



The Church in the Modern World

Prisons

7 May 2017

Pieter De Witte

Ezra 3: 10–end Ephesians 2: 11–end

“I am not a bad person, am I?” Quite often a prisoner will ask me this question, explicitly or in a more indirect way. A lot of things are going on when somebody directs such a question to a prison chaplain. So I will dwell upon this question to see what is implied in it.

First, it presupposes a confession of guilt. This may come as a surprise, because the question seems to be a claim to innocence, to goodness, maybe even a form of self-righteousness. On a closer inspection, however, it is undeniable that the question ‘Am I a bad person?’ can only be asked by someone who blames himself for what he has done.¹ No one denying all guilt and responsibility will even care about this question. This person will say, “I didn’t do it.” Or, “I couldn’t help it.” He will be concerned with the facts and the concrete accusations, but not with the quality of himself as a moral person. Only the person with at least *some* remorse will say something like: I *know* that I made a mistake, and I know that this is a threat to my worthiness as a person, but *despite that* I hope that I am not completely corrupted, that *some* goodness, *some* innocence remains in me.

So it is about hope. This brings me to a second peculiarity of this question. The thing is, it is not simply a question. It is rather a request for confirmation. The prisoner already knows that he is not a bad person. He knows it by this strange form of knowledge we call hope. And hope will always seek for support by others. It longs for a community of hope. When this question is directed to the chaplain, he or she is addressed as a representative of a community, a community that supports the hope that there is goodness in people who have done terrible things.

There is a third characteristic of the question, ‘I am not a bad person, am I’. Asking this question is, in the strict sense of the word, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Most self-fulfilling prophecies we know are negative ones, like students who think they will fail their examination and therefore do fail, or like preachers who only fill their sermons with complaints about decreasing church attendance. The question I talk about is a rare case of a self-fulfilling prophecy working in a positive direction. For the foundation of all morality is the willingness to do what is good and to abstain from what is evil. At the root of all morality is, more fundamentally, the desire to *be* good. And it is precisely this desire that

¹ Because I work in an all-male prison, I will always use the masculine form when speaking about prisoners.

is expressed in this anxious question 'I am not a bad person, am I'. It is not just a desire for morality; it is a moral desire, a desire that makes the person who has it already good and beautiful. If the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference, as Elie Wiesel said, the concern for one's moral quality as a person is already one huge step away from indifference and a small step towards love.

So, as you can notice, my reflections thus far are characterized by an obsessive quest for what is good in the words of a prisoner. A simple question on his part seems to have brought me into a lyrical mood and made me sing a song of praise about his sense of guilt, his hope, his desire for community, and his desire for the good. I can assure you that things are far more complicated and ambiguous in reality. I was telling you that the question 'Am I a bad person' is frequently asked in an indirect way. And this is often how the ambiguity comes in. A prisoner who has beaten up somebody, may say something like: "I know it was wrong and against the law and all that, but if you would realize how this person has made my life miserable, you would understand how much he deserved to be beaten up." Another fist-happy prisoner may say, "Oh, I just gave my friend a little push and he fell down and broke his nose – and his chin." Judges and prison psychologists are deeply worried by such statements. And rightly so, for they are forms of self-justification and minimization of the offence. They demonstrate a lack of responsibility and an inability to acknowledge the harm one has caused. All of this is true. And yet, on the basis of a crazily benevolent approach to prisoners, one could see such justification and minimization as a clumsy attempt by the offender to distance himself from his deeds, an attempt to be the good person he wants to be. So they are morally deeply ambiguous.

A similar ambiguity is noticeable when someone would say: "I know I killed somebody, but that does not make me a murderer, does it?" The statement seems ridiculous. The judge dismisses it as a failure to take responsibility. The psychologist sees it merely as a superficial and selfish concern about one's own social status. Public opinion is filled with scorn and indignation when it hears such a statement. But the Christian should think twice. Christians (and so Christian chaplains) should, I think, adopt the crazily benevolent approach. They should see how the murderer wants to be more than a murderer. They should appreciate how he longs for confirmation from the community that he does not coincide with his murderous act. They should discover the helplessness, the begging for mercy, in those words, 'I am not a murder'.

But why should Christians be crazily benevolent in their dealings and encounters with criminal offenders? There are two reasons, I think, one is 'natural' and the other 'supernatural'.

