

Imprisonment, Justice and the Love Ethic

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In this short article I will outline the principles which inspire my worldview with regard to imprisonment and work with people who have committed crimes. This worldview is the product of my experience working with a variety of marginalised groups including drug misusers, homeless people, prisoners, people who have committed offences but have been sentenced to rehabilitative programmes in the community, and survivors of torture. In addition it is the product of my Christian religious convictions. My struggle as a professional and a Christian has been to integrate my faith with my style of work so that faith is integral to a way of working rather than an added extra. I am convinced that if religious faith has any value it has to be relevant. I am also convinced that the love ethic as espoused by Jesus is radically relevant.

My reading of the Bible leaves me with a firm prejudice in favour of those powerless in society, those who are marginalised, oppressed, of low social status. Prisoners fall into this category. Some would argue that this is the way they deserve, that they are merely paying the price for their own actions. My experience of working with people who have committed crimes of all degrees seriousness imaginable has shown me that these people portrayed by the media as anything from monsters to merely irresponsible are actually as human as you and I. Sitting in group therapy sessions, hearing life stories being recounted has shown me that in many cases people are not evil but products of the society in which we live and their own particular local family context. Many of the offenders I have worked with have been caught up in a cycle of violence/suffering/pain from which they do not possess the skills or abilities to break out of alone. There are few people that chose a life of crime as their planned life course.

How does prison help? Or hinder? What are the results of imprisoning people who commit offences? Many studies dating centuries back have demonstrated that imprisoning people as a form of punishment does not prevent crime but rather results in more criminally minded individuals. What does our society want: Punishment or rehabilitation; the reinforcement of negative self-image or the promotion of transformation?

I have been lucky enough to work as a student Psychologist at a prison in the UK called HMP Grendon which is a prison dedicated to group therapy within the context of therapeutic community units. This is an institution unique in Europe where prisoners are offered the opportunity to engage in intensive reflection on their previous behaviours, where they are called to account for their behaviour and make changes. Research has demonstrated positive results of such intervention. My own research study suggested that whilst many prisoners who have heard rumours about Grendon considered it a soft option prison those who actually engaged in the therapeutic process, faced their own selves and the terrible crimes they had committed considered it a very hard and even punishing process. It is my view that if prison is a form of punishment society is going to continue to utilise then the concept of therapeutic prisons to which prisoners choose to go is an ethical must. There are also alternatives to prisons, other forms of consequence may be appropriate responses to criminal behaviour. I also worked for a time for the English Probation Service assessing offenders' suitability to engage in rehabilitative programmes in the community rather than going to prison.

These programmes involved addressing the social problems faced by many of the people who came through the system as well as their more personal problems and family related issues. These programmes also involved a considerable restriction of liberty.

Therapeutic groups were also utilised as a medium for challenging attitudes and behaviour, reducing isolation and allowing people to the opportunity to recognise the connections between their history, their current situation and their future possibilities. Empowerment and reduction of offending behaviour and thus protection of the public was our aim.

These two examples show that there are alternatives to just locking people up and expecting this to change them. They are also examples of an approach which is more in line with a Love Ethic and a Justice Ethic than an ethic based on revenge and retribution. Punishment for the sake of punishment in my experience does not result in transformation and merely perpetuates the cycle of violence and pain.

When Jesus was asked the famous question "Who are my neighbour?" he told the story of the Samaritan who unlike the religious leaders and others did not ignore but showed compassion for a stranger who had been beaten and robbed. My reading of the Love Ethic of Jesus is that the same compassion needs to be extended to those who beat the man. To look with the eye and hear with the ears of compassion is not to love those who deserve loving but precisely to love those who apparently do not.

This is the radicality of the Christian gospel, which is my inspiration.