

Address by Deborah Leighton Plom for Sunday, February 20th 2022

I have kindly been invited to speak to you today on behalf of South West Community Chaplaincy, where I work as a community chaplain. We are a charity based in Exeter for the last 15 years, are part of a national association, and we work across Cornwall, Devon and West Somerset to provide support for men and women of all ages in the months before they are released from prison, as well as in the crucial first days, weeks and months back in the community. We help them to overcome whatever challenges they face to make a fresh start and build a positive future for themselves. So we are different to prison chaplains, because once we have met and got to know prisoners, we also meet with them when they come out, and are in a unique position to provide a continuity of support in this way, for as long as people need it. Having got to know people in prison, community chaplains can then match them to trained volunteer mentors in the community, who provide person-centred mentoring for as long as people need it. We currently have about 50 mentors across the region who do this work with us. Through mentoring, being a consistent support to listen to problems and feelings, identify and explore possible solutions, we help people find a new path that does not involve going back to prison. We do practical stuff, signposting to housing and benefits organisations that can help with specific issues, and it is lovely when we can link them up to churches in the area they are released to, but mainly, we just come alongside people, and are there for them, with them, at this difficult time.

Many people in prison want life to be different when they're released, but they're not sure where to begin. They may have never experienced a safe and supportive environment, even as a child. They may have struggled with education, and found it hard to form positive relationships. They may have drug or alcohol dependency issues. Many suffer from low self-esteem.

I want to share with you a few facts and figures about prison. As of June 2021, the UK had a total prison population of 78,756 in England and Wales. A little over 95% of the prison population is male. There were approximately 75 thousand males and 3 thousand females. There are three male prisons in Devon – Dartmoor, Channings Wood and Exeter. Exeter is a remand prison, so anyone arrested for a crime in the region is sent here while they await court, while Dartmoor holds prisoners who have been sentenced. Thirdly, Channings Wood, where I am mainly based, is a resettlement prison from which men will be released, hopefully after engaging with a programme of education or work inside the prison.

HMP Eastwood Park is a women's prison in Gloucestershire, which I also cover, is the nearest women's prison to Devon and Cornwall. If you live in Truro, and you want to visit your Mum, or your daughter, or your sister, in Eastwood Park, the train and bus takes 6 or 7 hours one way. This round trip is often prohibitive for families without transport or on benefits.

One final set of numbers for you: over half of prisoners reoffend within a year of being released, and it costs up to £40,000 a year to keep someone in prison. This is one of the reasons why prisons, probation and the police refer people to us for mentoring.

What struck me about the Gospel reading this morning is that it speaks to us, and certainly to people in prison, on how life can get stormy. We all have different ways of coping when the storms of life happen to us – our family, friends, our coping mechanisms like self-care, our resilience, and of course our faith. Trials and difficulties happen to us all, but God is there with us in the storm. This is the hope we share with prisoners as community chaplains, where we come along side people and commit to journeying with them, when they are frightened of how they will make a new start.

I wonder if any of you would consider joining us the work we do? Could you sit with someone in their storm, as a mentor? We offer free, full training and support for this role. Could you pray for us, and for those we support? I will stay after the service and would love to speak to anyone who might want to get involved.

I am supporting a young man at the moment – I'll call him Jack - who got into trouble as a teenager, when he was in the care system, and now in his mid-twenties, is trying to make up for lost time and get his life back on track. I met him about 12 months ago, and with very little self-confidence, no family support, and needing to develop some life skills pretty quickly to enable him to live alone, Jack was panicking. I spent some time getting to know him, and we agreed a plan of what he needed to do, and how he might do it. We then continued to meet weekly while Jack worked through things - this included searching for voluntary opportunities in Exeter, helping him write a CV and apply, and talking through his fears of being rejected from a job, and all that this triggered for him. I helped him write an application for social housing, and soon enough, as a vulnerable young person, he was offered a secure tenancy with a housing association. He got an interview for volunteering, and we practised interview questions. He got the role, and then, six months later, he got a paid job. I am still supporting Jack as he settles into his new life, and will be there for as long as he needs me on the end of a phone, if things get rocky or stormy in his life.

In community chaplaincy, then, we work with people of all faiths and none. Jack, the young man I support, would describe himself as somewhere in the middle – not quite sure what he believes. But does that make any difference in what kind of challenges we might face in our lives? No, having a faith doesn't protect us from storms, and storms hit believers.

The storm described in our Gospel reading today hit those *with* Jesus in their boat, as well as those *without* Jesus in their boat. Mark's Gospel records that other boats were with them. If this were a fairy tale, we might read that when the storm arose, the other boats were swamped, but the boat with Jesus in it sailed as smooth as glass. The fact is, Christians are not magically exempted from the storms of life. Just because you're in Jesus' boat doesn't mean that it's going to be smooth sailing. It also doesn't matter how 'good' a Christian you are! Storms hit believers who are actively serving God.

Jesus said, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake". These men, who had committed their lives to serve him, obeyed. And he led them straight into a storm! And in the same way, obediently serving God may place you smack-dab in the middle of storms you would have avoided if you had stayed on the shore.

"As they sailed, he fell asleep". What a time to fall asleep! Just when they needed Jesus' calm leadership and assurance, where was he? Fast asleep in the back of the boat, oblivious to their dire need. I think we can sometimes feel like that, in the midst of a trial, when it might feel like God has left us alone. You can feel like you about to go under, and you wonder – where is God? I have a lot of conversations like that with people in prison.

What I tell them is that God *is* with them. He is always with them, even if sometimes it feels like he isn't. He is there with us, in the storm, in the same boat, alongside us. He is there even before we call on him to help us. But we need to ask him to help us, trusting that he will.

Being in the same boat is an idiom we use to mean being in the same difficult circumstances as others. Well, Jesus is in our boat. He's right there with us, no matter how bad things get, or whether we think he's not there – he is. Sometimes we all need reminding of that, whether in stormy or calm times of our lives. God is always with us, and he wants us to trust him, and to ask for his help.