



PRISON AT CHRISTMAS

Catholics Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

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At this time of the year, many people feel an excitement building, as Christmas approaches with its promise of rest, relaxation and celebrations with family and friends. But there is another group of people for whom Christmas is a very difficult time. Many people actually find themselves in prison, on Christmas day and prison can take many forms – it can be a prison of loneliness, of fear, of sadness, of illness, of regret. I work with people for whom prison also means physical confinement in our jails, removed from the rest of us, because of the offences they have committed. 85,000 men and women, young and old, in England and Wales, in over 140 prisons may well spend Christmas Day locked in small cells, shared perhaps with a total stranger, with what appears to be a bleak future stretching ahead of them.

Into this world of prisons, of whatever kind, comes Jesus Christ, bringing hope, joy, peace, forgiveness, love and release from all our prisons if we but learn to trust him.

Throughout the year, prison chaplains labour to be alongside and to help people held in prison, to discover the love of God, the love which sets us free from everything that harms us. On Christmas Day or as close to Christmas Day as possible, the Catholic Bishops' in England and Wales go into these prisons, those dark places where so much pain, fear and hopelessness reside. The bishops proclaim, by their very presence there, the truth of the Lord's unconditional love for everyone.

Christmas Day, spent in a 10 by 8 prison cell, can be a terrible time, as prisoners remember past Christmas days with joy, but probably with regret. Many prisoners become overwhelmed with sadness on this day and may even seek to harm themselves.

In our prisons, as prison staff we do all we can to support people in our care. As prison chaplains, we try to help people held in them to discover that the true message of Christmas is for them too and that it is a message of liberation and new life. Holy Mass, services of reconciliation, carol services all provide an experience of the Lord stepping right into our prisons, prisons of whatever kind, to set us free.

With permission of the Governor, I always brought some sweets into prison, on Christmas Day. I remember grown men and women, prisoners, weeping, crying, when I gave them a few chocolates and telling me that it is the first time since childhood that anyone has ever given them a present on Christmas Day. I would ask them to take their chocolates back to their cells, if they could wait that long and then in the cells, to sit down and enjoy the chocolates. And then to also remember that the little gift of some sweets come to them from the Lord who loves them so much – this very Lord who comes to dwell alongside them, in this prison cell, bringing joy and peace.

Christmas means the birth of love, the eruption of love into a world starved of affection; a cold, dark world is suddenly bathed in warmth and light. Imagine or even experience for yourself, what it feels like to know that you are loved in spite of weakness, frailty, sin and shame. When anyone of us begins to experience how much we are loved, a way out of prison opens up before us.