Punishing someone is a form of public rejection and condemnation, a powerful statement to the offender and to society as a whole that certain behaviour is intolerable and wrong. It is thought that this public rejection will have an effect on the offender; that he will be confronted with his mistake and his responsibility. This makes sense: rejection, condemnation and punishment – they *may* awaken a sense of responsibility. The thing is: they don't. In most cases the rejection by society is so massive, the condemnation so sweeping, the identification of the offender with his offence so strong, the media coverage so degrading, that this rejection causes self-pity, rather than responsibility. It arouses rebellion, rather than reflection, and resentment, rather than care for the victim.

This is where chaplains may have a role to play. Chaplains can offer to prisoners a *sanctuary* in the ancient sense of the word: a refuge where people are safe from prosecution – and, I would add, safe from condemnation and rejection. People in prison can speak freely there and their words are not met with suspicion, but with a surprising benevolence. And quite often something remarkable would happen in that sanctuary. Precisely because people are, for a brief moment, not being shot at with bullets of condemnation and rejection, they may drop their defences and, quite naturally, start thinking about their own responsibility and about the victims they made. This is an experience that I have in my pastoral work and it has led me to the conclusion that responsibility is a strange thing in prison. The more one tries to force people to take responsibility, the less likely they will feel responsible. And yet this is what is often thought: that we should first and firmly point out people's responsibility – and that only in a later stage should we be compassionate and understanding. The truth is that it is precisely the opposite: only in a compassionate atmosphere, only when people's stories are heard, only when these stories are listened to with crazy benevolence, only then the vulnerable plant of responsibility can start growing and flourishing.

This is the 'natural' side of Christian benevolence. There is a 'supernatural' (or 'theological') side as well, which is well expressed in the readings of today. Both readings are all about the building of a new house, a new temple of God. In both texts the building of this new house is seen against the background of a sad and destructive past. It goes without saying that this theme is highly relevant for people in prison, concerned as they are with the question of how they will build a new life, despite a sad and a destructive past. I have become aware, however, of a great danger in this analogy between the new life of the prisoner and the biblical narrative about the new life of the believer. St Paul especially tends to draw at times a sharp distinction between the old situation, where everyone is equally a sinner, and the new, joyful condition of being saved by Christ. This sometimes gives rise to a certain moral and religious zeal among some prisoners. Some prisoners (sadly enough supported by certain pastors) think they can radically leave their past behind and start with a blank (religious) slate. In prison, nothing is more attractive than the idea of a complete *tabula rasa*. And nothing is more deceptive, for the new house can and will only be built with the rubble and the ruins of the old house. Even when one's life is radically reoriented by religious faith, this rubble of the past will be the only available building material. This is beautifully expressed in the reading from the book of Ezra, where at the end the joyful noises about the building of a new temple become indistinguishable from the weeping of the older people who still remember the old temple. The new life will always remain ambiguous; it will be weeping and joy, old and new. The damaged and half-hearted love people have inherited from their past, *this* will be the love with which they will love their partner and children. And precisely for that reason we have to confirm: "No, you are not a bad person, for there is love in you. It is damaged love and half-hearted love, but at least it is love, and this will be one of the cornerstones of your new house."

There is one last thing I would like to say, something that involves us all here tonight. Paul's dream of a new house of God was that of a house where Jews and Gentiles were gathered. That was his concern. I don't think Paul was very much concerned with the individual. When he spoke about the equal sinfulness of all people, his intention was not that we would all individually contemplate our own guilt and wretchedness in order to appreciate more fully our individual experience of being saved. What he said about universal sinfulness was part of his strategy to bring Jews and Gentiles together into one community.

He promoted moral humility, not to knock people down, but to prepare them for a community with a group they would normally consider morally inferior. How difficult this process was in the first century is hard for us to imagine. How much more, then, should we in our time care to bring prisoners and non-prisoners together into one community. How much more, then, are we called to be morally humble when it comes to prisoners (especially us, non-prisoners, who find it hard to imagine that *we* would ever end up behind bars). How much more are we called to foster relations of equality and mutuality with prisoners. How much more are we called to see *our* responsibility towards those whose freedom *we* have taken away, instead of speaking only about their responsibility. To this we are called as Christians. And I am sure that we can do it. For, after all, and by the grace of God, we are not bad persons, are we?