

Justice (2): Prison and the Criminal Justice System

Scripture

Gen 39.19-23; Ex 4.22f; Lev 19.15f; Deu 10.17f; Pss 68.6; 79.11; 85.10f; Isa 61.1f; Jer 37.15f; Amo 5.14f; Hab 1.2-4; Mt 25.31-46; Mk 6.17f; Lk 4.18-21; Act 28.17-20; 1 Cor 6.1-8; Gal 5.1, 13f; Eph 6.12-20; Heb 13.3; Rev 1.9.

Graih

1): Graih's only contact with Ivan was when he was in prison. He was shy and quiet and seemed half-guilty, half-resigned about his criminal past. He had been homeless in the UK for many years, battling addiction and getting casual work where he could. A string of petty crimes had led him back to prison again and again. He had spent most of his adult life in prison through dozens of short sentences. After each stay the cycle would begin again. For Ivan, with his hopes of getting a trade and making a life, rehabilitation was a myth.

Eric had nursed his girlfriend through a painful addiction and an early death. Following that tragic event his girlfriend's family took him to court, disputing the contents of her will. Eric's papers and possessions were seized and sealed. Advocates bombarded him with aggressive letters. Eric, existing on benefits and desperately looking for work throughout, managed to find an advocate of his own. However, when he applied for legal aid to pay the costs he was left waiting. And waiting. He had to wait too long. More letters flurried in with deadlines that Eric couldn't meet. His advocate told him that they had waited too long for legal aid and ditched him. Eric chased legal aid on several occasions and was repeatedly told that he would just have to wait for a decision. Eric's opponents, with money and easy access to advocates, kept up the pressure. Eric had no choice but to represent himself as best he could.

2): Graih frequently visits people in prison and supports those who are going through the criminal justice system. Most of the people we see serve short sentences in prison. There is a familiar cycle of petty offence, short prison term, loss of accommodation due to incarceration, release into poor accommodation, and another offence. In some cases prison provides far higher standards of accommodation than those people leave behind. Prisoners find themselves warm, fed and often among friends. At the same time prison remains an incredibly mentally, emotionally and spiritually taxing place, causing the exacerbation of wounds and problems.

The island follows the UK in broad prison policy. The UK in turn operates on a US model. This model has high rates of incarceration, little funding for community or preventative work, and high rates of re-offending. Other European models have focussed investment on probationary and rehabilitative work rather than incarceration and have seen much lower rates of re-offending.

Mental ill health, including suicide, and lack of access to proper treatment run at much higher rates amongst prisoners when compared to the general population.

Questions

1. What are your experiences, direct or indirect, with the criminal justice system? What are your impressions?
2. From patriarchs to prophets to apostles to a crucified revolutionary God's people are often criminalised by society. How does the knowledge that throughout scripture God's people are often imprisoned affect our view of prisoners and prisons?
3. What does the freedom and liberation proclaimed throughout scripture look like for prisoners today?
4. God seems to identify with prisoners and his concept of justice appears more relational and

- restorative rather than punitive. What implications does this have for the church's approach to criminal justice?
5. How does wealth affect access to justice in the current system? Is this just? How might the church respond to this?
 6. What do you think should be the purpose of the criminal justice system, and prison in particular? Punishment? Rehabilitation? Lower rates of re-offending? A more reconciled society? How does this affect our response to the current system?

Ideas for further action

1. Get in touch with PrisonWorks (www.pw-isleofman.im), or the northern churches whose clergy visit the prison, and see if you can visit the prison with them.
2. Invite ex-prisoners to your group to share their experiences.
3. Speak to the courts and meet to discuss access to justice for vulnerable people (immigrants, those suffering mental ill health etc) and gain a greater understanding of the legal aid system.
4. Consider how the broader church can both respond to the criminal justice system and play a part in serving prisoners and ex-prisoners.
5. Look at the Howard League for Penal Reform (www.howardleague.org) for further materials, discussion and a UK perspective.

Prayer

Father, thank you for your righteous justice, one that kisses peace and is joined with steadfast love and faithfulness in your good kingdom. Help us to embody such a justice in our words and deeds.

Jesus, you died as a criminal and identified with the prisoners even as you proclaimed liberation. Help us to see you in the prisoner and to love and serve them, and you, in justice.

Spirit, where you are there is freedom. Thank you that our freedom rests in you and not in legal systems. Form us into a people of such loving, reconciling freedom.

Amen.