, no assurances from me, made any difference. And then I was ashamed too, ashamed of the image of cold unforgiving judgmentalism we had cultivated around the name of Jesus Christ.

Forty years later I met Tommy again. I was in the last month of my years inspecting prisons and I was in Perth prison and there was Tommy behind bars in the very same jail where I had first visited him. His was a sad but familiar story. A whole lifetime of petty crime and short prison sentences, over and over and over again. The he said “Jennifer will be so pleased when I tell her tomorrow that I met you. She has never let me down.” In that moment I had a glimpse of what marriage had meant, what life had meant, to Jennifer. For forty years her husband had been an ever-returning prisoner; and for forty years she had had to serve her own sentence. And what had life been like for their children.

Think about Tommy and you probably don't feel a little righteous anger rising inside you along the lines of “If you can't do the time you shouldn't do the crime”. Of course people shouldn't do crimes. But that gets nowhere near Jennifer and the children. Sad to say, the experience of Jennifer and so many others was put into words recently by another woman in the same position: *My family and friends don't agree with me standing by my partner, therefore I don't have any support.*

Jesus said *I was in prison and you visited me.* The day was to come soon – indeed it was to come in the very next chapter of St Matthew's Gospel – when he was literally in prison. They arrested him in the Garden of Gethsemane and carried him off into captivity. And at that very point the Bible records *all the disciples left him, and fled.* Not one

even tried to come with him, to be beside him, to tell him that he was not alone. Terrible.

The saying of Jesus is in the story we read this morning. *I was in prison and you visited me.* Sometimes the story is called The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, sometimes The Parable of the Last Judgment. It is more a vision, a dream, than a story. It is a picture of how it might be. The risen Jesus, bathed in clouds of glory, has all the nations gathered before him. He divides them into two groups. One group he welcomes into glory; the second group is sent away. What can this mean, they cry? What have we done? What is the basis for this judgment? The answer is terrifyingly simple. The difference is in the way you each treated the needs of others. The hungry, the thirsty, the refugee, the homeless, the sick and those in prison. Those who cared for them in their need are those who are welcomed into glory with him; and those who did not care for them in their need are those who are sent away.

To make the picture perfectly clear, to make the judgment horribly clear, he says to them *every time you cared for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you cared for me. Every time you ignored the least of these my brothers and sisters you ignored me, in my need.* It was I whom you fed and clothed. It was I whom you visited in prison. It was I whom you did not feed and clothe. It was I whom you did not visit in prison. When I hear that I should tremble, and so should you. When I hear that, I agree at least for once with Mark Twain who said *It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand*

So what is a follower of Jesus Christ to do about those in prison.?, about Tommy's wife Jennifer? About those 20,000 children in Scotland who experience every year the imprisonment of a parent.? If you want to take the Bible seriously, completely turning your back is not an option.

If you listen to your conscience at all, completely ignoring their need is not an option. So what could be done?

Here's three things. You might want to support Families Outside. After the Speaker's Supper this congregation did make a small donation, and I know from our Speaker how much it was appreciated. You might want to give only a very small amount and you might want to do it only once. Even that will make a difference. Whether a little or a lot, the Families Outside Website is the place to go for more information and for easy giving. If you are not a computer user speak to me.

Or. A rather bigger commitment. Nearly every Scottish prison has a Visitor Centre: I chair the steering group which coordinates them all. Visiting a prison can be frightening: visiting a prison for the first time can be terrifying. So there are people to help: not prison people, but trained volunteers and professionals. The Visitor Centre at Edinburgh Prison is a model of excellence. Morningside Parish church has many people who volunteer in all sorts of wonderful ways across Edinburgh and beyond: this city would be very much worse without them. If you are interested in learning more about becoming a volunteer at the Visitors' Centre at Edinburgh Prison, please speak to me.

And then this. You have in your hand a leaflet about Prisoners' Week. This is an initiative of the churches to stimulate discussion, highlight concerns, and share hope. Prisoners' Week encourages us to pray for prisoners and their families, for prison staff and their families, and for the victims of crime. There is a prayer printed on the leaflet for everyone to say this week. Can you picture what it might mean to have Christian people across Scotland praying this same prayer each day this week? Can you picture yourself among them?