

This Sunday is 'Prisoners Sunday' and it is the start of 'Prisoners Week'. It's all too easy to be judgemental about being in prison: our first thought is that wouldn't *be* there if they hadn't done something wrong; but this isn't necessarily the case. A surprising number of prisoners should be in psychiatric care rather than behind bars. Besides, it's often only a matter of degree: if thinking badly of someone was a crime, how many of us would still be free?

For us, crime and punishment belong together – like bread and butter. When something goes wrong in our life or some trouble comes our way, we can't help feeling that we're being punished: 'What have I done now? What did I do to deserve this?' This feeling runs deep in us, but it's completely untrue. It's also sometimes hard to believe that God doesn't get angry - but he doesn't. Human beings get angry, but God isn't a human being. When we look at the terrible things that go on in our world, we think that God *must* be angry, that he *has* to be, *ought* to be angry – but he isn't. If, for us, crime and punishment go together, for God it's crime and mercy. In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich says: "And when I looked, I saw that there was no anger in the divine nature; rather, the anger is all in ourselves." The charm of this is Julian's complete surprise that it should be so.

We may not be behind bars, but we can still be a prisoner in many other ways. In the gospel of John, Jesus says: "I tell you truly, whoever sins, is a slave to sin." (8:34). Which means a prisoner of sin. Our hearts can be prisoners of fear or hatred or resentment; our minds can be enchained by anxiety or obsession; our bodies can be entrapped by illness or addiction

to drugs. A whole generation has lost its soul to the enslaving power of social media. But the biggest prison of all – the deepest and darkest dungeon we find ourselves in – is the three words ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’. And everything that these three words imply: separation, division, exclusion, aggression, conflict. The purpose of every great world religion – including Christianity and, for us above all, the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ – is to help us free ourselves from the tyranny of ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’. The great Persian mystic Jalal Rumi said a number of things about these three words, but for me these are the most beautiful:

“Why are you still sitting in your prison cell? The door is wide open.”

“How astonishing it is to see a soul languishing in prison, with the key in its hand.’

And finally:

“I long to escape from the prison of myself and be lost in you, O Lord.”