



Prisoners · Families · Communities
A Fresh Start Together

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Reimagining Human Dignity in Dark Times: Finding Dignity in the Struggle

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It is no easy task to follow the remarkable performance we have had this evening, and the film we have just seen. I am not someone who can stand here this evening with the expertise from experience that Lewis and Jamie and Cleo and Paula and many other here can. I am aware that in this room this evening will be those who represent every different kind of experience of the criminal justice system, including those for whom extreme trauma seems its overriding reality. Jamie and Lewis have shared both their trauma and the things that enabled them to find more hopeful places, for others those hopeful places may be far from apparent, and we hold all of that in this room.

What I do for a living is, I think and write about things, and like all of us here this evening I am responsible for learning how to act with others to help think again about a system that is currently failing so many. So, I will speak this evening, in a conversational response to what I have heard from Jamie and Lewis, in particular, drawing on my own expertise in the Catholic social teaching tradition. What I am going to talk about is dignity, human dignity, and its central importance to a just and loving society, and a well-ordered one.

When Archbishop Peter Smith wrote his foreword for the 2004 Bishops Conference document on Britain's prison and criminal justice system, *A Place of Redemption*, the first concept he made reference to was human dignity. Human dignity has also been an absolutely central refrain of Pope Francis' social teaching: he has lamented a dark world in which human life comes to be seen as discardable, where some people are seen as superfluous: where we throw away not only consumable items but also people. He calls us to

move, in every area of our lives beyond a throwaway culture. The first step in moving in this direction requires us to embrace our basic human dignity – a dignity that belongs equally to all.

Yet human dignity is a slippery idea, and it can seem to mean something so vague or general that it isn't really of much use to us. What I want to do briefly this evening is to highlight three key elements of a Christian understanding of human dignity that give real bite and direction to the idea, and then, to suggest conversation starters for what such an understanding might have to say about prison reform in the UK today.

Claim number 1: what makes us dignified as human beings is our capacity for relationship, and our need not to have to live with a pretence of being self-contained and self-sufficient.

[To unpack this claim a little] We live in a society that defines human dignity in different ways. Some would say that what makes us dignified is that we are capable of being rational, or that we possess free will – the ability to choose what we do and do not do; other traditions say that it is our basic capabilities that make us dignified, each person is then dignified in a different way. A Christian account of human dignity agrees that we are capable of being rational, have free will, are capable of self-reflection on our actions. But to be a person is something more fundamental than any of these things: it is to be built for relationship with others. Pope Benedict wrote that to be a person is to be 'an event of relativity'. The first relationship we have is that with our Creator – with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And this relationship, for Christians, is personal. All our other relationships either acknowledge or deny that basic relationship of goodness we are created in and for.

Crucially, the Christian tradition teaches us that to achieve all the most important goods in our lives – the things we tend to want most and that are good for us - requires us to have and to sustain over time relationships with others. We cannot achieve the highest goods alone. The first principle of human dignity therefore is relationship: the gift of it, the need for it, and the problems that accrue when we deny it, for ourselves or for others. This is a teaching with real edge for two reasons in the context of our discussions this evening. We live in societies that sell us daily the myth of self-dependency as the highest goal and that tend therefore not to value deep interdependence as the pathway towards social goods. Secondly, at the point in our lives when things fracture for us, our need for sustained relationship is greatest. The Christian tradition tells us we are built not for self-dependency but for healthy interdependency, and the more traumatic the

experiences we live through, the more this truth intensifies in its meaning. Christ comes in history, in his ministry in Galilee, into a fractured humanity and society to renew and restore that basic call: to recognise ourselves and others as persons, as events in relativity. Throughout the scripture poverty is presented as isolation, riches as relationship sustained and renewed.

The follow through on this first teaching on dignity, therefore, is that a society really committed to dignity upholds the basic need of the human being for healthy relationships, for lasting connection to others. All that isolates a human life, especially when that life has fractured in some way, pulls in the opposite direction to dignity.

Claim number 2: human dignity for a Christian is a double story line: it's about our origins and our 'ends' – where – or whom - we come from and where – whom - we are destined for. And that dual story line makes a difference.

The Jesuit theologian James Hanvey talks about Christian dignity having a dual storyline. First of all, human dignity is a story of our origins – the Book of Genesis tells us that we are made from the dust of the earth (humans from humus, the soil), fashioned in the image of God. We are dignified because we image God. This is good news because it means we can never completely erase our dignity. Our dignity is a gift in creation we don't own and didn't earn, so we cannot ever completely lose it. We can debase the gift, but it is renewed in us daily by the same reality that gives us new breath each day. So, that's it's beginning.

