

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
A Place of Redemption
A Christian Approach to Punishment and Prison

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Burns & Oates, London, 2004, £9.99

Anyone, whether Christian or not, who wants to give serious and balanced consideration to the debate about crime and punishment would do well to read this book. It is a report from the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference Department for Christian Responsibility and Citizenship, and as such draws on gospel principles and on the social teaching of the Catholic Church. It does so, however, in a very accessible way that is thoroughly grounded in well researched and up to date facts and figures about the current state of the prison service.

I was challenged to think more deeply about the implications of the Christian belief that humanity is created in the image of God. What does it mean to fulfil the apparently conflicting demands of justice and mercy when it comes to determining penal policy? When sentencing an offender how are we to balance the needs to contain, to deter, to punish and to reform?

The report gives disturbing statistics which amply illustrate that, as presently constituted, the prison system simply does not 'work.' But it also makes numerous recommendations which could indeed turn prison into 'a place of redemption' if only the will and the resources were made available. These recommendations are summarised at the end of the report under the headings: Victims; Inside Prison (22 recommendations here alone); Alternatives to Prison; Parole; Social Attitudes; and The Church.

One initiative that the report commends is that of Community Chaplaincy. Volunteers are recruited from churches and other faith groups to work under the supervision of a community chaplain in befriending and mentoring released prisoners. Wormwood Scrubs, where I am a chaplain, is in the process of setting up such an initiative; Feltham Young Offenders Institute has already got funding and is under way. It is my hope that some of those reading this review might be encouraged to read the book and get involved in community chaplaincy or some other initiative for the support and resettlement of offenders.

Gina CSF