

**Christ Church Cathedral Lenten Series: 'Who is my Neighbour?'**  
**3rd March, 2024.**

My thanks to Rev. Anne for the invitation to speak as a part of this Lenten series on the theme of 'Who is my Neighbour'. I'm delighted to accept the invitation to speak, not on my own behalf, but on behalf of our neighbours, the men of Shelton Abbey Open Prison and the men of Wheatfield Prison with whom I have spent the past two years as a student Chaplain.

My first encounter within the prison community was when I began to teach a weekly yoga class in 2019 in Shelton Abbey Open Prison. I began working with a small group of five life sentence men who between them had served over one hundred and twenty years in closed cells.

That first night, as I sat in the silence, I became very aware of just how vulnerable they were. I felt they were anxious and wary of me - I was a stranger in their midst. Trying to find the words to break the tension I asked them, 'does this feel like a safe space?' They looked blankly at me for a few moments until one of the men took a deep breath and quietly asked 'you're asking us if we feel safe with you?' and he broke into a hearty laugh. In the laughter, the ice was broken and then it wasn't 'me and them' but simply 'us' - a community, all parts of the one body.

At the time I had no notion of becoming a chaplain, to be honest I didn't even know what a chaplain was, but each week as we began the circle, I would take a few moments in silent prayer to invite God into the circle, knowing that on my own, I was completely out of my depth. One evening, just a few weeks after I started, I remember so vividly that in a flash of what I would now refer to as 'a God encounter,' I had an insight into my own arrogance and my own ego and realised that it was not me inviting God into my circle but God inviting me into His.

And it's a circle that I've remained deeply committed to and feel very privileged to be a part of ever since. From that day I realised that the words, 'I was in prison and you visited me' were not about me but about Him and in recognising Him in this very complex and vulnerable community. It was from that point that I began the somewhat challenging transition from a twenty-five year career as a veterinary surgeon to becoming a prison chaplain.

People on the outside often ask me when I stand in the circle with a group of men, imprisoned for a variety of crimes, from theft to drug issues, or violent crimes, including murder, 'what do you see'?

And as a Mother of three young adult children myself, as I stand in the circle what I see is another Mothers' child. Or it could be somebody's Father, or their brother, or a cousin or best friend or a work colleague - or simply the neighbour next door.

No Mother ever holds her newborn child in her arms and wishes that they end up in prison someday. If we as Christians are committed to believing that each one of us is made in the image and likeness of God, then we have to ask ourselves what goes wrong?

It's so easy to take the view that it's about them' and not 'us' – it's someone else's child or neighbour, or someone else's problem. You only have to read the newspapers or social media to get a sense of the 'lock them up and throw away the key' mentality that is so prevalent in our society.

In today's Gospel, we heard how Jesus became angry and upended the temple. This gives me courage's because what I see as a toxic societal attitude towards our people in prison at times makes me very angry.

Of course it is always so important that in advocating for these men – and the women - within our prisons, that we first fully acknowledge their crime and the impact of their crime on often innocent member of our community. Crime and criminality has devastated so many communities. Nothing can condone what has happened, or the human suffering that has resulted. But if we want to look forward and to bring about change, we have to ask the why?

It's my experience from listening to the people in prison that no crime occurs or criminal evolves in isolation but in families, in communities and in our society and in that maybe each one of us bears a part of the collective responsibility?

From my time spent with the men in prison it is clear that with so many of the stories of a crime committed, there is a story behind the story. I've heard stories of childhood neglect, dysfunctional families, violence and abuse, unresolved trauma, addiction, homelessness, poverty, mental health issues - the list is endless. And these stories become the road into criminality and in this way the cycle of criminality continues.

Many of our people in prison are also coming from communities where a life of crime is so inherent that it almost becomes a way of life, a means of survival.

With others in prison, I see what seems like accidental criminals - where a moment of chaos, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, inadvertently ends up with tragic consequences.

There but for the grace of God go any one of us – or any of our children.

I have also come to understand in my time within the prison community that for every violent crime that is committed, not one but two families lives are irreversibly shattered. There is of course the family of the often innocent victim but there is also the family of the perpetrator who in most cases are innocent of anything other than being family.

