

## LOOKING AT THE HEART

### Thoughts on Leadership from a Prison Perspective

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What you and I see on the outside and what God sees on the inside may be two different things. Samuel and Jesse didn't see why they should be troubled with looking for the youngest of Jesse's sons if the older were not fit for God's purpose, but whilst 'Man looks on outward appearance... God looks at the heart' said the Lord (1 Samuel 16:7). Unformed and young as he was, David was God's man.

Many of us will know David as the king with flaws, who nevertheless was a man 'after God's own heart' (Acts 13:22). Somehow, God was still able to work through him.

Yet what of the criminal/congregation member/neighbour whose life seems to have the stamp of 'danger - hazardous contents' all over the package? Are we ready to look at the heart and see how God may be able to work in the life of this man or woman?

If we're not, are we in danger of treating some human beings as worthy of God's grace and others as not? Do we reinstate a doctrine of 'salvation by works' as we look at people who we assume can't change or are not worth our efforts?

The longer I work in a prison, the more stories I hear about childhoods with parents who couldn't care because of their own drug- or alcohol-based lives; about people who grew up being expected to fail, and expected to thieve to earn a place in the gang where they could belong. For many, it's all they've ever known. Hardly a surprise that they end up sliding into a precarious and chaotic lifestyle for themselves and see prison as an occupational hazard.

Then there are the others who got mixed up in fights and crime because they were soft targets and now are paying the price. Occasionally I meet someone who has held down a well-paid job but succumbed to the lure of wealth from dodgy dealings and is continuing their Open University degree in jail, with the mantle of shame on their shoulders. Not all prisoners are ill-educated.

Amongst all these people are common themes, with one above them all; a need to believe they are loved for who they

are. They have wanted to please parents who cared little; they have wanted to achieve success, whether by the accumulation of wealth or the heroic, well planned robbery. They have wanted the distinction of belonging to a group, even if it involved crime leading to violence; they have wanted relief from boredom.

So they are like many of the rest of us, aren't they? They have hearts that I think God sees even if I do not look beyond the surface.

Don't get me wrong; they owe a debt and have caused untold misery and fear amongst their many victims. But they still need a message of grace.



So our Bible studies in the chaplaincy are engaging. Men take part in thinking about justice and they respond to messages about the loving nature of God who will never leave or forsake.

There is a need for repentance to be preached, of course. What we have to do is recognise the right balance.

When you feel condemned already – be it by a judge in a court of law or by being unable to manage your job as well as your family, or by not rising to the standards your parents expected of you, or by letting temptation bring you down to some action that everyone else says is the height of sinfulness – the last thing you need is to feel you may not be good enough to receive mercy and love.

A surprising element of my work here has also been the way the men have ministered to me, by being themselves. When we are humble enough to believe that all people can be our teachers, our character can be shaped by those over whom we thought we needed to be in authority or control.

I have been gifted by men here. I have been shaped. I've had to learn

to analyse my own attitudes to criminals; I've had to recognise a need to be vulnerable if I'm to show these men that they may help me and that there is pleasure in kindness, generosity and selflessness.

So how does this rather specific setting speak to the issues of leadership with which we all have to deal as Christian leaders? An illustration from our chapel carol service may help.

S had told me that he wanted to sing 'Feed the World' at the service. 'I've got the words by heart' he had said 'and I can do it unaccompanied'. I computed the number of ways in which this could go badly wrong and mentally made a note to check the words and find a recording to play as a backing track.

S almost bottled out. He has a spinal problem which makes standing and walking hard. It needed the cooperation of an officer to escort him a different route from the others, using his walking frame, but he made it.

We worked our way through the service, in which the men had clapped enthusiastically for those

who had read the Bible, some well and some less distinctly, in front of their peers, staff and community visitors. We'd heard the Bishop speak and I'd been struck by the hefty male singing of the carols. Our new governor, after his Bible reading, had remarked that he felt he should be named 'Quirinius' from now on (think about it). It had been a different kind of event from my average church-based pre-Christmas event.

So we moved towards the conclusion. S stood, shaking with the effort of standing still. He sang. Every word was perfect, every ear was listening to him. Some voices joined in near the end. And at the end there was great applause and some tears. To me it was what Christmas is about – the grace of a God who comes to encourage the hearts of those who have fallen but are not without the image of God within them.

The most important comment amongst the general thanks at the end was from someone who talked about the need to be 'sensitive to the real-time moods of the congregation'.

That's so true. We're real people. In front of us in church will be people who are happy, sad, lively, talkative,





bored, depressed, wanting action, feeling flat. Our carefully planned liturgies or sermons don't always connect as we'd like with the real-time moods. Yet Jesus came to set us free, whether we have a prisoner number or not, and to lift our eyes upwards to new possibilities, wherever we may be.

For the non-residents at that carol service, including myself, it seemed we were confronted by all the mess of humanity and all the potential for great good and great sin; for success, achievement, failure, weakness, hurt, disappointment, vulnerability and love. And God refuses to give up on them.

After all, God looks on the inside, and when we look harder and love a little more, it may just be that we'll see the inside as well, and find someone God wants to use for his purposes in the future.

**FOR REFLECTION**

1. What practical things can we do to help us remember to look below the surface for the image of God in each person?
2. How can we be sure, as leaders, that we allow others to minister to us?
3. When we see the flicker of talent in someone, how can we encourage and reward it, when others may feel that it should remain hidden?
4. How can we better design our church services to allow for connection with 'the real-time moods of the congregation'?

