



PRISONS WEEK 2009 RESOURCES

SERMON OUTLINE

Chaplains and Clowns

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. *Hebrews 10v23-25*

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope

Colin Morris, a former President of the Methodist Church, wrote a book called 'The Hammer of the Lord' in which he spoke of the clown as a symbol of hope. It is not difficult to see why. The clown refuses to conform and insists on living out his or her wildest dreams and never gives up on hope. Against all odds the clown will attempt the impossible like riding a bike with square wheels, walking along a slack rope or challenging the bully. The clown will always reach out beyond the possible, forgiving the unforgivable, hoping for the hopeless and challenging the status quo. But above all, the clown is depicted as a vulnerable lover; this is especially true of the king of clowns, Charlie Chaplin, who in so many films never gets the girl, but does not stop trying.

Nonconformity, living out impossible dreams, forgiving the unforgivable and remaining hopeful are the characteristics of the clown. Perhaps they should be listed somewhere in the advertisement for the recruitment of prison chaplains as essential qualities for the post.

Jesus refused to side with the cold legalistic world of the Scribes and Pharisees. He longed to infuse all of life with mercy and grace. He challenged the status quo in order to live out his dream for a better world in which the first in line exchanged places with the last; the righteous followed the sinners into the kingdom and the meek inherited the earth.

Just as clowns are part of the circus but often stand on the boundary, so prison chaplains often appear to belong to the establishment, yet are somehow set apart. It has been interesting to note that during a Restorative Justice programme, prisoners requested that the programme should take place in the chapel, not a classroom and that chaplains should be invited to lead the programme. There is something in the minds of prisoners that sets chaplains apart from the world of rules, orders and reports into the life giving atmosphere of restored relationships. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself a prisoner, once said, "More and more people are sick and lost because they do not know with any certainty who they are. They will only find their true identity when someone looks on them with love".

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The words of Jesus are always invitational and relational. He said, "Come unto me all you whose lives are heavy laden". To a tax collector and to fishermen alike, he said, "Follow me" - not join my religion, follow my philosophy or obey my moral laws. It was an invitation to join him in a relationship of absolute trust and commitment. This intimacy lies at the heart of the Christian faith and we do a great injustice to our faith when we reduce it to a disembodied morality or detached philosophy. It is a personal encounter with the risen Christ, founded on faith, hope and love.

Faith, hope and love are the only weapons that chaplains have, but, they can in surprising ways disarm even the most hardened offender. People of faith never think of anyone as being hopeless or a waste of space because they believe that each person born into the world is a unique creation filled with divine potential.

People who work in prison walk a narrow line. They live on the boundaries, and just like clowns, often appear peripheral to the main performance in the no man's land *between* punishment and forgiveness, despair and hope, wasted and redeemed lives. Living on the boundary is where we are most aware of the tensions and complexities of human life, where good and evil are not always what they appear to be and where offenders can often feel more like victims. It is a place where chaplains and volunteers take on themselves the guilt of the guilty and the pain of the innocent.

The story is told of a holy man sitting by the bank of a river and next to him was a scorpion trying to escape the rising flood. A passer by called out to the holy man saying, "Don't you know it is in the nature of a scorpion to sting?" Whereupon the holy man replied, "That may well be, but it is my nature to save; and must I change my nature because the scorpion does not change its nature?"

It is in the nature of Christians to hope with a hope that is grounded in faith and sustained by love. The clown never gives up on love; nor do those who work in prison. 'Provoking' love anywhere and everywhere is their business because they know that nothing great ever happens in this life without love. The same may be said of hope, which is why the writer to Hebrews exhorts us to provoke one another to love so that even the most apparently hopeless places or people may be filled with redemptive possibilities.

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A week of prayer for all those involved with prisons

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