



Letters from Prison

As a newly ordained pastor in the late 1980s, I had the opportunity to visit a young man whose mistaken actions had landed him in the country jail, a prelude to his conviction and sentence to a lengthy prison term. It was very clear that he was a very troubled young man, and, as might be expected, he was deeply afraid of what lay before him. As we talked, I did my best to witness to him of God's enduring love and forgiveness for him; I gave him a Bible and a catechism and other materials that I thought might be of use to him. Although we did stay in touch for a while after he was sent to prison, eventually I lost track of him as he moved through the prison system.

But two elements of this experience have vividly stayed in my consciousness over the intervening decades. The first element was the enormous unease of being shut in a prison, if only for very brief periods of time. In those hour-long visitations, I was shut into a room in the jail with this young man, behind bars and locked doors, and although I knew rationally that I could leave that situation at any time, the experience was deeply disorienting. Being thus confined engendered a feeling of immense claustrophobia and loss of control. Though experiencing only a tiny slice of what the prisoners themselves were dealing with, it made a large and lasting impression on me.

The other element of this experience was in some way to understand and feel the absolute fear that pervaded the whole system, from the inmates to the guards, and by extension to the rest of society. Certainly the fear of those confined was the primary and overwhelming aura, but there was fear among those who dealt with these inmates. I confess to a deep feeling of fear in this experience, and especially a fear of being trapped in a similar situation. For those of us in the wider society, these places are even fear-provoking in their outward appearances, places that "good" people should steer clear of.

And yet, as the Bible witnesses to us, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). Out of these fear-filled places can at times come words, written by thoughtful people, who cast off the fear of prison and shone the light on

our world and our God. Letters from prison are a classic genre that has produced timeless works, from the prison letters of the apostle Paul, to contemporary classics such as those by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr, and others. To these people, the experience of imprisonment often paradoxically freed them from fear and moved them toward a renewed understanding of the work of God, and of God's people, in this world. Having been stripped of what most of us find essential and dear (not least of which is our freedom), they came to find the type of freedom given by God, which no earthly power could take from them. The irony here of those who are truly free and those who hang on to their illusions of false freedom is palpable, and instructive. This is why we listen to their words.

It is also important to remember those who are still physically imprisoned, not only by the actions of the state, but also by their fears and regrets, hardened by the system of incarceration. Of all people who need to hear of the forgiveness and freedom of the gospel, they are at the top of the list. The New Testament enjoins believers to regularly visit those who are in prison, and yet often our fear holds us back from this. Prisoners, too, have voices, voices of pain and anger and fear, but still the voices of human beings. Perhaps many of them deserve to be where they are, but this does not remove the fact that they too are children of our God and ones for whom Christ also died. If God graciously has not given up on us, it is incumbent on us not to give up on them.

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Editors' note: Some of you will notice that this issue of *Word & World* is out to you rather later than our usual quarterly schedule would dictate. There were some significant production challenges to this particular issue. We ask for your forbearance, and we will endeavor to have the next issue out on our regular schedule.