

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> August 2024**

### **Reflection from Reader Gillian Kern**

Louise emailed me earlier in the week asking me for some thoughts about the focus for my reflection this morning. This was my reply:

Strangely I came home from the prison last night thinking about the gospel for Sunday and my work during the day. I decided to reflect on the earthbound prison we make for ourselves by limiting our understanding of God's power, but how that changes if we live in the spirit.

And then I looked at the pew sheet for Sunday and read Spotlight (*You can find the Spotlight for the week at the end of the Reflection*), and so, my reflection draws on the story of Corrie and Betsy and others who find the power of the spirit and the love of God through confinement.

The nineteenth century reform of prisons, driven by the famous Quaker Elizabeth Fry (honoured in the Church of England, annually on 12<sup>th</sup> October), led to a rethink about the purpose of prison from retributive justice to a place of restorative justice based on Christian ethics. This in turn led to the design of prisons based on the monastic principle of single cells with the chapel at the heart of the structure.

A place for solitude, reflection, and an opportunity to learn the restorative nature of God's love. Sadly, as Corrie and Betsy discovered their prisoner of war camp was the same as many prisons: a place where restorative justice might be the model, but retributive justice was the norm. Much like the prison into which Paul and Silas were thrown in Philippi.

During their internment there was a great storm which damaged the prison and all the prisoners escaped except Paul and Silas who remained singing hymns and praising God.

Paul and Corrie make a similar point - we can find ourselves in earth bound prisons of our own making separated from God when we are limited by our circumstances, surroundings or mind set. This, I think, is true of us all from time to time and our challenge, as Christians, is to set ourselves free from the things that constrain our growth as Christians and our relationship with God.

I'm always amazed how much I learn from the men with whom I work in the prison - how much I learn about accepting God's forgiveness and growing in grace and peace. How much I learn about finding the mental and emotional freedom from the pressures of living an interned life to soar in the love of God.

It's strange but that monastic structure, with the chapel at the heart of the prison community, makes it a place of sanctuary, peace and quiet in a turbulent world where love and joy have a naughty habit of moving us forward as we share in God's love together and find ourselves restored to him daily.

One of my tasks in the prison is leading the Bible Study Book Club which is open to men of all faith and no faith. Currently we're reading Richard Rohr's 'The Divine Dance'. (Published by SPCK ISBN 978-0-28-107815-8.) Father Richard Rohr is a Franciscan Friar who runs the Centre for Action and Contemplation in the US. He's adept at challenging the boundaries of human understanding and sometimes conventional Christian thinking. His website declares

"Love is the source and goal, faith is the slow process of getting there, and hope is the willingness to move forward without resolution and closure."

The book is a journey into our relationship with God and how we use scripture and theological writing, prayer, and contemplation to get to know God and ourselves through the spirit. He says that we have all drifted away from the relationship God had intended. So, the book is about restoring our relationship with God and breaking out of the limitations of our self-adopted earthbound interpretation of that relationship. He says we set the limit of the relationship, but God always offers opportunity, possibility and potential if we trust him to move us beyond it.

The choice of the book came from our study of Origen a first century theologian whose theory of biblical understanding is a way to knowing God and entering into a restorative relationship. He says we should read the Bible at 3 levels. Firstly, as a social, biographical, historical, and political account of the life and relationship of people with God and secondly as a moral compass. But it's when we can read it at a spiritual level that we really start to know God and be restored to him.

He says that we need to read the Bible at the first two levels to be able to achieve a spiritual relationship with God. It's not until, like Paul and Silas and Corrie and Betsy that we move, spiritually, outside the earthly confines of our understanding of God, that we can live in a truly spiritual relationship with God.

Richard Rohr says that we have to accept the mystery, and the lack of control that we have over our relationship with God, and we have to stop confining the infinite to a finite to be able to find the joy of which Corrie writes.

I'm always reminded of Julian of Norwich and her relationship with Christ while she lived and taught bricked-up in a tiny hermitage in Norwich. It was an earthly structure that confined her but liberated her to freedom and openness in her relationship with Christ in which she soared and was suffused with wisdom and love.

The same sometimes happens to the men in prison when they live beyond the confines of the walls and gates and the regime and routine and find themselves, through their relationship with God, in a spiritual life which brings freedom, joy and hope, faith a trust. The people in the synagogue at Capernaum were not confined by walls but by the boundaries of their mindset when they rejected Jesus.

It's easy to be saddened by them. Sad that they walked away from him never to return. Perhaps they were revolted by what they thought was Jesus reference to cannibalism; perhaps they were disturbed by inferred infringements of their dietary laws; perhaps outraged by Jesus self-referencing to Moses or perhaps just because it was too much change, just too radical and too complex, to absorb. There was certainly rejection in the air. So much that it seems that even the 12 were hesitant.

The question 'where else is there to go?' does seem defeatist at first sight but it could be rhetorical. Where else is there because it's in the challenge of Jesus' teaching and in their relationship with him that they, and we, find our grace and peace. It's where we find ourselves restored in unity with God.

I'm not suggesting that it's good to be confined by physical walls and a regime that causes suffering. I'm not recommending that we shut ourselves away from the freedoms of our lives and loves nor that we abandon what we have and what we enjoy. Nor am I suggesting that we are separated from God but that there is always a journey to be had in getting to know God better. I'm suggesting that we take the opportunity to know God better wherever we find ourselves, that we use the opportunities given us to turn them into joyful journeys of renewing our faith, trust,

and hope. I'm suggesting that we liberate ourselves from any restrictions we create for ourselves and, through knowing God and being loved by God, we find joy and hope in conventional and strange places. I'm suggesting that we remember that we find God in our Bibles, in prayer and worship.

To paraphrase the last verse of Richard Lovelace's poem 'To Althea' from prison in 1642

Stone Walls do not a Prison make,  
Nor Iron bars a Cage;

open minds can make them a place of freedom  
and if we have freedom in loving  
our souls are free  
and we can soar like an angel  
and have liberty.

Gillian Kern Reader - Anglican Chaplain, HMP.....

### **Spotlight from Sunday 25 August 2024**

Dear Friends

In the passage from the Gospel reading this Sunday (John 6:56-69), Peter says to Jesus 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life'.

For Christians, the words of eternal life are contained in the Bible. We have this treasure in our midst. May we encourage you to join us this Autumn as we go deeper into the Bible through 'The Bible Course'. To inspire you, some words written by Corrie Ten Boom, who was imprisoned with her sister Betsy in a concentration camp in the Second World War. The Bible was very precious to them, in those times...

*"It grew harder and harder. Even within these four walls there was too much misery, too much seemingly pointless suffering. Every day something else failed to make sense, something else grew too heavy. But as the rest of the world grew stranger, one thing became increasingly clear. And that was the reason the two of us were here. Why others should suffer we were not shown. As for us, from morning until lights-out, whenever we were not in ranks for roll call, our Bible was the centre of an ever-widening circle of help and hope. Like waifs clustered around a blazing fire, we gathered about it, holding out our hearts to its warmth and light. The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and truer and more beautiful burned the word of God. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."*

From 'The Hiding Place' by Corrie Ten Boom

With Love and Prayers

Simon and Louise