

8th August 2004

International Day of Prisoner Justice

Prepared By Elaine Ledgerwood member of the Uniting Church Social Justice Commission

Candle

We light the candle
To remind us of Christ:
The bringer of hope to this world

Call to Worship

Come before God in true worship,
Gather together as God's people:
Bring your life as a sacrifice,
Bring who you are as your worship:
For in learning to do good
And in seeking justice
You are worshipping God.

Hymn

Prayer of Adoration & Confession

[Invite people to share their thanksgiving for the week]

God of justice and compassion,
We give thanks for signs of hope and love in our community.
For the rain renewing the plants in our gardens
Reminding us of the freedom of the waters
To you, O God, we raise

This our sacrifice of praise

For fresh buds and new flowers
Reminding us of new starts and new possibilities
To you, O God, we raise

This our sacrifice of praise

For the joy of a puppy that wiggles with delight
Reminding us to enjoy life as it is
To you, O God, we raise

This our sacrifice of praise

For the song of the birds
Reminding us that even in our cities, the bush persists
To you, O God, we raise

This our sacrifice of praise

[Add in other points of thanks]

For smiles, hugs and moments shared
Reminding us that we are loved
To you, O God, we raise
This our sacrifice of praise

[Pause]

Yet we confess that we have not always truly worshiped
For our forgetting of our freedom
And the freedom of others,
Forgive us, God

For shutting off possibilities
And taking hope from those around us
Forgive us, God

For equating joy with happiness
And thinking that we must have more
Before we can be fulfilled
Forgive us, God

For being part of a system
That keeps others vulnerable and oppressed
Forgive us, God

For not connecting with other people
And for focusing on ourselves
Forgive us, God

[Pause]

You are the beloved of God:
When you acknowledge your shortcomings
And turn your life around,
God is there
And forgives you.

Children's Time

Hymn

Readings

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

Reflection

Hymn

Prayer of Intercession

Loving God,
There are many hurting people in the world
We pray for them.

[Pause]

We pray for people in prison:

For the people who admit what they have done
And are seeking to find ways
To turn their lives around.
May they find new beginnings,
New blessings,
Compassion and acknowledgement
For their new way of being.

For those who do not see the hurt they have caused
May their hearts be opened,
May they experience love
That will help them seek healing

For those who are wrongly imprisoned
And seek justice
May they find strength to continue,
Grace to forgive
And a voice to speak out.

For those who are political prisoners
Who are silenced prophets in our time.
May their lives continue living their convictions
With courage and compassion
And although their bodies may be trapped,
May their minds be free.

We pray for those released from prison:

For those getting their lives back together again,
Reconnecting with families,
Finding work,
Finding friendships,
Finding community.

We pray for those who have a family member in prison:
For children confused at a parent's absence,
For grandparents caring for their grandchildren
For partners being a single parent.

We pray for those who assist prisoners and their families:
For the prison officers,
For prison chaplains
For community agencies supporting families
And agencies that help people reconnect.

Offering

Hymn

Benediction

May our God of justice inspire you,
May example of Christ teach you,
And the Holy Spirit empower you to:

Go out into the world and be the good news!
Live every day in true worship,
Learn to do good,
Seek justice,
Protect the victimised
And encourage new beginnings.

Amen!

Prayers of Intercession International Prisoner Justice Day 2004

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International Prisoner Justice Day Sermon Notes

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August 10 will be the International Day of Prisoner Justice and when I read the lectionary for this week I had much more than my usual inward groan at the combination of readings! Both the Old Testament readings could be used to speak of a harsh and judgemental god and the Gospel included the text about the “thief in the night” – how completely inappropriate! But then in my reflections I thought about the typical story of the women prisoners and the recent opening of the Boronia Pre-release Centre with its Spiritual Centre that forms a focus in the prison. So I offer these thoughts as a reflection on God, judgement, justice and our modern day prisoners.

The average woman in prison comes from a poor background. She has experienced abuse since early childhood, often severe physical abuse and sometimes severe enough to require hospitalisation. It is also very likely that she has been sexually abused and for many who have experienced this form of abuse at a young age, it is not until early adult years that memories reappear. Until then, she has had to struggle with the legacy of this abuse without knowing what it was.

This struggle can set in place a cycle of low self-esteem and being victimised in abusive relationships. Experiencing one form of abuse leads her to be at an increased risk of experiencing other forms. All up, this affects her schoolwork, which may not be valued in her family and her peer relationships. Time and again, her status as a victim is reinforced – she becomes the object of others’ actions rather than a human in her own right. Somewhere in this process, perhaps as part of her being a victim, she commences on a spiral of crime and imprisonment.

