

## Advent Sunday 2016: He comes the prisoners to release

At the 'Prayer and Share' meeting this week, as an introduction to our prayer Marion read the lovely Advent hymn which we will sing later, 'Hark the glad sound the saviour comes': "Hark the glad sound the saviour comes, the Saviour promised long: let every heart prepare a throne and every voice a song". After we had kept a time of silent prayer and turned to listen to any comments anyone might have, one particular phrase of the hymn appeared to resonate widely. It was the line, '*he comes the prisoners to release*'. "He comes the prisoners to release in Satan's bondage held; the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield". Whereas the hymn appears to offer a spiritualising interpretation of being in prison (and of release from prison) – the imprisonment of being held in *Satan's bondage* – we found ourselves reflecting on the more immediate sense of imprisonment i.e. being in prison. This is perhaps not surprising since prisons have been very much in the news lately. The recent unprecedented strike by 10,000 prison officers in England and Wales over health and safety concerns, gave us all a major wake-up call. Factors such as the prevalence of drugs in prison, the widespread availability of mobile phones and the phenomenon of overcrowding and under-staffing have led to many prisons becoming unsafe. Earlier this month prisoners caused almost one million pounds' worth of damage during a riot in Bedford prison. Days later at HMP Isle of Wight, an inmate cut the throat of a prison officer with a razor blade on the way back to his cell. The facts attest that assaults on staff are commonplace, to say nothing of what goes on between inmates. Many prisons have become unsafe for both staff and inmates. This of course makes a mockery of what imprisonment is supposed to provide, a safe place for individuals to rethink their actions and rebuild their lives. In many cases, prison does indeed provide opportunities for the development of learning skills and achieving academic qualifications i.e. for personal development. This is particularly the case for young men and women. For many people the

principle and aim of restorative justice is indeed accomplished. However, there is manifestly much that needs addressing in our prisons and it is good that Lyn Truss the Prisons Minister has been meeting with prison officers since the strike to attempt to resolve what is at issue. A white paper has also set out the government's vision for the future.

In connection with the context of prison, I wonder who may have chanced to hear an interview on Tuesday morning this week on Radio Four with the American opera singer Joyce DiDonato. She has recently conceived a very particular operatic project entitled 'In War and Peace'. It is a response to last year's Paris terrorist attacks. The concert programme draws together 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century arias that correspond with themes of conflict, violence and peace-making. She sang at a performance of the piece at the Barbican on Tuesday night. A Guardian review described it as "a sombre exploration of "our brutal nature and our elevated humanity" that celebrates the harmonising potential of music". I wonder if anyone heard it or whether it was relayed in cinemas at all?... What the morning interview on Radio Four explored with Joyce DiDonato was her experience not long ago of doing a performance of the piece at a very different venue, namely the apparently notorious high security 'Sing Sing Correctional Facility' in New York State. She was therefore in front of an audience of inmates.

In a very moving and authentic conversation with James Nocherty, she described her nervousness at the outset, yet her determination to perform the work with all the professionalism and detail that would be expected in a concert hall venue. Happily she was put at ease quickly by one inmate booming out from the back of the hall, "thank you for coming here!", and she knew he meant it. One piece was a very powerful aria sung by Cleopatra about how the one man she loves, Mark Anthony, has been killed and she is condemned to grief. Joyce DiDonato explained to her audience how the singer uses the word

'piangero', meaning 'I am going to cry'. She explained how, as Cleopatra, she would be singing, "I will cry, cry, cry for the rest of my life", and then of how Cleopatra is going to come back and make the man pay for taking away her love. Perhaps understandably, this brought out an impassioned response from the audience of, "go girl, make him pay girl!"... At the end there was silence and then the whole audience jumped to their feet and applauded. Her comment to the interviewer was, "they got it!", which of course they did. She also commented, "I have never sung for a more grateful audience. I have never felt more proven right that opera is for everybody; and I have never felt more useful as a performer". Now I relate that conversation because I think her experience points to something very important about being in prison and freedom, and perhaps particularly to the quality of freedom that the Son of Man brings; 'he comes the prisoners to release'. It suggests that freedom is not simply about *not being in prison*. It is something much deeper. After all, if you are in for life, do you have to kiss goodbye to every kind of freedom?... I make no claim to understand a great deal about the mindset of long term prisoners. However, through my brief experience of prison visiting a long time ago, and reflecting on this experience of an opera singer in a high security facility, and the responses of the inmates, it seems to me that in the context of prison, with all the opportunity it gives to come to terms with the truth about oneself, and the recognition that there is nowhere lower to fall and no one has anything left to lose, this can make for a kind of personal freedom that is as rare as it is precious. There is a freedom that can come from having nothing left to hide because it has all been exposed. And in everyday life we know very well how heartening it can be when people are truly authentic and speak their own truth openly. It is as though we witness human being as it really is or should be, and are somehow enabled to recognise ourselves in the mirror and be just that little bit more truthful *to ourselves* and *about ourselves*. It is of course deeply ironic that this quality of inner freedom should be found,

arguably, in the one place where another kind of freedom is denied. But it is something we know when we meet it, and I think Joyce DiDonato met it, and it had a very profound impact on her, clearly. And it seems to me that Christ came, and Christ comes, to bring this very kind of personal freedom that transcends experience. In Christ we are liberated to be who we are and become what lies in us through the call of God. “He comes the prisoners to release in Satan’s bondage held; the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield”. And from Luke chapter 4 verse 18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me... He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives”. And from John chapter 8 verse 36, “If the Son of Man shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” .....

From the spiritual to the very practical: in Ladywood very soon a new project is being launched called ‘Suited for Success’. Some of us know Patricia White who used to work at the Foodbank and through the Birmingham City Church on the edge of the Jewellery Quarter. Suited for Success is her initiative and she has been working hard over the last six months or so to get herself set up in premises near Tesco’s Springhill, to be able to distribute suits for people going to interviews for jobs who can’t afford the necessary or desirable attire but need to be smart for interview. There is a particular focus in the project on people in groups whose access to the job market is particularly challenging, and this includes ex offenders. If therefore you have old suits – I expect both womens’ and mens’ suits will be appreciated – then do hold on to them and as soon as the premises are open, and the project is actually launched, I will make sure everyone knows. Here perhaps is a way in which we can be part of facilitating the road to another kind of freedom and autonomy for individuals trapped either by their past or by the constraints of their present circumstances.

1481 Words

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