



Monday 18th April 2011

## Punishment and Liberation

### STARTING OUT

Our society is governed by laws. When we break the law, we can expect to be punished. So if we are caught speeding in our cars we can expect a fine and points on our driving licences. Other crimes attract more extensive punishments because we live in a society which makes it clear that people who commit crimes will pay a penalty, whether that's a fine, community service or imprisonment. The most serious crimes are punished by life sentences and in some cases, a life sentence means there is no hope of being freed from prison.

Yet we also read in the newspapers that crime and punishment causes a great deal of disagreement. Sometimes people complain that people who break the law, like those who kill people through drunk driving, get off too lightly; others think some penalties are too harsh, such as the prison sentence given to the student who threw a fire extinguisher off a roof during a demonstration against higher university fees. Others disagree about locking people up and whether it really does any good. Or we sometimes read about miscarriages of justice, where the wrong person ends up in prison. Others, such as Nelson Mandela, end up imprisoned unjustly for their beliefs or political activities. Crime and punishment is a complicated business.

Yet as we approach Easter, we learn that Jesus himself was accused, arrested, interrogated, put on trial, beaten and finally sentenced to death and executed. He became, quite simply, a criminal and died a criminal's death among wrongdoers who suffered the same fate. His mother and disciples were left without him and felt the pain and bewilderment of losing their son, master and friend. If we are to follow the story of Jesus through his final hours, we need to think about what prisoners and prisoners' families experience and what it is like to have your society pronounce on your future. Prisoners are Unreconciled people, because their punishment, just or not, takes them away from their communities. In the last hours of his life Jesus became one of them.

### Reflection

- What, if anything, might drive you to commit a crime?
- If you have ever had a crime committed against you or someone you know, how do you feel about the person or people who did it?
- What kinds of people in the world today do you think might be unjustly imprisoned?





## Going deeper

When Jesus began his ministry, he identified with Isaiah's words about the liberation of those made captive and unjustly imprisoned. Yet when he was arrested he did nothing to free himself. People were surprised and taunted him about it. He did not fight or resist arrest when he was taken, and stopped his disciples making a fight of it as well. He did not argue or plead his case, protest his innocence or offer anything in mitigation or even try to explain the charges against him. He did not use his power to change anything or secure his release, which people clearly thought God's chosen one should be able to do. There was no plea bargaining or deal struck, even though Pilate was willing to do a deal by releasing a criminal as was the custom, letting Jesus go after a flogging.

Did Jesus just give up? Did he simply go along with whatever the Father had planned for him? Did he see this was the way to carry out his purpose? Was he committed to becoming a prophetic figure, or a martyr, fulfilling scripture before people's eyes? Was he driven by the theological view of the need to take on God's punishment for sin? (you could consider here the reconciliation section in 2 Corinthians 5, especially verse 21). Or is it important that in the last hours of his life on earth he identified with those most powerless, most outcast, and most vilified – the Unreconciled ones under a society's judgement and sent to death?

## Activity

If you were arrested for something you didn't do what would you say and do to prove your innocence? Who would you expect to help you? How would you feel about what had happened to you?

## Celebrating the Bible - I

### John 12. 1-11

#### KJV

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead.

<sup>2</sup>There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.

<sup>3</sup>Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

<sup>4</sup>Then saith one of his disciples, Judas

#### NRSV

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' <sup>6</sup>(He said this not



**(KJV continued)**

Iscariot, Simons son, which should betray him,

<sup>5</sup>Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?

<sup>6</sup>This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.

<sup>7</sup>Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this.

<sup>8</sup>For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always.

<sup>9</sup>Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead.

<sup>10</sup>But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death;

<sup>11</sup>Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.

**(NRSV continued)**

because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

<sup>9</sup>When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup>So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup>since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

This Gospel event tells us a great deal about imprisonment and liberation, although no one is actually in prison being punished. Here is Lazarus who has been liberated by Jesus from his fatal illness, and here is Martha freely serving Jesus. These two are the chief host and hostess, so what is Mary's role? Judas is the person most imprisoned by his attitudes and behaviour, obsessed by money. But while Judas remains in his Unreconciled state, Mary takes advantage of Jesus' liberating presence to break free from all the cultural conventions of her time and she anoints Jesus' feet. She refuses to remain the outsider. Judas objects, - instead of seeing how Mary finds a way of expressing her love for Jesus, he complains about the cost, but Jesus affirms both her and her actions. When people engage with Jesus as Mary did, they can discover and express true freedom in the most confining of situations. From this intimate picture of Jesus with his friends expressing their mutual hospitality and love, we hear that even more people were finding their freedom through faith in Jesus and this causes a backlash from those who are unnerved by, and resentful of, the liberation Jesus brings. They want Lazarus dead, somewhere he can't tell people about what Jesus does to set people free.

**Some questions:**

- Why do you think Judas can't understand Mary's gift? Why does he remain in his Unreconciled state?
- Think of people who you know who are either in prison or otherwise trapped or confined by their situation, their behaviour, their culture, or even their beliefs and practices. Imagine what freedom might mean for them. How could Jesus help and sustain them?





- Imagine some ways in which you might give a person a bit more freedom. For example, could you do some babysitting or stay with an elderly or disabled person while their carer has a break?

