

PRISONS WEEK 2016 – SUGGESTED SERMONS

The new CTiW Prisons Week Booklet for 2016 contains a lot of material, but not suggested or model sermons for use during Prisons Week services. However, we believe that some ordained and lay people will find it useful to refer to these three texts when considering what is most suitable for their churches.

SUGGESTED SERMON OUTLINE 1 (Short)

Bible passage – Matthew 9 vs 1-13

Introduction

Speakers may wish to set a context by referring to any involvement they or the congregation have in prison ministry, or in experience of crime as offender or victim.

The very short story in Matthew 9 verses 9-13 shows Jesus' attitude to those who have offended.

(In the Bible, tax collectors are often associated with sinners because they were generally corrupt, as in the example of Zacchaeus.)

Jesus recognised that the people he was with had offended

Many prisoners will try to deny or belittle their crimes when you first talk to them. One of the things that Prison Fellowship volunteers find through talking to prisoners is that as the relationship grows, they often become more honest about what they have done. Whenever Jesus met people, he was discerning about them. He was direct, openly calling his dinner guests "sinners". We don't have to pretend that prisoners have not offended; we don't even love them in spite of their offences. Rather, we show God's love to them because they are offenders, and because of that, they need it.

Jesus got close to them

He didn't harangue them from a distance. He sat round a table with them and engaged in conversation at close quarters. It is the daily experience of people in the criminal justice system to be talked at rather than talked with. As Christians we need to model a different relationship, a Christ-like relationship, by coming alongside them. (Of course, in a prison context there have to be boundaries for security reasons).

Jesus brought a message of salvation

One of the messages from the Prison Fellowship restorative justice course is "There are reasons why we are the way we are, and excuses are why we stay that way". We acknowledge prisoners' offences but we also offer them hope. Whether we are involved in an openly evangelistic activity such as a Bible study or a neutral activity such as the Sycamore Tree Restorative Justice course, we model to prisoners a different way of life, a Christ-like way of life.

Jesus message to offenders was that he had come to call them and to bring them the Gospel message. The salvation he preached was available to them – as evidenced by his statement to the repentant thief on the cross – "Today, you will be with me in paradise".

(Source 3)

SUGGESTED SERMON OUTLINE 2 (Longer)

Bible passage – Matthew 9 vs 1-13

Introduction

Speakers may wish to set a context by referring to any involvement they or the congregation have in prison ministry, or in experience of crime as offender or victim.

The very short story in Matthew 9 verses 9-13 shows Jesus' attitude to those who have offended.

(In the Bible, tax collectors are often associated with sinners because they were generally corrupt, as in the example of Zacchaeus.)

Many stories in the Bible involving prison concern people who are imprisoned unfairly (e.g. Joseph) or for their faith (e.g. Paul and Silas). However, in our prisons ministry in England and Wales today, we focus on the vast majority of prisoners who are justly imprisoned for offending against fair and reasonable laws.

Jesus recognised that the people he was with had offended

Many prisoners will try to deny or belittle their crimes when you first talk to them. One of the things that Prison Fellowship volunteers find through talking to prisoners is that as the relationship grows, they often become more honest about what they have done. Whenever Jesus met people, he was discerning about them.

Matt 9:12 – while defending his actions in spending time with them, he did not deny they were sinners

Mark 10:17-27 – he recognised that for the young nobleman it was his riches that stood between him and the kingdom

Mark 2:5 – Jesus recognised that the paralysed man's root problem was sin not sickness Jesus doesn't act softly to show love. He was direct, in this case openly calling his dinner guests "sinners".

When we minister to prisoners, we don't have to pretend that they have not offended; we don't even love them in spite of their offences. Rather, we show God's love to them because they are offenders, and because of that, they need it.

Jesus got close to them

He didn't harangue them from a distance. He sat round a table with them and engaged in conversation at close quarters. It is the daily experience of people in the criminal justice system to be talked at rather than talked with. As Christians we need to model a different relationship, a Christ-like relationship, by coming alongside them.

Prison is not a nice place to be despite some sections of the media branding it holiday camp.

Yes, prisoners have three meals a day and most have a television set if they pay the rental for it. But think about some of the negatives:-

- Many share a cell with someone they haven't chosen
- They are locked in the cell for long periods and have no control over when they come out or where they go when they are unlocked
- They can only make phone calls at specified times and to particular approved numbers
- They can only be visited at limited times
- They only get half an hour or so outdoors every day.

Prison is not somewhere most of us would choose to visit:-

- Everywhere you go there are metal gates to be unlocked for you to pass and locked behind you again with a load clang
- There is an institutional smell, loud noises due to the hard surfaces, the crackle of radios and the sounds of alarms and men shouting, including foul language
- There is little natural light
- You have to leave most of your possessions outside
- You may be subject to being searched

Prisoners are not the people we would usually choose to socialise with:-

- They have committed crimes, possibly violent
- They spend their time with other offenders
- We don't know how far we can trust them
- They may use bad language

Jesus example was that he loved those no-one else loved:-

Luke 8:43-48 – he healed the woman with the issue of blood, breaking the cultural norms by stopping to touch a woman who was ritually unclean

Luke 17:11-19 – he healed ten lepers including a Samaritan

Many men and women in prison have experienced rejection even before they became order to change. One man, whose testimony forms part of the Prison Fellowship Sycamore Tree restorative justice course, tells how the first affirmation he received from his family was the first time he stole from a shop – "You're one of us now, lad". A man who attended the course recently had been abandoned by his family and later the social services removed him from a foster family where he was happy. Six weeks of consistent input from Prison Fellowship

volunteers changed that man's attitude from suspicious and confrontational to taking part in the course constructively.

