

When I first started the faith based mentoring project at Feltham Young Offenders, now almost 10 years ago, I wasn't sure what to expect, or whether or not our idea would work. Community Chaplaincy, the idea of continued pastoral and practical support outside prison, for those who had linked with the Chaplains inside, had worked well in Canada for over twenty-five years, but the demographics in England were entirely different. Add to this the fact that we were setting up the first project to work with Young Offenders in the UK, and I was new to this work, and you will understand why my expectations were uncertain. Yet since the project began in 2005 we have seen remarkable things happen and whilst the process of desistance, or ceasing to offend, is exactly that, a long, slow and often difficult process, we continue to be impressed by those who support the ex-offenders, but most of all by the ex-offenders themselves, in the case of the Feltham Community Chaplaincy Trust, the young men, who are struggling to escape a life often characterised by past abuse, poverty and illiteracy.

Nine years ago I started with very little knowledge of the criminal justice system in England and Wales and had my own ideas and prejudices about those who have spent time in prison. Still, I tried to approach my new vocation with an open heart and mind, as much as is possible, and over the years I have walked alongside young men and their families and learnt the most valuable lesson I could ever have learnt. We are not that different. Maybe my life has been filled with a little less trauma, perhaps my education and parenting was in some way better, but when it comes down to it we are all just people, people with hopes, dreams, fears. People with hearts that break, people with regrets, people who mourn for what is lost and who celebrate the good in our lives, however rare and fragile that may be.

When Andy Keen Downs approached me about giving this talk I was a little hesitant. I knew that I would be filling rather big shoes, considering who my predecessors have been, but something made me say yes. I would like to think it was the gentle prompting of the Spirit. I decided I would approach this a bit differently and tell you a little bit about those I journeyed with in these last

years and my hope is that in doing this, and in sharing something of our Church's own relevant thoughts and ideas on this important subject, as well as mentioning the work of a few key academics who have informed my work, that I will leave you with something to reflect on.

"I do not understand my own behaviour; I do not act as I mean to, but I do things I hate.....for though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want – that is what I do" (Romans 7:15-19)

This verse taken from the writings of St. Paul, speaks to us of the human predicament. That disobedience and crime have characterised human action through out the ages is given testament to in the very first few chapters of the Bible. God creates Adam and Eve, provides all they require, and what follows is disobedience to the only single injunction he places on them. Shortly after Cain kills his brother Abel out of jealousy.

Whilst there is no time today to discuss the history of crime and its development in our consciousness through the ages, it is interesting to note that crime seems to be known to 'man' for as long as humankind has been known to set standards from which deviation was possible. Earliest known codes of law which meet out penalties for breach of the law of the land include the Codes developed by the Ancient Egyptians, these codes, written in cuneiform script include the Code of Ur-Nammu, developed by the Sumerians in the 21st Century B.C. and the Code of Hammurabi, developed by the Akkadians in the 18th Century B.C. (The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol 5: p546).

Today crime and our fear of it seems to characterise our age in the UK, one has only to turn on the news, read the press or 'surf' the internet and you will find no end of reports on people committing crimes against the person, corporation and the state. Current fears around the involvement of young people and knife crime have driven some schools to place metal detectors in their corridors

As long as the problem of crime exists, so too does that of what to do with those who break the law, and hence require punishment. Currently in the UK, we expect our judicial and prison system to meet out justice and rehabilitate offenders, ensuring they no longer pose a threat to mainstream society. This is a simplistic statement for what is a very complex process.

As of 7th November 2014 in excess of 85,000 prisoners were to be found incarcerated in England and Wales, by 2019 this number is expected to rise to 86,000 (Prison Population Projections: Ministry of Justice Statistics Bulletin: Nov. 2013). As many as half of these prisoners will have been in prison more than once and amongst the under 17 population, up to 75% will be repeat offenders (Local Adult Reoffending, 1 January 2013 – 31 December 2013 England and Wales Ministry of Justice Statistics bulletin) (Re-offending of Juveniles: Ministry of Justice Statistics Bulletin: May 2009).

Rehabilitation programmes abound, but the statistics of re-offending seem to tell a different story.

Whilst working as a Community Chaplain I also completed an MA in Pastoral Theology. As part of this process I interviewed a number of people who had spent time in prison and were attempting to make a different life for themselves. I was often touched by the responses I got from the men I spoke to, both in terms of their honesty and by their desire to seek something they often had never known, stability and a life without crime.

