

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



HM Courts of Justice Service

Sunday 17 March 2024

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Sermon by James Timpson OBE DL, Chair of the Prison Reform Trust

A year before I was handed the keys to run our family business, I decided to go and look what successful businesses around the world really did. I visited fellow retailers, manufacturers, IT and hospitality companies. The good and the not so good. What was crystal clear was the best companies just did two things very well. They trusted their people and they were kind to them.

My job since then, with a few bumps in the road over 22 years, has been pretty straightforward, because I've just tried to trust people and be kind to them. In fact, the more I've trusted people and found more ways to be kind to them, the better we've done.

Trusting people to make decisions in theory is quite straightforward, but many organizations struggle to loosen the reins, not least in the public sector. The hard part is instilling a culture of kindness. Ethical, kind capitalism can be a very positive force in society, and also in a business, and as I've since learnt, in our prisons.

I interpret kindness in our business in three ways.

Firstly, we trust everyone to make decisions based on their own judgment of what is right and what is wrong.

Secondly we recruit like-minded people (hopefully with a big personality), who don't really want to work in an organization where they're told what to do all the time.

And finally we lead with love and kindness.

You won't find many businesses using the word "love", but I feel it's commercially very powerful to run a business with genuine love for your colleagues. Our leaders are not incentivized through profit, but by how kind they are. What we find is the best leaders aren't pushovers, but they care for their colleagues as equals, and they spend time really getting to know them. And when I say know them, I mean know their children's names, their hobbies, where they last went on holiday, and the football team they support. The more you know an individual, the more you can help them flourish.

Some may see this unusual strategy as being impossible to replicate in the public sector. Those who work in public service are employed by the civil service. There's a clue in both those names, and it's the word "service". Providing a service to fellow citizens is a privilege, and when done well has a profound impact on individuals, and wider society. When the public sector dovetails with volunteers, businesses and educators, with a simple vision and plan, amazing things can happen, and happen quickly. Just look at when Covid arrived, and London hosted the 2012 Olympics. We

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didn't see silo working, or inward looking organizations focused on their internal political problems, but a large group of inspired people, focused on providing an amazing service, alongside bucket loads of kindness, fun and goodwill.

My first real experience of kindness in life was probably when I was 9 years old. I came down for breakfast one morning to be greeted by two younger boys, Simon and Shaun, sitting at the kitchen table, wearing my clothes. They'd arrived overnight because their parents had gone to prison, and they'd been put into care. They were our families first foster children.

It was a shock for us all, especially when five month old triplets arrived soon afterwards. We welcomed into our home children who are clearly very damaged, in fact most of the 97 foster children we cared for were damaged, but all had potential. We used to have a sign in the fridge warning us not to mix up the methadone with the Calpol. The Calpol was for us, and a methadone for the babies weaning off the heroin their mums have been taking.

My first memory of Prison was sitting outside Styal women's prison, waiting for my mum to come back from a visit with a couple of babies who were in her care. Ever since then, I've been interested in what goes on behind the walls, and I've come to learn that caring for foster children in some ways isn't very different than caring for offenders. Not surprisingly they're often the same people, just later on in their dysfunctional, damaged lives.

I had to wait a long time to finally get to look within the walls, and to see a prison for myself. 22 years ago I was introduced to a young man called Matthew, who was experiencing his first time in custody at Thorn Cross, an open Prison not far from where we live in Warrington. As Matthew gave me a tour of the prison, it was clear to me that his personality was exactly what we want in the business.

We look for people who are fun, interesting, sparky, charismatic, and kind. Mathew had all these traits and more. So I offered him a job, and since then we have welcomed hundreds of exoffenders into our business. I'm proud to say the one in nine of my colleagues we first met in prison, in fact, many are still inside, but are released every day to work in our shops, offices, and factories. Our statistics show that those we recruit from Prison are more likely to stay with us, get promoted faster, and are more honest than those we recruit from more conventional ways.

We don't recruit them because we are kind, we recruit them because they are excellent. They may have failed society, but society has often failed them too. They seem to flourish in an environment where they feel valued, trusted and loved. For many is the first time they've genuinely had a voice.

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When they walk out of the prison gate, they're just like you and I, individuals trying to make a go of life, make the families proud, and find love and meaning from relationships.

But the barriers are already stacked against them, getting a place to live and a job are just the first stages of rehabilitation. But there is hope. Despite ever increasing prison sentences, employment outcomes on release have more than tripled over the last four years to 34%, not least down to great work of our Employment Advisory Boards, and their Chairs who have done an amazing job and transforming the culture of employment in prisons. In fact, we have some of my Employment Advisory Board Chair colleagues here today. I take my hat off to you for the remarkable turnaround you have instigated in our prisons, and the hope you have given to so many.

Maybe if there was more kindness in our society, we would have fewer offenders, fewer victims, fewer courts and even fewer judges? There is no reason kindness could not be reflected more deeply in our justice system.

When we reflect on how we punish, do we look if we punish with kindness in mind? Is it in the best interest of victims that we sentence people to what most other countries consider excessive periods behind bars? Is it kind to direct a judge to send young men to prison for longer than they've been alive? Is it kind to separate a mother from her children for the nonpayment of fines, or is it kind to send someone to prison for working diligently at the Post Office?

I'm not naïve. There are many people today who really should be in prison. The kindest thing for them, and society, is to keep them there until they are rehabilitated. The excellent staff in our prisons know how to best help them serve their sentences, focusing on overcoming complex mental health, drug, attachment, and behavioral issues.

Prison and justice gets under your skin. It certainly has with me. I've been fortunate to visit prisons in many other countries, to see where we can learn our lessons, and help more people more often.

The best examples of a perfect prison can be found in Norway, and the most remarkable justice system I've seen is in the Netherlands. Here they have closed over 23 prisons because they don't have enough people to live in them. It is not because the Dutch are inherently less criminal than here in the UK, it's that the State has chosen to punish them differently. Rather than incarcerating offenders and keeping them away from Society, more and more sentences are carried out within the community, so people can keep their jobs and read their kids bedtime stories. Not surprisingly, the more this is done the less reoffending is seen.

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The Dutch have done something that we often struggle to do here. They simply follow the evidence rather than following the sentiment. In the UK, it seems we are addicted to punishment, despite all the evidence around the world showing that longer sentences don't reduce the amount of crime committed. We also conveniently forget that most punishment is directed almost exclusively at people who are in poverty.

I recently visited Ashworth Hospital in Merseyside, where we hold the most dangerous, most complex people in our society. The level of compassion and kindness I witness by the staff reinforced my enthusiasm for giving hope to everyone in prison. One example of this is over last 2 years the staff have never had to restrain a single patient. At some point 99.9% of those locked up today will be released. There are our loved ones, neighbours and colleagues of the future.

While offenders need to be rehabilitated, they also need hope. 18 months ago Bishop James Jones, a previous Bishop of Prisons, led an independent commission into the experience of victims and long-term prisoners for the Prison Reform Trust, a charity I'm fortunate to Chair. It became known as the "Hope Commission" and focused on both victims feeling justice is done, and offenders, especially those who serve very long sentences, have hope for a second chance in life. If offenders have hope, they will, alongside their families, have a much greater chance of contributing to a society they once harmed.

Imagine if all of us here today had to spend the next five years together, in this wonderful building. The doors are locked, our families come to visit once or twice a month, and we have 23 hours a day alone in our cells. Oh yes, and the food isn't great either.

The best way for us to leave in five years time, ready for life on the outside, with our heads held high, is by being kind to each other, and not forgetting to be kind to ourselves, too.