

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – WEDNESDAY, 11TH SEPTEMBER 2024
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Good morning.

Good morning. The way we treat people in prison is a central theme in Christianity. When Jesus identifies himself with the most marginalised and suffering people in society, he tells his followers, “I was in prison and you visited me.” Elsewhere, he repeats the words of the prophet Isaiah, saying that he has been sent to preach the good news to the poor and to set the captives free.

Such teachings are often spiritualised so that they lose their radical edge and become domesticated, but this week that theme of liberty for captives is an urgent social challenge. An estimated 1700 prisoners are being released early in England and Wales to free up space in the overcrowded prison system. This will have an impact on many lives and communities. Some of those being released will have mental health struggles, exacerbated by having been confined in an often chaotic and dangerous environment. Many will find themselves homeless, without jobs or incomes, vulnerable to exploitation. Though violent offenders will not be released, victims of crime and their loved ones may be retraumatised by the knowledge that their attackers are free.

But the challenge of responding to the needs and anxieties of those released from prison and their victims is the tip of the iceberg, for the crisis in the criminal justice system is symptomatic of a deeper social malaise. A quote attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky observes that “A society should not be judged by how it treats its outstanding citizens but by how it treats its criminals.” People who commit crimes often have a history of poverty, neglect and social exclusion. It’s not surprising that many who grew up feeling abandoned by society can have little sense of responsibility to others. A recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research says that children from low-income backgrounds and from some ethnic minorities, and those with special needs or mental health issues, are disproportionately excluded from school. Such early experiences of rejection can become a breeding ground for feelings of alienation and rage, expressed in criminal acts.

Of course, many people overcome painful childhoods to become good citizens and high achievers, but the Christian faith is a call to be attentive to those on the margins. The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts the early Christian community to “remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” I wonder how many Christian preachers this Sunday will dare to preach such a radical message to their congregations.