The excerpt which follows is from my interview with J, a 30 year old who was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome and has spent a number of years going in and out of prisons and remand centres:

I asked J if his faith affected his desire to commit crime or to go straight?

J replied: It's been a struggle to progress with my-self, but I think I am getting there because my level of re-offending has reduced.

Why do you think that is? I asked

J: Because its like, I wish it would just end altogether like, but it's ...like before, I was like...very high.. and then, it's like somebody just trying to get off drugs, like a strong heroin addiction. Like when they have excess abuse one day and then not taking any heroin at all the next day, just like stop, like cold turkey...

It's very difficult? I asked

J: Yes..

J characterises so many of the men I have come across in my time working in prisons. Ordinary people who find themselves lost in a downward cycle and struggling to find a way out. People who often have real problems with mental health and other issues that remain undiagnosed and untreated.

One of the young men I worked with I had actually come across previously during my time working with the homeless. Max had problems relating to people and the world around him, but he had a phenomenal memory. Despite a number of years elapsing, when he saw me at Feltham he remembered me. Max had been placed in care as a child and rarely saw his family. Occassionally he saw his father. Other than that he lived a fairly itinerant lifestyle, his only real home being the hostel in which he lived. Then one day he got into a disagreement with someone at the hostel. They had his CD and were not returning it. In a desparate attempt to get their attention he put a piece of lit paper under their door. Thankfully nothing terrible happened as the person was there at the time. Unfortunately Max's actions would result in him losing his place in the only stable accomodation he had known and being sent to prison.

There is no doubt that arson is a serious crime, but Max could not understand this. With an IQ of just around 60 he struggled to understand and retain ideas

of what is socially acceptable and what is not, let alone what constitutes a criminal act. When I met him in prison and had caught up with his case I had to explain to him that this was his home for now and we would have to find him another home when it was time to leave. Often he would get confused about things and if he saw me in the corridors he would shout out...L U C I A...L U C I A...that was how he addressed me. I'm not entirely sure he understood that he was spelling my name rather than saying it, but it was really rather touching and always gave the other staff and chaplains something to smile about.

I worked closely with the De Paul Trust on Max's case and between us we got him assessed by his local borough and he was safely and appropriately housed, eventually. He was also given a mentor, who has been fantastic and despite years passing still keeps in touch with him. When I last heard Max was doing short courses at college and his behaviour had improved.

All Max needed was a little support, care and continuity. Prison, as it is today was not going to give him that, had we not stepped in its possible he would, in his confusion, continued to commit unwitting crimes, resulting in repeated incarceration.

Our prisons continue to be squeezeed so that any useful programmes are being sacrificed just to pay for vital staff and other running costs. Programmes which work to help people in prison to reflect or change their behaviour are largely supported by charities and other non-governmental organisations. Whilst this gives them a certain amount of independence, most small charities go from one funding round to the next, never sure of where the next Pound will come from. This severely affects the ability to plan longer term, or spend time on valuable exercises such as training, learning and information exchange.

NOMS have continually promised to roll out effective programmes and invest in those that show results, yet in all the time I worked at FCCT we did not see any of this investment, at least not in current work that was effective. Instead

there was an emphasis on developing new initiatives. Now I'm the first to applaud innovation, but why is money and time spent on getting people to think up something new whilst not investing in the programmes that are working!

Currently our criminal justice system treats prisoners like a bundle of risks and needs. Whilst there is a need to identify the risk a prisoner might pose to the community upon release there is also a strong need to help them go beyond this, to identify hopes, goals and aspirations for life and find ways to support them in their attainment of these. Otherwise we are in danger of doing something to them rather than with them and this is disabling.

In a recent address to the International Association of Criminal Law Pope Francis comments on this issue;

"In the last decades there has been a growing conviction that through public punishment it is possible to solve different and disparate social problems, as if for different diseases one could prescribe the same medicine. This conviction has pushed the criminal law system beyond its sanctioning boundaries, and into the "realm of freedom and the rights of persons" without real effectiveness.

Max didn't just need a probation officer, housing officer and community mental health officer, he also needed someone to care about him and believe in him. This is where mentoring, or befriending, come into their own.

One of the good pieces of work NOMS has done is to try to build a national network of mentors. In my experience at FCCT we found that mentors could make all the difference to the lives of the young man they were paired with.

Take Ron; we matched Ron with his mentor around 6 years ago. Ron was a bright lad who had got mixed up with the wrong crowd for the usual reasons. He didn't want to be bullied, so by connecting with a gang he felt safe. Unfortunately his associations led him to committing crime and that led to prison. Whilst inside Ron took stock and decided he wanted to try to do things differently. He knew this was going to be a challenge, but he knew what he

wanted out of life and prison was not it. Ron's mentor, Stewart, was a family man with his own business. A man who knew what hard work is and spoke honestly with Ron about his hopes and fears. They built up an excellent relationship, so much so that Ron still calls on his mentor if he needs a little extra support. In the last 6 years since leaving prison Ron became an ambassador for the Prince's Trust, he qualified as a professional football coach and obtained a degree in Sport Science. He now works for a well known charity in their Sports development programme, where he helps other young people. I remember Ron saying to me, "If only everyone had a 'Stewart' what a difference that would make, I could not have done all this without him".

How many more young men are there like Ron in our prisons?

In his last address to Prison Chaplains in Italy Pope Francis says this of those who are imprisoned:

the Lord does not remain outside, he does not remain outside their cells, he does not remain outside the prison; rather, he is inside, he is there. You can say this: the Lord is inside with them; he too is a prisoner; even today, he is imprisoned by our egoism, by our systems, by so many injustices, for it is easy to punish the weakest while the big fish swim freely in the sea.

We need to ask ourselves whether as Catholics and Christians we are part of this problem. Are we asking for justice, yet not being willing to show mercy? Are we trying to help those who want and need our help, or are we shutting the prison door and mentally throwing away the key? Are we campaigning for and voting for a criminal justice system that helps those who want to leave the cycle of crime? Or are we merely looking after our own interests?

What does our faith teach us? Jesus says:

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven

[Matthew 18:21-22](#) ESV

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians says:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you

[Ephesians 4:32](#) ESV

I do not for a second assume that forgiveness is easy, or that everyone wants to be forgiven, but what I ask is; do we, in England and Wales have a system which promotes forgiveness as well as punishment, or do we just punish and offer no real hope of forgiveness and moving forward.

In my experience forgiveness is necessary in order to move forward in life. Those who feel forgiven can forgive themselves.

In talking to a young man, who also stated that this was the longest time he had been out of prison since he was 18 years old, the importance of forgiveness was clear;

“I got to the point where I really wanted to change and I was going to Church inside to try and find myself, I remember really being moved by Psalm 40, suddenly I didn’t feel alone anymore. I was forgiven! I felt relief, light, it was a whole body experience, I was crying..I felt cleansed and free!”

I find Shadd Maruna’s work in the field of criminology and rehabilitation very accessible and insightful. His book *Making Good*, looks uniquely at factors internal to an offenders situation, most studies to date had been focussed on

external issues, such as relationships and employment (Maruna 2001, quoted in Farrall and Calverley 2006:13).

Maruna interviewed a number of offenders in the area of Liverpool, some who had ceased offending and those who were still active criminals. In his search for “a common psychosocial structure underlying [the ex-offenders’] self stories”, he found that in those offenders who were experiencing secondary desistance, that is ‘going straight’ for a long period of time, their *self-narratives* had been re-written, that is they had somehow been able to re-write their pasts. Forgiveness plays an important part in this process. As does faith.

I am going to read a short excerpt from an interview with Paul, a young offender who had already been in prison on numerous occasions, but had managed to rebuild his life, his relationship with his family and with his baby son.

I asked Paul; What do you think made the change possible for you?

Paul replied; Religion, that helped...the people I’ve met through religion as well, I mean going to church, that’s helped a lot...

According to the sociologist Anthony Giddens the continued desire for the spiritual and religious stems from the need to make sense of a, “*Personal meaninglessness – the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer*”, in the post-modern world (1992:9). In today’s secular culture religion remains important, it is the expression of faith, with it comes symbol, ritual and community, all of which have meaning and offer a level of structure and certainty, at both a group and individual level.

Community is an important component of anyone’s lived experience. An excerpt from the Catechism of the Catholic Church reads:

The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange

with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation. [1879]

(Second edition, Chapter two; The Human Community. Article one: The Person and Society)

Paul went on to say; "I think [in] some ways [faith], helped me stay out of trouble a lot, cause now I talk to a lot more people, I've got a lot more friends and more places to go to, like Church, or I've got I've got courses to do, like Bible studies, its helped me steer away from going down that path again".