But there is also the story of where it 'ends'. The second storyline of dignity is where the story 'ends': the events of salvation and the promise of the Kingdom of God, towards which we are called to set our face. This means that there is a destination and a goal, not just a setting off point. This dual story line of beginning with the image of God and ending with a life of promise in the Kingdom means that dignity is both, for the Christian, something innate – from the beginning- and also something we become.

This means that dignity is a dynamic process we are invited to cooperate with in our lives, not just a status. It also means that a Christian account of dignity is anti-individualistic – our dignity is tied to relationships with others at both the beginning of the story and the end of the story. To understand how dignity works in our lives is to understand dignity as part of a process of social entrustment – in which my dignity is entrusted to you and vice versa. It is also true that at times in our lives when we can least see our own dignity others often have to carry that in trust for us and help us to re-receive it. The idea

that dignity is relational, and functions through entrustment requires us to rethink individualistic approaches to social policy and certainly to criminal justice.

Claim number 3: Because dignity is something social – it is understood not just as an idea or horizon but as something we do. Something we perform. Dignity requires performing into action in the key relationships and the social structures that shape our lives. This means, when those structures deny dignity, it becomes something we have to struggle for.

The black theologian Vincent Lloyd, who has written much on prison reform in the US, writes on the importance of the idea of human dignity to the civil rights movement, and most recently to Black Lives Matter. Drawing on the legacy of Martin Luther King Jnr. amongst others, Lloyd argues that the insight of Black Christians is that dignity is not just the goal of the struggle, but dignity is found IN the struggle against what is evil or unjust. The special insight of the black tradition is that with time frozen dignity can seem like status, but in the moment, in its natural habitat dignity 'names friction' – between the world as it is and the world as it can be. Dignity is something you do, a practice, a performance – that's what Lewis performed this evening – a way of engaging with the world. Dignity as struggle means that it becomes important to name dignity in the negative: to name what we know dignity is not. Lloyd notes, sometimes dignity then implies struggle on a grand scale, activism to change the system and to reject the accrued presence of social sin in our institutions, sometimes it is utterly personal and is the struggle just for survival. Both of these are dignified, the struggle to change institutions and the struggle for survival, both are what Lloyd calls 'dignity in motion'.

Each one of these three faces of dignity – as gift and relationship, as entrustment, as struggle, has been witnessed to in the conversation between Jamie and Lewis in the film we have watched this evening, and in Lewis' poem. But each of them also lays a fundamental challenge to the direction of travel of our current criminal justice system. In my final few minutes, I want to draw those connections out.

In 2004 the author of *A Place of Redemption* tells the story of Lord Ramsbottom, then Chief Inspector of Prisons, being handed a note by his wife as he struggled to deal with various complex questions about prison reform. She wrote down on a slip of paper -

- If prison worked there would be work or education for every prisoner
- If prison worked, we would be shutting prisons not opening more

- If prison worked, judges would not be seeing in the dock the same people over and over again
- If prison worked, we wouldn't be imprisoning more people than any other European country except Turkey
- If prison worked, fewer mothers would be in prison and fewer children would be in care
- If prison worked, we would be saving billions of pounds with fewer prisons, fewer care homes and fewer court cases.

That note was written in 2001. If we were to update this twenty years later, what would we, what would you, say now?

From an even cursory glance at the evidence, it is clear that all of the above remains true, and in addition we might add:

If society worked in the genuine interests of all, and human dignity of victim, person with convictions, families of both and society was taken seriously [that's the bit I'd add to the framing of the note above]

- the prison system would not disproportionately represent those who have lived in care,
- the prison system would not be used as a primary route to manage addiction or mental health challenges
- the prison population would not be disproportionately from black and ethnic minority communities (27% compared to 13% of population, 13% black to 3% of population)
- would not be the largest in western Europe
- would not be a primary tool of the management of borders and citizenship, holding increasing and disproportionate numbers of people with complicated immigration status
- would not be the site of an increasing prevalence of self-harm and suicide – self harm increasing most amongst women in the prison system

