

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Trinity 18 / Prisons Week
19 October 2025
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Sermon by The Venerable James Ridge

It's a real privilege to be here this morning, I'm grateful to the Dean and to the Canon Precentor for their invitation and for the warm welcome I have received.

I speak to you at the end of a week where Christians of all denominations across England and Wales have been focussing on our Criminal Justice system. As Chaplain General and Archdeacon to Prisons since 2018 I lead Prison Chaplaincy across England and Wales and the British Overseas Territories. In terms of numbers in England and Wales that means I am responsible for the ministry of around 1300 Chaplains of 23 different Faith and Belief traditions in 123 prisons, 96 probation delivery units, a Secure Training Centre, a Secure School and eight Secure Children's Homes across the two nations. Chaplains look after around 88,500 men, women and children in these establishments, and around 120,000 on probation in the community along with staff, relatives of prisoners, visitors and others with whom we come into contact.

This Sunday is at the end of Prisons Week which began in 1975 as a Christian response to the growing awareness of the needs of prisoners and their families. What started as a single day of prayer has grown into a national week of reflection, prayer, and action across denominations. It invites churches and communities to remember those affected by the criminal justice system—prisoners, victims, families, prison staff, and chaplains. Rooted in Christ's call in Matthew 25 to visit those in prison, Prisons Week reminds us that no one is beyond hope, and that redemption, restoration, and reconciliation are at the heart of the Gospel.

But if you haven't been following Prisons Week, do not despair, the details on the Prisons Week website – prisonsworld.org will be there for some time to come and a daily prayer guide can be used at any time.

This year's topic comes from the second Epistle to Timothy in which we are told "the word of God is not chained". Written at a time when Paul was literally chained whilst in prison under Nero's persecution, this declaration that the word of God remains free is all the more powerful.

As a Chaplain in various prisons over the years I often found myself accompanying people on a visit to a prison for the first time. They would come in with no small amount of fear and trepidation, not sure what they were about to find – would they encounter people in

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manacles, perhaps chained to walls or held in irons? What they discovered sometimes came as a shock – an environment in which people moved around relatively freely within certain parameters, where the atmosphere was good humoured, polite and at times light-hearted.

But of course the chains are there. They're just not physical. People are constrained by the chains of guilt and grief and despair. It is the lack of any sort of self-worth, any kind of humanity which chains people just as much as the physical chains they might have imagined before they went in.

Prison strips people of dignity and hope. And you might be sitting there thinking “Good, that’s what they deserve if they’ve committed a crime. Why not focus on the victims?” And I understand, really I do. It’s absolutely vital that we support victims of crime and Prisons Week includes them as well, but we cannot solve the problem of crime by simply locking more people up – we’ve been trying that for decades and it simply doesn’t work.

We need good people in every aspect of the criminal justice system, and as a Church we must pray for them all, not just this week, but all the time. But I am a Prison Chaplain, a leader of Prison Chaplains and this is the part of the system that I am involved in.

But we all of us ask ourselves “What is Justice” and “Am I just?”. Our Gospel reading from Luke’s Gospel gives us the example of a judge who is very definitely not just, neither fearing God nor having respect for people, ignoring initially the cries of a poor widow. But the grace of God works through the cries of his beleaguered servant and justice is done in spite of the unjust judge’s worst intentions.

As Prison Chaplains we seek to be agents of God’s justice in a system which is often unjust, agents of God’s compassion in an often uncaring environment, agents of hope in a system which often feels hopeless.

The Prison Chaplain can be many things:

Mentor, Parent, Preacher, Teacher, Enforcer, Diplomat, Mediator, Reformer, Administrator, Guardian of decency, Gap filler, Oil in the machine, Conscience of the establishment but perhaps above all things we seek to be an agent of hope.

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In a system which is, or seems to be, designed to dehumanise – in surroundings which are at best stark and institutional and at worst degrading and indecent, to have hope, to promote hope seems to be open rebellion against the system.

At times, when I think of the role of the Chaplain as agent of hope I'm reminded of Markus Zusak's novel 'The Book Thief'. Set in a fictional town in Germany during World War II, against a bleak background of greyness and despair, Liesel Meminger and her friend Rudy Steiner live out a relatively normal childhood against a background of militarised oppression and the gradual breakdown of society.

Despite of the horrors that they face on an almost daily basis, the innocence of childhood shines through.

Frequently their exploits lead them to helpless laughter which nearly always draws incredulity or even criticism. "How can you laugh in a place like this?"

The Chaplain as an agent of hope is likely to draw a very similar reaction from both staff and prisoners – how can you be hopeful in a place like this?

How can you still cling on to hope when you've seen what we've seen, when you've walked where we've walked, when you've met the people we've met? How can you still encourage others to be hopeful?

In this environment where despair and despondency are prevalent, hope is wonderfully, gloriously offensive.

It goes against the grain.

It might make us targets for ridicule, risk us being dismissed for being irrelevant at best and lunatics at worst, but it can also make us, and the message we proclaim deeply attractive.

Here is hope which can survive the darkest of times, the most depressing of places. Here is a living hope for all, no matter who you are, what your past or your current situation, here is a hope which will not bow to the spirit of the age or to the counsel of despair which is spread by so many.

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Here is a hope which will enable people to discover their best selves, the person that God created them to be. That person deep down inside them which is made in the image of God, capable of empathy, capable of relationship, capable of loving themselves and others.

And it makes sense for all of us. It is such a person, with a new hope and a new humanity who is more likely to make a success of life on the outside, who is more likely to contribute to a society in which we can all live and flourish.

So I invite you at the end of this Prisons Week to hold prisons and those who encounter them in any way in your heart and in your prayers. Take the time to pray, to make people aware of our criminal justice system, of prisons and those who live and work within them, for those who suffer as a result of being victims of crime, and for all whose lives are shaped by crime and imprisonment.

Here in Suffolk are three prisons HMPs Highpoint, Hollesley Bay and Warren Hill. It's a privilege to be here in the Cathedral this morning with some of their staff, Chaplains and indeed some of the prisoners. They will be around after the service if you would like to talk to them. Please pray for them and for those they represent - the Chaplaincy Teams, Governors, staff and prisoners and if you've ever thought that you might have the slightest inclination towards prison ministry or would just like to know some more, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

May God bless you in this coming week as you reflect on all you have heard and experienced today, may you be filled with the hope which a life lived in God's presence gives and may that hope in you transform the lives of those around you.