

Two Kinds of Prisons

Joseph E. McCormick

There are two kinds of prisons. One kind is built with concrete, steel, and razor wire. The other is built in the dungeons of our minds. It may be that none of us can escape from the 'solitary confinement' we've condemned ourselves to out of fear, pride, and social inertia. We construct actual prisons as bitterly as we construct our individual places of detention, building them on the ruins of other epochs, accepting as viable the failures of other societies, even other centuries. When everything else we have put our hands to fails to solve the problems of our individual and collective consciences, the limestone and steel cemented by our pitiless morality will remain as a monument to *compassion's* failure. The walls of Kingston Pen, the Maze, and Marion were built to keep in thieves, terrorists, rapists, and killers. But in our haste for *justice*, we have also jammed the cells with the lost, bewildered, and misfits whose major crime is not fitting in as a cog in our socio-economic wheel. We have condemned to prisons those whose speech, behaviour, and appearance have disturbed our sensibilities and those with whom we care not to deal.

How will history judge our society's fear of facing those who are odd, incompetent, or poor? How will God judge a nation that considers itself Christian but locks up the victims of sexual abuse, paternal abandonment, social neglect, human devaluation, and discrimination? How will we justify to our grandchildren that part of our population lives in destitution, disease, and detention so that others can indulge in conspicuous consumption? How do we rest with a conscience that rationalizes: "*He's only a native*" or, "*The homeless are the authors of their own misfortune.*" Perhaps, prisons have merely replaced 19th century work houses for the poor.

Symbolically, the barriers of prisons represent the impregnable security shields behind which much of society hides. We hire police, prosecutors, judges, prison guards, and parole boards to keep 'those people' out of our sight. We listened to the old Dylan ballad about the cutting down of George Jackson, but failed to understand the prophecy of his words: 'The whole world is one big prison yard, some of us are prisoners, the rest of us are guards.' We are too blind to see that social control of the under-class is an attitude emanating from the prisons of our minds. We secure ourselves in the counterfeit sanctuary of our own homes and careers, trusting that civil servants will guard us against our responsibility for living the spirit of the Gospels. The collective attitude perverts the beauty of Natural Justice to mean 'just-us.'

To ensure the privilege 'just-us' affords, we take counsel from accountants and tax lawyers, but shun the cry of a single mother being

evicted from a rat-infested slum. We sip coolers in posh vacation playgrounds and pretend we don't understand why someone would use or sell drugs. We place a dollar value on everything meaningful, then judge harshly anyone who seeks nefariously to buy security or respect. We continue systematically to ignore the long-term, cyclical effects of family violence, incest, and dysfunction – despite knowing the socially crippling consequences. As urgent as environmental issues are, we are blind to an equally dire problem of social ecology. Selfishness is decaying western culture.

Perhaps every school and university should have a required course in prison ethics. If we intend to continue needlessly locking up the non-violent nuisances in our society, we might as well teach young people how to do it right. We may want to officially sanction our own version of apartheid; bring it out of the closet and practise it openly instead of hiding behind the pretensions of middle-class hypocrisy.

With all our boasted reforms, pretensions of social change, and far-reaching technological advancements, we still allow human beings to be the scapegoats for our guilt-ridden consciences. As long as a powerless and voiceless 'cannon fodder' is available, we will have backs to stand on to elevate our misguided sense of self-worth. Ten, fifteen, twenty-five year sentences are handed out in our courts like vitamins. We condemn the victims of our materialistic folly to hell-holes named Millhaven, Stony Mountain, and Archambault. In an effort to promote the modern advancements in penology, we have replaced hard labour and corporal punishment with warehousing, inordinate sentences, and psychological labeling. Degradation and cruelty have not ceased, they have just been disguised. So we lock up, pervert, and turn bitter our social blemishes so that society may be *protected* from the phantoms of its own making.

Junk-yard dogs that are chained and abused never get turned into household pets. Puppies, like human babies, are not born mean, they are made that way. Our obsession with punishment has perverted discipline and correction into 'cur' factories. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (April 26, 1944)¹ wrote:

This is my second spring in prison, but it's very different from last year's. Then all my impressions were fresh and vivid, and privations and pleasures were felt more keenly. Since then something has happened to me which I would never have thought possible – I've got used to things; and the only question is which has been greater, the growth of insensitivity or the clarification of experience?

Prison, a social protection? What deluded mind ever conceived such a notion? Just as well believe that Mother Earth can be restored by widespread pollution. We have institutionalized abuse to teach people that abuse is wrong. It is as naively ignorant as believing that more law enforcement and prison cells will win the war on drugs. The penal system is such a failure it can't even control drug abuse within its own walls.

There is a curious ambivalence of guilt feelings that most prisoners surely experience. It is easy to accept the notion that they are paying for some kind of grave misdeed, and in so doing will discharge an obligation to society. But as time progresses, we are awakened to an understanding that the government actually *believes* it has the right to examine and judge individual moral conscience and detain prisoners accordingly. Acts of commission land offenders in prison. Prison mindsets keep them there long after parole eligibility dates have passed. Imprisonment for punishment is one thing; imprisonment for values and beliefs is quite another. What indignation a prisoner may feel towards prison practices is usually not that of an innocent martyr, but rather that of the guilty who feels his or her punishment grossly exceeds just deserts and is being inflicted by those *who themselves are not blameless*.

Modern society has abdicated the duty of justice to bureaucratic machinery in the mistaken belief that the state can better and more appropriately carry out the mandate of Natural Justice. It metes out 'just-us' based on class hegemony, wealth, and power. The state punishes crimes against institutional property with particular vengeance, because we value money over human life and dignity. It exonerates corporate crime, while condemning powerless individuals to years of despair. It discriminates against women and Native Peoples, while granting male white-collar criminals virtual licences to exploit and profit from the distress of the voiceless. It punishes the addicted for having a recognized disease. We rely totally on the decisions of a professional class, whose vested interest in 'just-us' is building a self-perpetuating industry.

The 'majesty of the law' is a reasoning thing; it ought not to stoop to the primitive instinct of vengeance. Its mission is of a *higher* nature. True, it is still steeped in a theological muddle, which proclaims punishment as a means of purification or the virtuous atonement for sin. Perversion of Justice (as clearly defined in the Beatitudes), in favour of a prison mindset is a pernicious cancer that is the antithesis of a compassionate, just society.

Is prison abolition the answer? Reality dictates that it is not. There is a proportion of offenders from whom society must be protected. Prison is effective in its safeguard role. Beyond that limited mandate, prison is merely a school graduating embittered, dysfunctional misfits. It neither corrects nor appropriately punishes. It has little, if any, deterrent value. Less costly, more effective, pro-social alternatives for dealing with criminal behaviours exist, but until society collectively becomes accountable for its own problems, we are destined to remain in the dark ages. Legally and socially, prisons of both kinds inflict more than punishment on the offender. They have a profoundly damaging effect on all citizens.

NOTES

- 1 Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and teacher, was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis for participation in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler.