5 May 2013
The Fifth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Wisdom of Solomon 1 v. 16– 2 v. 3, 21–24
Matthew 25 vv. 31–46

Humanity and Creation

By The Rev'd Andrew Hammond
Vicar, St Mary's, Willesden, London

…through the devil's envy death entered the world,
and those who belong to his company experience it.

I'm walking around a maximum security prison with one of its chaplains, the imam, as it happens. This is the statutory daily tour. I see one of the Great Train Robbers, languishing on his sick bed, unknowing … Through the bars of a cage (like the one in 'The Silence of the Lambs') I talk to a gentle, articulate, polite young Muslim who will never leave prison. He's been convicted of murdering his baby by throwing her against a wall… In the segregation unit we have to flatten our backs to the wall as a young new reception is taken to the showers by the posse of guards who are needed to contain him… In the health suite we talk through the flap in the door to a terrified Bangladeshi man who is convinced evil spirits are tormenting him. The imam sings a few lines from the Qu'ran and, in a sense literally, blows the words into the man's face… Further along we talk to an old, red-faced chancer, probably from Kilburn way, who's inside yet again because he can't take his drink. His torrent of words climaxes, without irony (and I won't attempt the accent) – 'I wish I couldn't see out of this wee hatch to that front gate. There isn't a man in here wouldn't give both his legs to walk out that gate…'

I was spending a few days in that prison on placement when I was training for the priesthood. And the experience, short as it was, had a lasting impact on me. For one thing, it forced me to think about being human – and about what people are saying when they call others inhuman.

Our attitude as Christians to prisons and prisoners gives us a pretty good test of our so-called Christian attitude to people in general: and specifically of what we mean when we say, with scriptural assurance, that we are *made in the image of God*. The scriptural assurance is unimpeachable, of course, but what does it mean? As we ponder the mystery of such a phrase which is familiar and simply expressed, but not simply analysed, what does it mean for us in the messiness of human life? And especially when we're thinking of people whose actions make us recoil.

Many of the men I met or saw in prison could have written this:

I am forgotten like one that is dead, out of mind;
I have become like a broken vessel.
For I have heard the whispering of the crowd;
fear is on every side;
they scheme together against me,
and plot to take my life.

These words are actually three millennia old, from Psalm 31. But they are frighteningly fresh. So how do we answer this cry of anguish? And how do we feel when the cry comes from people who have done terrible things? I'm Parish Priest of an estate which for some years, until not long ago, supposedly had the worst murder statistics of any social housing estate in the whole of Europe. So the question has bite, for me and for the people I serve.

Our creation, our humanity is given by God and bears his own print, and is shared by every single one of us. However we try to unpack that, it has moral consequences which we struggle even to articulate, let alone try to live out.

One way is the way of certain well-known newspapers. The constant drip of poison from the so-called popular press does not make any easier the job of all who work with prisoners. When we read in those papers about monsters, perverts and scroungers, 'lock 'em up and throw away the key', it's at the papers that our real outrage should be directed. They demonise very particular individuals into faceless categories. They feed fear, they feed prejudice - and they make money out of it. They are forces of darkness.

…through the devil's envy death entered the world,
and those who belong to his company experience it.

The devil envies our created status, our being marked with the mark of the divine. He finds fertile ground for entering the world in the toxic domain of such journalism; a domain whose aspect is cheap, but whose effect on society is very costly indeed.

Ours is a religion of grace, mercy and peace, founded in the redemption of every person by the very person of Jesus Christ. Grace, in God's enabling us to love him and love the other. Mercy, in his inexhaustible patience when we mess it up. And as we grow closer to God in Christ, which is to grow in Christ-likeness, this life of grace and mercy becomes more and more a life of peace, of peacefulness. We sense that peace, we sense that golden wall between us and heaven beaten to an airier thinness, when we dare to let our hearts be softened; when we dare to believe that we have the spark of divinity, and so does everyone else;
and, as we struggle to believe that, when Jesus gets through to our stopped-up ears (our stopped-up hearts) and we hear him saying 'whenever you look gently on another damaged soul and care for them, you're caring for me.'

Every single person, far from being diseased by an inner worthlessness, is made in the image of God. We learn this from the very first pages of scripture. And because there's a bit of the divine in every human being, God became human in Jesus. In doing so his love for every single one of us is made earth-transformingly clear. By becoming fully human, God invites us and empowers us to realise fully the divine within us; and recognise it in the other.

Some of the men in that prison I visited had done terrible things. It was sometimes very hard to stomach, knowing those things; very hard to work out what it might mean to say that all of the men there were made in the image of God. But I can't put it better than this, from the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales' 2004 report on the state of prisons in this country:

> *"Our Christian anthropology insists that the innate dignity and worth of each person is not negotiable. Jesus invites us to see himself in the marginalised, alienated and rejected. Thereby he calls us always to extend his Kingdom of mercy and compassion. That call requires us to commit ourselves to a pursuit of justice which is always within the horizon of grace.*
>
> *The image of God comes to its glory in each one of us. Through justice and mercy, hope and forgiveness, no-one is beyond the reach of God's purpose. The possibility of change is ever-present … For every place is a place of redemption."*

I'd only want to add – that place of redemption might come after death. Some people may be so damaged by external conditions or by their mental health that their moment may only come at the mercy seat. Who are we to proscribe God's justice and mercy this side of the grave?

The better of those who work with prisoners know it can't be right that the prison population has just about doubled in the last decade. In many prisons it's almost impossible to do anything other than contain people, especially where there is overcrowding. But as the Governor of the prison I visited, a Christian woman, said to us, 'I'm not in the punishment business, I'm in the reclamation business.' Most of those inside have to return to the outside, and may have lost job, family, husband, wife, partner, friends – even any kind of hope. Brutalised, institutionalised criminals are almost bound to re-offend and end up back inside.

The work with prisoners which really matters is rehabilitation, education and, where appropriate, restorative justice; and this always with a detailed understanding of each particular individual. In many cases when you heard what a prisoner had done, you wept for the victim (never forget the victim); when you heard about the prisoner's own life, you wept for him. This is not limp, hand-wringing do-goodery (although I'm puzzled at the notion of doing good as weak and unhelpful). This is taking seriously what Jesus tells us in our New Testament reading. We meet him in the hungry, the sick, the prisoner; what we do to them we do to him.

Taking it seriously means, of course, not just daring to treat every prisoner as an individual, beloved of God, but treating seriously what they have done. Sometimes you encounter remorse, sometimes quite crippling remorse – sometimes not. But rehabilitation and reclamation must include helping an offender to take some responsibility. This is why restorative schemes, where brave victims come forward to help, can be so healing.

So what can we, who don't work in prisons, do? There are many charitable organisations which do great work – taking creative and performance arts into prisons, befriending and mentoring, helping with resettlement when offenders come out and much more. They all need money, or activities to raise money; and sometimes volunteer help. We can be vocal in our Christian take on the subject, including lobbying MPs and ministers. Why not train to be a mentor, taking on a one-to-one relationship with someone being released from prison? You could make the difference between that person staying out or going back into prison. We can at least find out more about the facts, especially from studies and reports. We can listen to acknowledged experts.

And, of course, there's a very quick and easy thing to do. Stop reading toxic newspapers. It's not a big gesture, but it's an important one. If you have subscriptions to them in your JCR, or indeed in the MCR or SCR…. cancel them.

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."