

What Does God Think of Irish Prisons?

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Introduction

The April 2008 issue of *Working Notes* entitled, 'Thornton Hall Prison – A Progressive Move?', has inspired the following article, which is written from the viewpoint of Catholic theology. I have never been jailed myself; however, courtesy of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform I had the privilege of visiting a number of Irish prisons some years ago. I also visit a friend who is currently serving a jail sentence.

I believe, as do so many others, that our prison system is not working well. While I have no easy solution to the problems of criminality, my argument will be that public energy and resources must be massively shifted from developing more prisons, however well-run they might be, into measures that would (i) reduce the causes of criminal behaviour, and (ii) work for the full rehabilitation of those who commit crime.

Crime and Punishment

Imprisonment seems a very practical way of dealing with criminals: commit the crime and you do the time. Our human notions of justice are satisfied with this procedure. And while Christians are aware of the command, 'Love one another!', they may feel that there is an implicit divine approbation of the prison system, since God rewards the good and punishes the wicked, or so the older Catechism said. Christians can argue that if a good and loving God locks up the bad in hell and throws away the key, then they can do likewise, and still enjoy a blissful eternity with God in heaven.

But is it that simple? What *does* God think of criminals and prisons? If I can raise questions in a few minds, this article will have been worthwhile. It has been suggested that the question mark is an inverted plough, which breaks up the hard soil of old beliefs and prepares for new growth. We need that plough in relation to our outmoded thinking about imprisonment.

I offer a variety of approaches. These approaches are Christian, not in the sense that Christians will always be found to be acting in accordance with

them – often they are not – but in the sense that when you read the New Testament, they hit you in the eye. They are disconcerting approaches which threaten our comfortable beliefs and stances. God's thoughts are certainly not ours, but if you profess to be a Christian you have to grapple with divine thinking and imagination in a way that turns your mindset inside out. If you take God seriously you find yourself swimming hard against the stream, because divine and human culture contradict one another, and perhaps nowhere more so than in relation to the 'wicked' who offend us.

The End Game

A first approach to the issue of imprisonment is to ask: *What is God's project for the world? What is the purpose of human history? Has life an ultimate meaning?*

You may have your own well-thought-out beliefs on these large questions, or you may not. But Christian belief is clear in regard to them: it asserts that God's ultimate intention is a Final Community of Love – a cosmic party on a scale that no human bash can even hint at! The invitations have already gone out; everyone is invited; the only 'terms and conditions' are that *admission is for those who accept the presence of the other guests.*

If God has his way, the final party will be all-inclusive. But the demand on each of us will be high: if I refuse to accept any of God's guests, then I must wait outside and have some sessions of remedial education in loving, until my heart softens towards those who in my view should be excluded from the fun.

Forgiveness

But how can I be at ease at a party if I'm landed beside someone who has committed crimes against humanity, or against me in particular? Could it be that in the final scenario, those who have wronged others will have to beg their victims for pardon and reconciliation – a cosmic version of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa? Peter McVerry outlines this idea in his recent book, *Jesus, Social Revolutionary?* The

Kingdom of God, according to Jesus, belongs to the poor: if the rich are to get into the Kingdom they will have to ask forgiveness from the poor insofar as they have mistreated them, and the poor will have to forgive them.

In the New Testament there is an outrageous emphasis on forgiveness. It is acted out in a dramatic way in the Passion where Jesus is shown as forgiving his enemies who are torturing him to death. It is crystallised too in the image of the servant who owed his master a huge sum and could not repay, and the master in his compassion remitted the debt. But the servant meets a fellow-servant who owes him a small amount and refuses to let him off. The master gets to hear of this and punishes him, because he has completely missed the point about forgiveness.

What is the point about forgiveness? It is that the compassion of God toward me must be the paradigm of mine toward everyone else. If we ourselves are to be included at the End, it will be due to God's goodness rather than our own, for none of us can claim that we fully live out the golden rule: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

If you had committed a crime, what would you have 'them' do to you? Speaking for myself, I would want 'them' to listen to my story as mitigating the crime; I would want 'them' to allow me to make amends in some constructive way; I would want my dignity to be respected always; and, finally, I would want to be enabled by 'them' to make a fresh start. 'Well then', the Lord would say to me, 'Do what you can to shift public attitudes and your own in these directions. Passive goodwill won't suffice. Risk something!'

Whose Side is God on?

God certainly loves me, but it is equally clear that God loves all others as well, including the 'bad'. God wishes me well, and works endlessly for my wellbeing, but he does likewise for all others. God is not only on the side of the godly but is on the side of sinners – outcasts, misfits, failures, wrongdoers, evil people. God knows better than we what malice humans are capable of, but God also has a stubborn vision of what they can become, and God works to that vision.

Are we forced to conclude that we must do the same? If God despairs of nobody, neither must I. We may not get very far with some: for the

common good, and their own, those whose humanity is badly twisted may have to be permanently restrained, but with the dignity that is their due. The majority of those who commit crimes, however, can be helped in their self-development, and restored to the community.