If we are to be like Jesus, we need to be willing to commit to listening, encouraging and showing faithfulness to those who have never experienced it.

Jesus brought a message of salvation

One of the messages from the Prison Fellowship restorative justice course is "There are reasons why we are the way we are, and excuses are why we stay that way". We acknowledge prisoners' offences but we also offer them hope.

There are a number of ways we can do this. In Prison Fellowship, our volunteers:-

- Deliver the Sycamore Tree restorative justice course, a properly accredited course
- Send Christmas presents to prisoner's children under the Angel Tree programme (and also cards and flowers on Mother's Day)
- Correspond regularly with prisoners who have no-one else to write to them
- Take part in Sunday services and Bible study groups in prisons
- Assist prison chaplains in other ways that may be needed
- Meet regularly to pray for the prisoners and staff in their local prison

Some of our volunteers also work with other organisations such as Prison Alpha.

Whether we are involved in an openly evangelistic activity such as a Bible study or a neutral activity such as the Sycamore Tree Restorative Justice course, we model to prisoners a different way of life, a Christ-like way of life.

Jesus' message to offenders was that he had come to call them and to bring them the Gospel message. The salvation he preached was available to them – as evidenced by his statement to the repentant thief on the cross – "Today, you will be with me in paradise".

Prison staff and the prison system

While the prison authorities generally welcome volunteers from faith groups, security is very important, as is the way vulnerable and volatile men and women are dealt with.

Prison Fellowship has worked hard with the prison authorities nationally to ensure that our volunteers are properly briefed or trained if they are going into prison or having contact with prisoners. As a result we are generally well respected and trusted. Prison officers do a difficult job and most show a real concern for the men and women in their prisons. One inspirational Governor always talks about "the men and women in his care". Staff have enormous potential influence on prisoners' future lives.

Genesis 39 & 40 – the jailer respected Joseph, gave him some authority in the prison and that was how he met the butler and the baker.

We are not prison campaigners opposing, challenging or undermining staff or the system.

In prisons week, we also want to pray for staff at all levels, from Michael Spurr, the Chief Executive of the National Offender Management Service (and an openly practising Christian) to every officer and support worker in every prison.

(Source 3)

SUGGESTED SERMON OUTLINE 3

Restorative Justice (RJ) has its roots in Judaism. 'Shalom' is the Bible's word for salvation - it means justice and peace. There can be no justice without peace and no peace without justice. As Howard Zehr says in his influential book, RJ is a peace-making response to crime for all those persons affected by it. It is not just one theme among many but a basic core belief which is central to the idea of covenant. It expresses God's fundamental intention for Israel. All the most important themes of the Jewish Scriptures including atonement, salvation, forgiveness and justice have their roots in '*shalom*'. It is God's intention that all people should live in physical well-being. Secondly, that God's people should live in harmony with each other and with God. Over and over again, the Jewish Scriptures make it plain that oppression and injustice are contrary to '*shalom*'. Thirdly, it carries an ethical dimension. There can be no '*shalom*' without the restoration of social, physical, spiritual, and moral justice. It teaches us that '*shalom*' is possible only when we care for one another, even in wrongdoing.

Jesus took up the theme in all he said and did. His Gospel is always about the Good News of the Kingdom in which even repentance is seen not so much as conscience, but conversion; not a guilty verdict, but the announcement of forgiveness. Christ frees us from that whole universe of condemnations, debts, courts, punishments, expiation and shame, in order to introduce us to a new world of grace. Not, however, the cheap grace that costs nothing but a grace in which the offender feels the pain and weight of responsibility, and longs to make 'shalom' between offender and victim. It was grace that freed Zacchaeus from his greed, the prostitute from her clients and Matthew from his profession. With the most gracious words and tender gestures, he did something that cold, grey, analytical eyes alone could never do for them. He helped them to know their true value and gave them hope for a better future.

The Good News is just this 'Your sins are forgiven' Not that they will be forgiven but that they are. It simply requires a step of faith into this astonishing world where punishment does not inevitably follow sin, nor vengeance follow an offence or where grace does not follow reparation - but precedes it.

The mercy and grace of Jesus were the means by which they knew themselves to be sinners; but more precisely, forgiven sinners. The love of God is always generous if not extravagant, and can evoke radical changes in the hearts and minds of all so that as the hymn-writer says; *'the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives'*.

A few weeks ago, The Archbishop of York, told a story that had come out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A woman addressed Desmond Tutu to tell him of her son's savage murder. The police officer who had ordered the brutal killing was present sitting shamefacedly listening to the details of what he and his colleagues had done. Then there were a few moments of quiet.

The Chair of the Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, asked the woman if she had anything to say to the man who had killed her son. She responded, *'I am very full of sorrow. So I am asking you now - come with me to the place where he died, pick up in your hands some of the dust of the place where his body lay, and feel in your world what it is to have lost so much. And then I will ask you one thing more. When you have felt my sadness, I want you to do this. I have so much love, and without my son, that love has nowhere to go. On turning to the policeman she said 'So I am asking you from now on - you be my son, and I will love you in his place.'*

Her action illustrates the extravagance of the Gospel. The Church at its best introduces a new dimension as it stands alongside victim and perpetrator. Restorative Justice from a Christian perspective recognises that the dividing line between good and evil cuts through every human being; that we are all sinners in need of grace. The emerging Church is learning new ways of doing justice by building communities where acceptance and reconciliation become second nature and '*Shalom*' is restored.

(Source 4)