

Column

Prisons can be dark and lonely places, especially for those who have little hope of ever being a free man or woman again.

While preparing for the ordained ministry, I did clinical-pastoral training in a prison for the criminally insane in another state. One of my most vivid memories is that of special cells for violent women inmates. These women were so savage that their food had to be inserted through openings at the base of the doors and the cells had to be hosed down from without. Screeches as coming from the possessed came from those cells.

These memories were brought back several weeks ago when a friend told me he had taken a new job in the medical department of a prison for woman. Many of the inmates in this facility are there for murder, with the victims often being husbands or boyfriends.

As my friend is a committed Christian, I asked him: What are you doing to bring light into this

place? His response was revealing. He said that the best he could do at the present was to acknowledge their humanity.

He went on to explain that the chief way he did this was to call them by their names. Officially, this practice was discouraged, with numbers often replacing names with the incarcerated. Nevertheless, that was the path he had chosen.

Adopting this practice does not take a lot of Christianity, nor does it indicate that a person has gone ‘soft on crime’. Rather it flows from a biblical understanding of the dignity of the human person. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them,” says Genesis 1:27.

Treating a person with dignity and respect, even one who has committed a heinous crime, affirms this Biblical principle and is this medical worker’s way of letting light into a place of darkness. As time moves along and more opportunities present themselves, he hopes to be able to witness even

more boldly to Christ who is the light of the world, but this is where he is beginning.

Surely, what this man is doing – brightening the corner where he is -- is what we all should be doing. After all, the Bible not only affirms that all people bear the image of God but that this image has been marred and defaced. Sin (man's rebellion against his Creator) has done its worst. The whole human race stands in the dock, condemned and guilty. Hence, it is not just those who are in a state prison who live in darkness and in need of light. It's the whole human race.

People of faith, moreover, have no reason to feel superior or self-congratulatory. They, too, are part of Adam's rebel race. The prison of sin, illusion and self-deception is their natural home. What has made the difference is Christ. "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord," says Paul in Ephesians 5:8.

The situation in which Christians find themselves might be compared with two men who meet walking along a dark roadway at night. Both

have had their cars break down. One has a flashlight; the other has none and is stumbling in and out of ditches. The man with the light shines it forward for himself as well as for the man that has none. So, it is with Christians sharing the Gospel. My friend working in a state prison is attempting to do no more, no less.

What about you? What about me? Are our flashlights on and shining? If so, are we sharing our light in whatever place God has placed us?

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick [living] and dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

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