The trajectories that worried Lord Ramsbottom, and prompted his wife's stark note, have continued over the subsequent twenty years in largely the wrong direction: 47% of prisons are currently overcrowded according to the government's own research – that is 56 out of 117 institutions. Prison is also a context in which prisoners spend an increasing amount of time – 48% of those with convictions are serving sentences of 4 years or more. This trajectory towards more imprisonment, longer sentences and an ageing prison population (the current growth age group is the over 50's) has been our lived

reality as a society since the mid 1990's, and we are at risk of simply accepting it as a norm, yet it is a peculiarly British norm. Of course, none of this is to downplay the creativity of many staff and volunteers in the prison system – Jamie and Lewis both pay tribute to this. There is professional and voluntary work inside prisons that saves lives, restores elements of care and dignity some have never really had as part of their lives before. And prisoners save the lives of other prisoners too. But none of that is helped, or attached to, the conditions and factors we have just listed. In fact, each of those makes that caring work harder. And the pandemic has made all that harder still, the factors that have so affected the mental health of the general population have been experienced as absolute factors for people in prison – long confinement to cells, lack of visits and increased vulnerability to the spread of the virus. Covid-19 has been beyond testing for those staffing and living in prisons.

Pope Francis is very fond of using a viral metaphor, rarely misses the opportunity! He was doing it long before COVID hit, but he has used the pandemic to double down on his message: our social body is afflicted, not just with one respiratory virus but with multiple social viruses that affect the immune system of our societies – and nowhere is that more obvious than in the personal and institutional histories of our prisons. Speaking in 2019 he spoke of the indignity of an incarceration oriented society, he said ""Many times in a supposed search for good and for security, we seek the isolation and imprisonment of those who act against social norms," believing that locking them up is "the ultimate solution to the problems of community life."

In that way, he said, people think it "is justified that large amounts of public resources are destined to repress [those with convictions] instead of truly seeking to promote the integral development of people, which reduces the circumstances that favour committing illegal acts." "It is easier to repress than to educate and, I would say, it is more comfortable too," "Denying the injustice present in society is easier than offering equal development opportunities to all." That injustice is perpetuated by the lack of "resources to address the social, psychological and family problems experienced by detainees." Addressing the hopelessness endemic in prisons Francis said "You cannot talk about paying a debt to society from a jail cell without windows... there is no humane punishment without a horizon. No one can change their life if they don't see a horizon. And so many times we are used to blocking the view of our inmates... Take this image of the windows and the horizon and ensure that in your countries the prisons always have a window and

horizon; even a life sentence -- which for me is questionable -- even a life sentence would have to have a horizon”.

This too is a theme that A Place of Redemption touched on: what I will call this evening an inclusive, or integral, account of Christian justice as mutual dignity. Because the social reality of crime is complex - it is rooted in a fractured relationship of entrustment between society, victim, and person with convictions - so the concept of true justice that must accompany it is complex and multifaceted too. A Place of Redemption had its own way of trying to think about this. It noted: ‘true justice must produce a positive outcome for the victim, for society and for the [person with a conviction].’ That last bit is often still a socially unacceptable idea – that justice must be felt as a positive reality in the whole life of the person who becomes a prisoner, not just something that is due to the victim or society. The person with a conviction also remains at every point subject of justice not of mere punishment, from a Christian viewpoint as innately dignified beings the prisoner too stands in need of justice at every moment of their lives. Otherwise, society teaches the person with a conviction that injustice is met with injustice.

So, to finish where we began: a Christian understanding of dignity as rooted in teaching interdependence, relationship, entrustment, and struggle for the good, challenges the current criminal justice system at every level of its operation. From the neglected social factors that we know form a thread in the lives of many prisoners – from care deficit in early life, to addictions, to mental health problems, to insecure immigration status, to name but the most obvious – to the sentencing framework, and the practical details of how incarceration shapes daily lives. A system that prioritised maintaining healthy relationships with family and friends, productive skills development, and opportunities for productive use of time, enabled dignity in dwelling, reducing overcrowding could, with real imagination, move beyond a merely punitive approach. An integral approach to penal justice, aiming to mediate the fractured relationships that mark every level of the criminal justice system could revolutionise our peculiarly British problem. To reach that place, we need more than moralising and more than just individual policy fixes. We need both a better way of seeing rightly what we are currently doing, honestly measuring its moral performance, and much practical wisdom about how we form not just new structures and institutions but a different kind of public conversation and imagination. That is a taking on of responsibility that belongs not just to victim, person with a conviction or their families but to us all.