



PASTORAL LETTER FOR DAY OF PRAYER FOR PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES
SUNDAY 11TH OCTOBER 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

At this time each year, the Church in England and Wales invites us to pray for Prisoners and their families. This year, however, the invitation has a particular significance for our Diocese.

Over the last few months, many people will have experienced or are still experiencing a loss of personal freedom as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The day to day life we took for granted has been challenged. For prisoners, the 'lockdown' resulted in only the very basics being permitted: a shower, a phone call and a short amount of exercise. For the prisoner's family, lockdown meant limiting even more the small amount of contact they had with their loved ones.

In this Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus makes use of a parable to remind the people of Israel that they had begun to take for granted the freedom and generosity they had received in God's invitation to be his 'Chosen Race'. The reading invites us to reflect on the invitation which we too have received from the Lord, the blessings we have as children of God through our baptism, and the generous response we should make by helping those who are poor and in need.

In his teaching, Pope Francis often urges us to become a "*Church of the Poor*" and engage with those who are wounded in our world. At the start of his pontificate he said, "*I see clearly that the thing that the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful.*"¹ Similarly, he has said that "*An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people's lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.*"²

Becoming a 'Church of the Poor' in our society however involves careful and complex discernment of 'who are the poor and most marginalised?' together with courageous commitment. What is more, becoming involved with the most marginalised in our society may well lead to uncomfortable associations, unpopularity and general rejection. At the core of our Catholic faith though, is respect for the dignity of the human person; this demands that we value the lives of everyone. St Thomas Aquinas said that, "*We should despair of no man in this life, considering God's all-powerfulness and mercy.*"³ and pointed out that God discloses this foremost by saving people from despair.

¹ Interview with Fr Spadaro SJ, 'America', 30 September 2013

² Evangelium Gaudium, §24

³ Summa Theologica, II,II q14, a3)

As Christians, we cannot support a society that just locks away and abandons criminal offenders. A question the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales have consistently asked is *“are our prisons potential places of redemption, or rather human warehouses?”*. Can contact and support for offenders and for their victims be a practical pastoral means of implementing the Gospel mandate to *“release prisoners”*, and our criminal justice system be a structure which incorporates the Gospel imperatives of both *“justice and mercy”*⁴?

Over the past two years, Caritas Leeds has conducted an Inquiry which focused on this question; it aimed to raise awareness about the criminal justice system and explore different approaches to Restorative Justice. On Monday 19th October, I plan to join Mark Burns-Williamson, the West Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner in a virtual launch of the recommendations and resources⁵ resulting from the Inquiry. I hope and pray that this initiative will be used by the various members of our diocesan family to foster change and to address the challenges and possible injustices experienced by victims of crime, prisoners, ex-offenders and their families.

In your prayers this day, I ask you to remember in your intentions all who are in need of forgiveness, healing and mercy; that the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ will bring redemption, justice and mercy to our society and to our world.

✠ Marcus Stock
Bishop of Leeds

Given at Leeds on the 30th September 2020, to be read and made available in the churches and chapels of the Diocese on the 11th October 2020.

⁴ A Place of Redemption: A Christian approach to Punishment and Prison, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2004

⁵ The resources can be found at: www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/caritas/criminal-justice-forum

