



Christian Voices from Prison Theology Behind Locked Doors

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Matthew 25: 31–end John 20: 19–end

The two readings we have heard this evening include the following:

From Matthew 25: *'I was in prison, and ye came unto me... Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me';* and also, *'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'*

From John 20: *'...when the doors were shut [NRSV and New American Bible: locked] ... came Jesus and stood in the midst...';* and also, *'Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.'*

I will explore them in reverse order. I begin with John 20 being studied in prison. It was the climax of a week my wife Deborah and I spent living in Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola, because when it had been a slave plantation that was where most of the slaves had come from.

John 20 in Angola. Louisiana State Penitentiary, set in an alligator-infested bend of the Mississippi River, imprisons 5,000 men in several camps (including the notorious death row, where up to eighty men at a time await execution – the setting of the film *Dead Man Walking*), and when we were there 70% of the 5,000 had life sentences, which in Louisiana means for life. The background to our visit was a conversation we had with Peter Kang, one of the chaplains in the prison. When he had been a graduate student in the University of Virginia he went on retreat to an Anglican Benedictine Abbey to think and pray about his vocation. The over-whelming thing that came to him was prison ministry. The only Anglican prison ministry he could find was at Grace Church in St Francisville near Angola, so he went there and volunteered. Among other things he did as a chaplain, he formed a group of a dozen men, all of them with life sentences, in order to try to live a Benedictine-style life in the prison. Distorted versions of all four key elements of a Benedictine commitment (poverty, obedience, chastity, and stability) were part of their lives anyway: poverty—they had almost no property, and worked in the prison for next to nothing; obedience—this was enforced, often brutally and with severe punishments, by the prison guards, and at night the perimeter was patrolled by dogs, half wolf and half Alsatian, trained to go for the throat; chastity—there was no access to women, and I will not try to describe the sexual practices in the prison; and stability—they were in Angola for life, as Benedictine monks and nuns stay in the same abbey for life. In this setting they engaged daily in three core Benedictine practices: prayer, work and study.

When Peter talked with Deborah and myself, he said that their biggest problem was with studying. For prayer, they had a daily pattern; for work, they were in for hard labour, so there was no shortage of that; but for study, which had included the Bible and Augustine's *Confessions*, they only had Peter and each other to talk to, and they longed for discussion with others. So, he said, 'Would you and Deborah be willing to come in to study and discuss with us?' So we did, living in the prison for a full week, and then two years later for another week.

The event I am about to tell you happened on the last evening of the first visit. We had had days of fascinating, intensive conversation around a number of texts. This began with two chapters from Bonhoeffer's short classic, *Life Together*, one on 'The Day Alone', the other on 'The Day Together', which they had read with a quality of attention and discernment equal to any of my Cambridge students, shot through with the extra dimension of daily prison experience and work, such as cleaning out the prison sewers. Perhaps the most moving discussion was about the prospect of dying in prison, and their experience of accompanying fellow prisoners as they were dying. Then on the last evening Deborah introduced them for the first time to the practice of *lectio divina*.

This involved our reading from John 20 being read slowly a few times, accompanied by silence and the chance to share reflections. Here we were, behind locked doors. Most of these men had done terrible things, yet at least most of them had, during decades in prison, come into a new spirituality and way of life, and matured in their faith. There were moving, profound responses, in which there was one overwhelming theme: the presence of Jesus, as one who has identified utterly with those who suffer, those who are marginalized or condemned by society, those who do evil, and those who are in prison or who are executed, but who shows that suffering, condemnation, marginalization, evil, and even death do not have the last word. Jesus, in person, risen from the dead, is the last, and present, word.

The text of John 20 was being taken very seriously in that room behind locked doors. In the text, twice Jesus, bearing the marks of his torture and crucifixion, comes and stands in the midst. Then Thomas makes the culminating theological statement of the Gospel: '*My Lord and my God!*' So, Jesus is present as God is present, which of course means that he is present to readers now as he was to Thomas and the disciples then. This is driven home by our text. Jesus says to Thomas, '*Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed/trusted*', and the author goes on to address the readers, back then and for all time, who have not seen Jesus: '*... these are written, that ye might believe/trust that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing/trusting ye might have life through his name.*' Trusting this testimony means that we know something that does not fit within any of our usual categories: that we are in the invisible presence of Jesus, who is the presence of the invisible, omnipresent God; we can meet him, and go on living in his presence, as his followers (even, for the Gospel of John, as his friends). In other words, blessed are you who have not seen, but read and believe. In that prison we had read our way into realizing the presence of Jesus. Just as the crucified and resurrected Jesus had surprised his disciples on the first Easter Sunday, so he surprised us there. As one of the men said, 'He still comes through walls!' Another said, 'Who would ever think we were in prison?' And another, the one Anglican in the group, who had all sorts of doubts and awkward questions, found that Thomas's questions and doubts somehow opened up a hesitant way forward. [Interestingly, he was the one member of the group to be later released, when a new witness came forward whose evidence showed that he had been wrongly imprisoned for over twenty years.]

There is also our other text: *'I was in prison, and ye came unto me... Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.'* This suggests a very different sort of presence of Jesus: his presence in 'the least'. John 20 is about the named presence of Jesus, and him giving his disciples their vocation as his followers: *'As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.'* Matthew 25 is about his mysterious, anonymous presence in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, those without adequate clothing, the sick, and those in prison. This is another form of radical surprise. And they are the sorts of people to whom Jesus was especially sent. So, if we bring the two together, and are open both to being sent as Jesus was sent, and to letting 'the least' be central to our concerns, that is the way to receive both blessings in our readings: *'Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed'*; and *'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'*

Two final remarks.

The first is about another group of people who might be added to Matthew's list: those with learning disabilities. Ten years ago, Deborah, my wife, co-founded Lyn's House, a little community of friendship in which the space between those with often severe learning disabilities and those in this university is bridged through meals, events, and other things that friends take part in together. I want to thank this College not only for its financial support in starting and sustaining the community, but also for those Trinity students who have been among our volunteers. It continues to be a wonderful experience of the wisdom of both Gospels, John and Matthew, the experience of the many, many blessings for everyone that flow from having at the centre of our community those with learning disabilities who, to the rest of society, often seem 'the least'.

And, finally, this is Trinity Sunday, we are in Trinity College, and I am an academic theologian, so I must restrain myself on the subject of the inexhaustibly rich and glorious doctrine of the holy and blessed Trinity (as it is often called). So I will just say one thing. The Trinity is above all about the supreme blessing of love: the love that created this amazing world and all the rest of the universe, and is eternally at its heart; the love that is utterly involved with us and for us in the person of the living Jesus Christ; and the love that, in the Spirit, moves deeply in receptive hearts and minds, blows freely across the divisions of our world, inspires people of all faiths and none in the search for truth and the struggle for justice, and delights us with beauty in many forms, not least the music and singing with which this evening we have celebrated the Feast of the Trinity.