

THE PRISON SYSTEM

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"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

A friend of mine caught a burglar the other day. It was absolutely red-handed. The chap didn't know that my friend was at home, and he began to break into the house. A quick phone call to the police, and one rather astonished thief was hustled away. But where will he go? What will happen to him now?

I suppose that he will be sent to prison, and it is right that a person who breaks the law should be punished. Burglary causes loss and inconvenience to the ordinary citizen; it often causes considerable distress and suffering as well. A woman I knew could not bear to be left alone in the evening again after her house had been burgled. So, off to gaol goes the thief - but that's not the end of the matter, for as one writer has recently asked 'who dare be happy with Australian prisons, as they are?'

One problem is that they do not reform their inmates. Some years ago the N.S.W. prisons department became the 'Department of Corrective Services', but the change of title only serves to mock the well-intentioned efforts of those who have tried to rehabilitate prisoners. The author I have just quoted, Dr. John Cleveley of the University of Sydney, speaks of 'this squalid, never-ending ritual of release, wrongdoing and recommital', and describes the prison system as a 'vigorously industry employing police, lawyers, judges, prison and welfare officers, builders and fencers ... one of our very few growth industries' (S.M.H. 10/5/80)

I am not sure that the focus should be on correction of the offender; but I am sure that there is a crying need for strict justice within the prison system itself. If we are going to

persist with this method of punishing offenders, the whole community must be alert to the dangers of abuse and brutality. The captive person is in our hands, and although punishment is justified, that punishment must never exceed what is appropriate for his crime. Locking a person away is punishment in itself; subjecting him to brutal treatment and depriving him of human rights is the vengeance of a sick and uncaring society.

I have never visited a prison; I do know that the task of those who work in prisons is exceedingly difficult. Prison administrators and officers need our support and encouragement. They represent us; we must not despise what they do. But we must insist that our prisons exhibit justice and humanity in their construction and in their administration. Prison reform is much spoken of these days, and certain well publicised events have drawn public attention to the whole matter. This is all to the good, as long as it is accompanied by a demand for justice and compassion for those whom we have in our power. If we do demand these things, we must be prepared as taxpayers to foot the bill. An over-crowded and cruel prison is a standing rebuke to the society which allows it to exist.

One final word on this subject. Prison officers, like policemen and soldiers have great responsibility because they exercise power over people in private. But these men and women are just like us - they feel the same burdens and have the same sins. If we want these public servants to be upright, uncorrupt, compassionate and just, we must have exactly the same standards ourselves, especially in family life. These are Christian virtues. When families become spawning grounds for greed and unhappiness, when families actually teach the vices of self-indulgence, envy and selfishness, then these horrors will be reflected in our public servants. The place for prison reform to start is with us, in our own homes.

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