Paul's community changed, from the friends who encouraged his life of crime, to; through his new found faith, those who encouraged and supported a different way of life. We all need to belong and it goes without saying that the norms of the group we belong to have a profound influence on how we live our lives and make choices. In Paul's case his faith meant he now had not only changed his personal narrative, but, he importantly had a means of sustaining the new story he was developing for himself, one of a law abiding person of faith who was making his way in the world like anyone else.

In Maruna's own work there is discussion on the need for ritual to mark an offenders move away from crime (2001:159), the use of the word *repentance* and the use of the word *redemption* are also used throughout his book, as well as reference to the parable of the "*Prodigal Son*" (2001:166). In a paper written more recently, by Maruna, Wilson and Curran, the issue of faith and its potential role in the rehabilitative process is explored in some depth (2006 vol. 3, iss. 2&3, pp 161-184).

In this article Maruna et. al. use the work on narrative in Maruna's earlier book, *Making Good* to look at, what they term the "*conversion narrative*", Maruna and his colleagues:

"argue that the conversion narrative "works" as a shame management and coping strategy", and so helps a prisoner form a new identity and in a sense re-invent themselves positively (Maruna, Wilson and Curran 2006:161).

This paper views prison as causing a “*crisis of self-narrative*”, in other words a point which forces an individual to question and re-evaluate their life history and potential future (Maruna, Wilson and Curran 2006:168).

In a conversation with a 48 year old man who spent 6 years in prison, but is now a responsible member of his community and runs a successful charity which helps ex-offenders re-start their lives, the importance of faith was in no doubt;

When I asked him how his faith affected his desire to commit crime, or to go straight? He replied

It's taken away that desire...it's changed my whole way of thinking...of life

Maruna and his colleagues established that, “*The conversion narrative:*

- *creates a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner or criminal*
- *imbues the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning*
- *empowers the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God”*

(Maruna, Wilson and Curran 2006:174)

This shift in reference is clear in the words of one of the men who feels faith has impacted him positively;

“Its totally changed my life, totally...I'm a different person than I was before, I react differently to situations, I'm a lot more patient and I don't think I know everything!...faith is now my reference point, I'll always remember that. My involvement in Church, what I get from 'putting in', my work in supporting others who have come to faith....its changed my whole way of thinking...of life”.

Stories of change and redemption are important in helping people believe they themselves have the power to change, Maruna touches on this fact when he talks of how many desisting ex-offenders go back to prison to talk about their stories and encourage change in others. This in turn re-enforces their own stories of change, which gives them more confidence to continue to live changed lives (2001:120-121).

An ex-offender who is attempting to turn his or her life around will, as part of this struggle, go through a process of re-defining their identity, re-writing their life histories, searching for new meaning and purpose and a new community which will provide a sense of belonging and acceptance. Faith offers a language of forgiveness and redemption, the hope of a new life and the opportunity to belong to a community of individuals, joined by belief and shared ritual.

Faith, as Bultmann says, is a “*must*”, it is what connects us to our “*existential being*” giving our lives meaning at an individual and at a societal level (1969:62-63).

For those prisoners and ex-offenders who find faith while in prison, there is a new path offered, if they desire it. Projects such as the Community Chaplaincy initiative harness the goodwill of trained faith community members and are helping ex-offenders to start their lives again. In some cases individuals who find their feet in this new context re-invent themselves completely, using the language of faith, to describe themselves as “forgiven”, or “redeemed”, their narrative is as changed as their lives. In other cases the positive change in self-identity and acceptance of others allows them to launch themselves into a new trajectory, one which might not involve going to Church or Mosque, but which is characterised by renewed hope, a connection with a power higher than themselves, in a personal sense, and, most importantly, real faith in others and faith in themselves, to be different. In these cases, we can say, yes, faith has had an impact, faith has helped them to choose a different path.

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Community Chapliancy

Have we been part of that process? Have we extended our hand to help, or do we remain trapped in our own fear

According to the Catholic Cathecism;

The New Law is called a law of love because it makes us act out of the love infused by the Holy Spirit, rather than from fear

1972:782

Can we, as Catholics and Christians uphold this in our lives, in the way we act, live, vote and speak out, can we act out of the *love infused by the Holy Spirit* and help each other in our life jounies, in and out of prison?

As Pope Francis asked recently, in an address to young offenders in Rome;

Am I really willing, willing to serve, to help others?."

Are we willing to be mentors like Stewart to the Ron's and Max's who are waiting for our support?