

13th December 2021

PRISONS

**“Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage:
Minds innocent and quiet take that for an hermitage.
If I have freedom in my love, and in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above, enjoy such liberty.”**

Richard Lovelace, To Althea, From Prison (1649)2

Richard Lovelace was a seventeenth century Cavalier poet during the English Civil War. In 1642 he presented the House of Commons with a pro-Royalist petition which was supposed to have been burned. For this he was imprisoned, and only released on bail if he avoided communication with the House of Commons without permission. One of his best-known poems is *To Althea, From Prison*, from which the verse above is taken.

No one is sure who Althea was. She may be a fiction. But Lovelace is simply using his yearning for “freedom in my love” as a device to explore a universal truth – imprisonment is not limited to stone walls and iron bars.

One of the hardest things I’ve had to do in ministry is visit people in adult prisons, Young Offenders Institutions and borstals – gates clanging shut behind me; stony faces within the stone walls; suspicious looks from prisoners and staff alike. But my most enduring memories come from conversations with prisoners, men and women. Among them were young lads who’d got in with the wrong crowd; a mum whose husband was a dealer and who’d got caught up in a drugs’ ring; a man doing life, who’d been estranged from his mother, and yet who was broken with sorrow when she died. They had all lost their physical freedom, of course, as a result of their own actions. But it was the imprisonment of heart, mind and soul that was most disturbing, and the inability to break free from what for many was a lifetime of mental and spiritual incarceration.

We all have our prisons. We may not be caged by iron bars or stone walls. But, in one way or another, we crave for liberty, the freedom to love, to be with the angels “that soar above”. What might these prisons be for us? And how might we find our freedoms again?

A prayer for today

*Lord, when I know what imprisons me and limits my liberty,
give me the wisdom to understand,
the patience to know that this need not be forever,
and the courage to seek the freedoms of heart, and soul, and mind. Amen*