In our culture of harsh and often uneducated judgement, of condemnation and of blame, it is not only those who are convicted who serve the sentence, but alongside them their families - their partners, their children, their parents and their extended circles. They too experience the impact and the alienation of a prison sentence.

This week's Prime Time looked at Irish life-sentenced prisoners. The interviews with families of victims, highlight their harrowing experiences and the life-long and devastating consequences they have faced as a result of criminality in our society. What was missing from the report was the voice of the men themselves and in this void, nobody can move forward. Everyone is trapped in a cycle of fear and anguish and unanswered questions. Without all sides having a voice, even the families of the victim feel unheard and their questions are left unanswered. Society has no way to come to terms with understanding how these events can occur.

With this lack of understanding, the greatest challenge for life sentenced prisoners on release is trying to re-integrate into a society in which they are feared and rejected. The cycle becomes self-perpetuating, with little hope of restorative justice for either side.

A pivotal role of the prison chaplain is to bring hope. It is often challenging to find or to witness that hope in a system where security appears to take precedence over humanity, where lives are shattered, dreams are crushed - hope can seem like a cruel joke.

Within this environment not only the people in prison but also the officers and the staff struggle to bring humanity and to work in what is a fundamentally an unsustainable environment.

But as chaplains, our role is to walk alongside and to be with them, as a non-judgemental and non-anxious presence and in doing so to enable them to find a way through their challenges, knowing that they are not alone.

And in this we are in the privileged position of witnessing something greater than ourselves at work. During my time as a student chaplain, I have learnt so much from the men themselves. I have witnessed their patience and perseverance, their courage and resilience. They have taught me about forgiveness as they struggle to reintegrate into society and into a community in which they are rejected and stigmatised.

We heard in the first reading this morning about the ten commandments brought by Moses to the people. Most people if asked, will know of Moses, the great prophet, chosen by God to lead His people to safety, but most people forget that Moses in his earlier life was not a great saint or a prophet but a murderer, murdering the Egyptian and running away into exile until the Lord revealed Himself to him and Moses too was transformed. The relevance of this comes to life in a prison community as we are given hope to believe that no one is beyond transformation - if given a second chance.

But are they given a second chance?

It is my experience in being with and among the men in our prisons that the two most overlooked words in scripture are the words 'as yourself'. 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and your neighbour *as yourself*.'

So many of our people in prison, do not have that privilege of knowing how to love themselves when that love has not been witnessed to them by their family or community or society, or if that love has been shattered by broken trust or trauma or abuse or a condemning society who refuses to forgive. It is only by learning how to love themselves, by knowing that they are lovable and loved, that they can learn to love their neighbour and to be open to the transformative power of a God of unconditional love.

So what can we do as a faith community? How do we come to love our neighbour as ourselves? In John Gospel, when the disciples ask Jesus where he lives, he simply replies 'come and see'? In coming to see, we first need to recognise our neighbours - to see the people whom society tries so hard to lock

away like the lepers of old. And we also need to acknowledge the leper within ourselves who judges and condemns and is prepared to throw the first stone.

We need to look to the example of the paralysed man in Marks Gospel. We hear little about the man himself. Instead, we hear about the faith of his friends and how they recognised his need and carried him despite his paralysis, breaking down barriers and battling on his behalf to bring him to a place where he found healing and restoration of health - and with it the potential for meaning, for purpose and for hope.

No one knows more than I do how challenging it is to 'break into' the prison community. It's taken me years to get to where I am now and there is still a long road ahead. If the men in prison had a voice, I think I would be in with a better chance. But they don't. And that is why I am here today, to speak on their behalf, to fight for their place at the table, because it is my experience of being a part of the prison community that it's a battle worth fighting. It's my privilege to be with and to advocate for our neighbours, our people in prison who as a community in the eyes of the Lord are no less perfect and no more flawed than any other.

*And so we take a moment to pray.*

*Lord in the season of Lent as we take time to turn back towards You and Your unconditional love, we ask You to open our eyes to recognise our neighbours in all parts of society as You did,*

*We ask You to open our ears to hear their voices,*

*And to open our hearts to find forgiveness and to receive them as You receive us.*

*We ask this in Your name,*

*Amen.*

