

PRISON SUNDAY 2025

There's a nice link between last week's Harvest and today's start of 'Prisoners Week'. The lovely new autumn wools I showed off last week, have been given to our Mothers Union who in turn are going to knit something for our local prisoners in Hollesley Bay or Warren Hill. As one of the Chaplaincy team, Alison would, I know, like you all to have a closer look at her display in the west end of St Mary's to see if you may be able to support our local prisons in any way. Or, please just have a word with any of our Visitors team who regularly see and counsel individual prisoners, many of whom have no-one else to really 'open up' to.

You would also expect me to mention, I am sure, that hostages and prisoners are soon, we pray, to be set free in Gaza and Israel and will be returned to their loved ones. The sad irony seeing all the recent TV coverage of affluent Tel Aviv and a completely destroyed, unrecognisable Gaza city is indeed heart-breaking. The prophet Jeremiah in our equally dramatic first reading actually speaks to those in exile in Babylon from the comfort of Jerusalem. Still though, his words, his message, seem to echo down the ages - that everyone deserves a homeland:

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce...seek the welfare of the city...and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

For Jeremiah and any prophetic voice, it is the work of God to keep on praying certainly, but also to work for justice and righteousness, for peace between nations and food and shelter generously given to those victimised or imprisoned by unrighteous wars.

And today's Gospel is equally eirenic. It is the leprous Samaritan, the outsider and disenfranchised soul, who is the only one to give thanks for being healed, as he lies prostrate at the feet of Jesus.

It is a radical Gospel, is it not? Instead of calling out the prisoners or refugees and instead of throwing stones and insults, Jesus stands alongside them, listens to them, and heals them. It is this pattern which we must follow. It is this path which the governments of the world must build. And our cries really are for 'mercy' and not retribution, which is why St Augustine could pray: 'Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.'

So yes, I fervently believe we need Palestinian 'Kyries' and, Israeli ones. We need to sing Ukrainian ones and, Russian ones: to show our Christian bias for mercy and forgiveness, reconciliation and renewal. We don't want or need more golf courses when people don't even have their own beds or their own homes. We want and need justice and human dignity for all because, as the Samaritan understood best, life and health are precious gifts - so much so - that our faith leads us to understand and celebrate **all** human life as 'sacred'. We are

each made in the image and love of God. I even want to add today, 'the Bible tells us so' – time and time again!

I want to end on a more personal and hopeful note because all of us are affected daily by what we read or see in the news. Liz and I knew well the leader of Manchester City Council, Graham Stringer (because his Mum worshipped with us in Clayton where, the new Manchester City football stadium is). He later became MP for Crumpsall and so I sent him our love and prayers at this very tense time. He replied:

“Really good to hear from you, even in such distressing circumstances. Although the Jewish community expected an attack, it is still shocking when it happens. Within the Jewish community there is now a serious debate about whether they can be safe in this country. That is a shameful comment. I wasn't aware until after the murderous attack at the Heaton Park synagogue that this was the first murder of a Jew in England for being a Jew since Cromwell invited Jews back into this country in the middle of the 17th century. I agree with you that calming the debate and not using abusive terms would help enormously. Sadly, we have imported hate and violence from the Middle East. To end on a more positive note, at least today with the agreed return of the hostages, there is some hope of an immediate cessation of violence in Gaza.”

We have to keep on praying, dear brothers and sisters, that this will be so and that the candles we light will still burn bright for lasting peace and healing. AMEN.