From Condemnation to Concern

St Paul refers to the weaker members of society as 'the brother or sister for whom Christ died' (1 Cor 14:13). This is an iceberg statement! The Son of God has died for me, but also for that criminal whom I loathe. God is determined to save the wicked, rather than eliminate them or punish them eternally. This is a total reversal of Old Testament belief, in which the good (= the Jews) will be vindicated, while their enemies will catch it in the neck. But from a New Testament perspective, salvation is for all; God is shown as being engaged in getting everyone onside, not least the bad.



Mural painted by a prisoner; Mountjoy Prison Chapel
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Do most of us still live out of Old Testament mentalities regarding justice? There, things seem simpler, more logical and more appealing – the bad get their come-uppance and the good (including ourselves, of course!) will be vindicated and rewarded. But if my sister or brother is of limitless worth and value to God, then I need to shift from condemnation to concern for them when they are wayward. We may hope that we may not have to die for them, but we must be ready at least to put ourselves out for them, according to our abilities.

What About Hell?

I mentioned above the deep-rooted Christian belief that God punishes the wicked, rather than that he labours to restore them. In fact, opposing traditions on this topic co-exist in Scripture. In line with the Old Testament tradition, hell is mentioned in the New Testament over 200 times, according to the biblical statisticians, and eternal damnation is painted in lurid colours, beloved of artists such as Michelangelo. But there is another tradition there too, asserting the salvation of everyone. Three references must suffice out of many. Jesus is spoken of as ‘taking away the sins of the world’ (John 1:29). He himself speaks of ‘drawing all people to himself’ (John 12:32), and Paul states that ‘in Christ all are raised to life’ (Rom 5:18).

This latter tradition – that all persons will be saved – was eclipsed as time passed, because it seemed much truer to the sad facts about humankind to admit that quite a number of us would be lost. Only a few writers, who included women such as Julian of Norwich and Thérèse of Lisieux, kept the second tradition alive. Most recently, a favourite theologian of Pope John Paul II, Hans Urs von Balthasar, has brought to the fore again this enduring tradition about the salvation of all.

‘Anybody There?’

Will anyone miss the party? Is anyone in hell? The Church, despite much provocation, has never stated that anyone is in hell, but it does know that God wants everyone to be saved, and so the Church prays for that, despite all the evidence. Vatican II has a sober optimism that God’s project – the Final Community of Love – will succeed.

The up-dated *Catechism of the Catholic Church* takes a new line on the Last Judgement (Matt 25:31–46) which depicts the separation of the sheep from the goats etc. Rather than affirming the older view that such scenes are a preview of or trailer to the final situation of humankind, it states that texts about hell ‘are a call to the responsibility incumbent on us to make use of our freedom in view of our eternal destiny; they are an urgent call to conversion while there is still time’ (1036, 1041).

There is a well of energy here: if God intends that everyone – no exceptions! – will be a participant in the joy of the world to come, then I can be motivated to help to develop a society in which

God’s project begins to be shaped up. I will witness against the prevailing culture to an inclusive, restorative, rehabilitative society.

Solidarity

Solidarity is a neglected notion, but the issues of ecology and globalisation are forcing us to return to it. Science tells us that everything is in relationship with everything else. We all contribute more or less to the problems of the world: each of us leaves both carbon *and* moral footprints. Apathy plays its part: as Augustine said 1,500 years ago, ‘For evil to succeed, it is enough for the good to do nothing!’

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The notion of solidarity is set out by Paul in his metaphor of the body. We form one body; all the parts are to feel for one another (1 Cor 12). We have one history, one common destiny. We are all in this together! Our single history is linked to that of Christ. Reversing the downward spiral of human history made limitless demands on his love, and will make like demands on ours also. But if we’re all in this together, those who are healthy must help those who are sick. To rubbish or despair of them would be to rubbish and despair of ourselves.

Conclusion

Dialogue is needed among the concerned parties on possible ways forward in the highly complex and emotional arena of crime and punishment. We are all affected by crime; we all pay for it in one way or another. A hard look at the facts is needed, but for Christians this must be in the light of a vision of how God intends things to be. A fund of goodwill within the nation can be channelled, if we have the energy and the love to do so.

No doubt, prisons are a necessary response to people who commit the most serious of offences

or who are not willing to cooperate with alternative sanctions. But prison is a last resort, an acknowledgment of failure.

We need honest debate on the effects of a prison term on the convicted person and his or her family. We need imagination to promote initiatives for rehabilitation of the convicted. More of our resources need to focus on these. And we need to focus intensely on eliminating the causes of criminality. While financial resources will be needed, the most important resource will be personal commitment based on goodwill, respect and hope for criminals. It may be that at the End, this will stand to us when we are on trial ourselves. 'In the evening of life, we will be judged on love alone.' (St John of the Cross)

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