

Durham Cathedral

**Special Service to celebrate
200 Years of HMP Durham**

Sermon by The Revd Jonathan Aitken

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This imaginative service honours the spirit of our reading from Hebrews which urges us to: "Remember those who are in prison as if you were in prison with them".

Not many of us achieve that. But perhaps here in Durham you do it rather better than in most communities.

The proximity of this iconic prison to the city centre can be seen as a blessing.

Some years ago I received a letter from an inmate of HMP Durham. He grumbled about the state of the prison but ended his letter with praise for one aspect of it:

"Every morning when I get out of bed" he wrote "I look through of the bars of my cell across the River Wear and see a wonderful view of the Cathedral. It gives me hope".

Now hope is a commodity in remarkably short supply among prisoners. I understand that well, having been a prisoner myself some 20 years ago.

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Let me tell you a story about this from my time as an inmate in HMP Belmarsh in South London, an even tougher Nick, by the way, than Durham.

- Story of Prisoner asking a letter read to him in a conspiratorial whisper.
- Evicted from Council flat in Lambeth. JA expert in eviction letters.
- Town Crier joke. "MP Geezer's got fantastic joined up writing"
- Thanks to Town Crier from then on queues formed outside my cell of prisoners wanting letters read or written for them, often on the most intimate subjects imaginable.
- Old Lag joke. "Fantastic impact on the Girls of Brixton".

I became so grateful to the Town Crier, because the letter writing business made me deeply immersed in the lives of my fellow prisoners. In those depths I learned so much about them, their hopes, their fears, their habits – often bad drug taking habits – and their humanity.

Two conclusions stand out from that time which are relevant to this Service of Reflection tonight.

1. Prisons are too often places of locked up fear.
2. Prisoners are quite often people of unlocked potential.

For all the best efforts of prison officers, fear stalks almost every prison wing.

Fear of violence.

Fear of disruption by Spice filled addicts kicking off.

And Fear of the future

I used to see fear of the future when I attended, as I often did, the trifle and jelly parties thrown by prisoners on the night before their release to celebrate their coming freedom.

You would have thought that the atmosphere at these night before release parties would have been cheerful and optimistic. At first they started that way, with lots of upbeat bravado.

But sooner or later, the man who was going to be released in the morning would say things like:

"I don't know how I am going to cope".

"I don't want to go back to crime and come back here".

"I'm afraid of not being about to get a job".

"I'm afraid of going back on the tackle (drugs)".

"I'm afraid of not being able to rebuild my family relationships and my life".

These are real, deep fears, which can be serious psychological road blocks to rehabilitation.

On the other hand, there is a lot of unlocked potential on a prison wing.

Prisoners are often street smart, quick witted, energetic, and ingenious (sometimes too ingenious).

And you can see the potential in many of them, even while echoing with regret Shakespeare's words "Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight".

Helping those branches to re-grow and re-graft is the challenge of rehabilitation. I pay tribute to many dedicated prison officers, probation officers, prison education staff, and NHS staff who help offenders to rise to that challenge.

This afternoon on my visit to the prison I was impressed to hear about the new culture of innovation and respect.

The fall in drug use thanks to body scanners.

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The improvement in communications thanks to internal phones in every cell.

And the rising morale among younger officers as they gain experience.

As an ex-prisoner and now as a rookie prison chaplain, I am under no illusions about the tough challenges of rehabilitation.

But Oscar Wilde, who, sadly, was never rehabilitated and died in impoverished exile, left behind an intriguing signpost to successful rehabilitation when he wrote the passage printed in our order of service. It is taken from Wilde's prison memoir *De Profundis* and I highlight these words:

"Perhaps I may go out with something that I had not got before For to become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered and such I have become".

Any thoughtful person who becomes immersed in the strange waters of prison and rehabilitation life, from whatever angle, is likely to become a deeper human being.

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Thoughtful prison officers, perhaps the most under-appreciated branch of Crown servants, know how to exercise an extraordinarily wide and deep range of interpersonal skills to carry out their duties in difficult circumstances.

Thoughtful prisoners can find, as I hope I have done, deeper meaning and satisfaction in their new lives created by second chance opportunities.

And perhaps the message from today's service will encourage more people in wider society to deepen their attitudes towards prisons.

For example, the Church tends to have too shallow and detached a relationship from Prison Chaplaincies. It is a relationship which needs to be deepened by closer co-operation of the kind we can feel in this Cathedral today.

Employers and business leaders need to think more deeply about the value of offering second chances to those whose mistakes have brought them a criminal record.

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As the trail blazed by the Leeds charity Tempus Novo demonstrates, ex-cons can make excellent employees and exceptionally loyal and grateful ones too.

And, finally, perhaps those of us who in our lives have been in any sort of depths, such as those summarised in Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer as:

"trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity"

might like to look across the Wear tonight towards the prison, murmuring under their breath 'There but for the Grace of God go I'.

And then they might ask themselves if there is anything, anything, they might do, practically, voluntarily, or prayerfully, to help prisoners to climb "*De Profundis*" - out of the depths and into better lives.

If this service encourages more of us to think more deeply in such directions it will have been a most worthwhile Prisons Week joint venture both by the Prison and the Cathedral. **Amen**