So where does all of this fit in with our readings? For me, the first connecting point is in Isaiah:

Seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

In the ancient world widows and orphans were the most vulnerable members of society. Without a man to provide care and protection, they were unable to defend their rights over their property, which could easily be taken from them and misused by others. For women in particular, they were considered property and had the same rights as anything else a man owned – such as his ox, donkey or slave. A widow without protection could be forced into prostitution.

Throughout the biblical text, and indeed in many of the cultures of the ancient near east, there exists a special care for the widow and the orphan. The prophets remind the people again and again of their responsibility to care for these members of society and the judgement of God is directed at those who neglect this responsibility.

The question is then raised for me as to who are the most vulnerable members of our society: one of those groups is surely children and families who have experienced abuse. Which in turn leads to the question of for how long this vulnerability is acknowledged. Is it just through childhood? Until a crime has been committed? For life? Whilst all people must learn to take responsibility for their own actions, if this is a skill that has not been learnt then punishment from the justice system will be useless.

The biblical concept of justice was about right relationships and restoration to the community. In the Old Testament, this was the focus of the laws about sacrifice, ritual cleanliness and legal obligations. By the time of the New Testament, it had been corrupted into a system that defined who was and was not acceptable to God. For prophets such as Isaiah and Micah, the issue was not whether or not to sacrifice, but whether or not the sacrifices represented true restoration and community. Without truly turning lives around, sacrifice became a hypocritical show of false repentance.

So too should justice become more than a show of “doing the time”. We force people to sacrifice their lives and future in prisons which have little prospect for restoration. How can we as a society expect that if we remove people from the community, lock them away, take away their self-determination (when they had little in the first place) for a specified number of years that this will be sufficient to change behaviours that were often a response to a sense of victimisation in the first place?

All too often when people are released from prison, sooner or later they will re-offend because they have not learned the skills required to not only survive in our culture, but also to maintain control of their lives. Prison also provides a community where people are accepted almost regardless of their past history. In contrast, out in society, their families have often been torn apart, work is difficult to find and friendships are more difficult to establish.

So how can we respond as a Church community to people whose fragile lives have been torn apart? How can we respond in a way that brings healing and wholeness for people who may never have experienced this? How can we prepare ourselves like the watchful slaves in our gospel reading? How can we provide the love and compassion that all people seek regardless of an individual’s past history?

One answer to these questions is found in the letter to the Hebrews – faith. Whilst this reading refers to faith in God (otherwise translated as the faithfulness of God), perhaps we could think about what it would be like if we applied it to the faith that everyone has the potential to grow and change. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. Perhaps we can apply this to our interactions with people who have been through the prison system: even if we do not see change, we can hope that it will be there. In this way, we interact in such a way that can motivate that change and by so doing give support to people turning their lives around.

I suppose the real answer lies somewhere in prison reform and expanding the concept of “restorative justice”. This second concept has been used in Western Australia, but not with any enthusiasm from our law-makers. As it occurs here, it involves the victims of crime sitting down with the perpetrator and a mediator to talk about the

impact of the crime and why it was committed. Then they are able to negotiate a just way of repaying society for what occurred.

One such meeting was between an elderly lady who lived alone and a teenage boy had mugged her. In the process she fell and broke her hip, which meant she was unable to do her shopping and gardening. The outcome of the meeting was that the boy agreed to help her with these tasks for a set period of time and a mutual friendship grew, which resulted in the boy continuing to assist the woman in the months and years after his time was complete.

Prison reform is only just starting to happen in Perth and the most recent and radical example of this is the opening of the Boronia Pre-release Centre. It is a village community that is focused on assisting women to make the adjustment back into community life. The women are responsible for their own cooking and cleaning. They buy their own provisions at the prison grocery store and during the day are engaged in work, study and rehabilitation. Families are kept together more easily as children are able to stay with their mother until the age of four. Most importantly, the programmes are focused on developing the skills required to take responsibility – for themselves, their families and their community. It represents a modern equivalent of the biblical concept of justice as restoration.

I would like to conclude with a poem written by one of the women prisoners and included in this year's "Mission prayer handbook".

Inside

Inside – what does that mean?
Well, it can mean many a thing
but my impression of inside
is being locked away inside a jail.

Locked away from the world
locked away from my boy and girl
imprisoned in time for a while
living behind the barbed wires.

Sometime things get hard
sometimes things get bad
most of the time things are sad.
All kinds of women living together
missing loved ones on the outside
on the other side, not the inside.

When you're locked up inside
you can lose many things
your privacy, your dignity and
sometimes even your sanity.
Sometimes you lose your strength
but the one thing you will never lose
on the inside is the real you.