## Celebrating the Bible - II

(This is the same reading as for the Daily Service for Monday in Holy Week)

Mark 15. 8-15

**KJV**

<sup>1</sup>And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them.

But Pilate answered them, saying, Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews? For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy.

But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them.

And Pilate answered and said again unto them, What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?

And they cried out again, Crucify him.

Then Pilate said unto them, Why, what evil hath he done? And they cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify him.

And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.

**NRSV**

<sup>1</sup>So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

This is a dramatic moment in the account of Jesus' last hours in which the possibilities of both punishment and liberation are held out. Jesus is powerless but others have it in their power to decide his fate: the governing authorities, the religious authorities and the people all have a part to play in Jesus' fate.

### Questions:

- Why do you think Pilate offers to release Jesus?
- Why do you think the chief priests stir up the crowd?
- Why do you think Pilate hands over Jesus to be crucified in the end?
- Imagine it was Barabbas whom Pilate brought out? What might your feelings about this scene be then? Suppose it was: an annoying neighbour, a person with a mental illness, an illegal immigrant, a tax dodger, a drunk driver, a serial killer, a sex offender, a dictator who ordered a genocide...





## Following Jesus

Theologies of the atonement (the way in which God reconciles the world to himself in Christ) try to work out the deeper connections between Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection, since the Christian faith teaches that Jesus' death was an ultimate reconciling act. These events have profound consequences for human beings and form the bedrock of our Christian faith.

Yet these different theological perspectives about Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection are themselves only approaches to the mystery of Easter, and new ways of thinking about it are still emerging. Some particular ways of understanding what happened have been important in different Christian traditions, so you may find that if you explore with your friends from other churches, that you may have inherited different ideas from your tradition. So as we approach Easter and follow Jesus to the Cross it's worth thinking for ourselves some more about what Jesus did and what it means to us. In these three resources for Holy Week we can look (very briefly) at some different ways of understanding the atonement, in our exploration of the Unreconciled, try to understand them better and to see whether there are other perspectives which help us prepare to meet the risen Jesus on Easter Day.

One way theologians have talked about what happened when Jesus was crucified is in terms of punishment and liberation, including what is sometimes called 'substitutionary' or 'punitive' atonement. Jesus' death is described as taking on a punishment we deserve for getting things wrong and going away from God, because that's how we generally expect things to be put right. If you do wrong, you take the punishment and pay the penalty. Paying the penalty satisfies God's justice and puts things right so that we can be reconciled to God and be with God when we die. But this is a penalty that we cannot pay ourselves because we can't put everything right on our own. So God sends his Son to do what we cannot. The tradition which speaks of the harrowing of hell extends that liberation to all those trapped there, unable to be reconciled to God until Jesus came and released the captives. In this sense, punishment and liberation go together.

## Some questions for you to think about:

- Imagine you were talking to a friend (Christian or non-Christian) about 'sin'. How would you go about thinking about it, explaining it or giving examples?
- Try to imagine when someone would take the blame for something they didn't do to help or protect another person or other people. Why would they do that?
- If you think about the crucifixion as punishment and liberation, do you feel you can understand God's ways with the world better? Does it help you to feel closer to Jesus?
- Do you think there are difficulties with this way of looking at the events of Easter? What do you make of the fact that some Christians have difficulty reconciling their idea of a loving God with a God who requires punishment for sin?

## Activity

Jesus suffered unjustly. Spend a few minutes thinking about all the Unreconciled who are suffering unjustly or who might be paying the penalty for things which have gone wrong in your own community. Spend a few minutes thinking about all the Unreconciled who are





suffering unjustly in your own community. They might be people who are picked on by others because they look different or have different appearances or beliefs; they might be elderly people struggling to get by on public transport in outlying areas; they might be children affected by the drugs or alcohol taken by their parents. How could you become more aware of their needs and find out what's being done to help them?

### Prayer

Lord,  
When did we ever see you naked,  
Hungry or thirsty,  
Shivering in corners,  
Locked in a cell?

Surely you are Lord of all,  
You are not to be found  
Among the thieves, the murderers  
The heroin addicts and among all  
That you are not?

Help us to see that Love  
Makes you cast off your cloak,  
Give away your food,  
Walk into prison

To the utmost depths.  
Help us to remember you  
And so remember all  
You would bring back to light. Amen

### DECISION TIME

## What is going to change?

You can use this section to gather your thoughts and to plan out any future projects on this theme.

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to makes us aware of those who suffer unjustly?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to reach out to such people in our own situation?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify **one** reconciling action we can commit to in the future which will help people suffering from injustice.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can we support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of it and what difference should it have made?

## Going further

You can find out more to think about this theme at:

[www.amnesty.org.uk](http://www.amnesty.org.uk)

[www.prisonfellowship.org.uk/sycamore-tree.html](http://www.prisonfellowship.org.uk/sycamore-tree.html)

[www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/home-affairs-policy/justice-issues-prisons.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/home-affairs-policy/justice-issues-prisons.aspx)

Peter Sedgwick (ed 2004) *Re-thinking Sentencing*, (Church House Publishing).

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Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 