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After-Care of Offenders

Miss J. F. S. King

'For most people, crime is something they read about in the newspapers. The prisons they have never seen are frightening places of punishment for wicked criminals they have never known . . . Crimes of violence, and certain offences against the person, inflicting as they sometimes do grievous injury on innocent members of society, create a response that stamps the criminal as the enemy of all that is good, and clean, and civilised. He cannot possibly be anybody's neighbour'.

The quotation is from *Safe Lodging*, in which Mervyn Turner describes how, as 'a simple interpretation of the Christian injunction to love one's neighbour', he and his wife lived for five years on a family basis with persistent offenders just out of prison. It may be objected that the neighbour in the parable was not a thief but the victim of thieves. But Christ found a neighbour in a criminal on a cross. The identifying mark of the neighbour is surely not his deserts but his needs.

Who are these needy neighbours? Most will have committed property offences rather than crimes against the person (which constitute a very small proportion of all crime). Most are boys or men, since proportionately far fewer women commit offences and fewer still are sent to institutions. But beyond this they vary widely, from those leaving approved schools to continue their education or perhaps start work, to young men who have undergone the 'short, sharp shock' of three to six months at a detention centre, or have been thought in need of the longer training given at borstal, and older men who may have spent many years in preventive detention. Some may be first offenders, unlikely to return to prison but facing grave difficulties in re-entering normal life. Others may be youths who already have considerable criminal records behind them, and are still in the full flush of self-assertion and defiance, linked up with criminal companions, and very likely to offend again even if it can be hoped they will grow beyond this attitude with time. Others may be those classed as aggressive or inadequate 'psychopaths', with a long history of petty thieving and occasional violence, unsatisfactory in all their relationships, friendless, homeless, incapable of settling down to a normal life at all without the closest and most continuous support.

The sort of situation that faces people on discharge will also vary. A fortunate few will be able to return to families, employers, friends or churches who will combine wholehearted acceptance with a real determination to help in their restoration. Others will go back to families, neighbourhoods or companions who will indeed accept them, but only because they accept law-breaking itself as normal and permissible if you can get away with it: in the absence of powerful influences in the other direction these

are very likely indeed to drift into further crime. Others again will return to highly respectable families and neighbourhoods, only to be met with rejection and with little hope of re-establishing themselves in professional work or positions of trust. The majority will encounter the distrust of the law-abiding and the temptation to accept moral support from those less scrupulous.

For it is here that the central need of those coming out of prisons, borstals, detention centres or even approved schools, shows itself. Certainly many need help with money, with employment, with finding somewhere to live. It is the need of these things that may lead them to accept after-care in the first place. Of late years, however, the State, through the penal institutions themselves, and also through the employment exchanges and National Assistance, has accepted responsibility for meeting the basic material necessities. But beyond them lie other necessities, common to all of us; but particularly acute in the case of those who have been, in the popular phrase, 'put away' as offenders. Such are the needs for acceptance, companionship, support, some sense of purpose in life.

The fact of having been judicially segregated cuts across all these. A man will have been sent to prison or to some other institutions as having deserved such punishment: perhaps he was also sent as being a danger to the rest of the community, perhaps as being incapable of responding to training except in captivity. Any or all of these reasons inevitably produce a sense of rejection. This is likely to be emphasised on release by the stigma attached to the very fact of having been in prison (or even, for that matter, in an approved school), a stigma additional to that of having committed an offence, and a stigma which cuts a person off in a special way from the law-abiding and respectable. Alongside this is the fact that during his detention he has been cut off from all his normal human relationships—family, jobs, friends. Some can never go back, and for all the way back is difficult.

This is not to pretend that all will welcome or accept help. The response to a sense of rejection may be withdrawal, a strong resentment against 'do-gooders'. It may be a drawing closer to others similarly humiliated in hostility to society. Some element of these attitudes is likely to be present even in those who are anxious for help. Many, too, are very ill-equipped, in intelligence or temperament, to settle easily or happily to work, or to maintain very rewarding relationships with other people.

After-care can be very exacting work, demanding infinite patience and producing few spectacular results in any worldly terms. What a prison governor has called the 'one-more-chance' type of helper is unlikely to get far: there is need rather of those who remember Christ's answer to Peter about forgiveness 'unto seventy times seven'. Forgiveness does not mean that a man may not have to be punished, even segregated again, but it does mean that, so long as he himself genuinely is willing to go on, we cannot reject him.

Christians have an honourable record of such tenacity of love and concern in many fields. They are sometimes accused of an exceptionally

retributive and punitive attitude to offenders, of siding too much with the respectable in rejecting the 'publicans and sinners' to whom Christ came so close. But in after-care, as in many other social services, it was Christians as individuals or groups who first offered help to those leaving prison in the nineteenth century. It was from their efforts that the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies grew up, societies later recognised and subsidised by the government and right up until the present the main source of help, however inadequate for the great majority of adult prisoners.

Like other movements for voluntary service, however, these societies have latterly fallen upon lean times. Fewer people have been free to work on a purely voluntary basis, funds have been too low to employ adequate numbers of well-qualified paid staff; the sheer rise in the numbers of offenders imprisoned has increased the pressure, and too often the societies have been unable to do much beyond providing a little material aid on release.

Meanwhile, since the inception of borstals in 1908, the State has progressively introduced compulsory after-care for those who seemed in the greatest need of it—the young who leave approved schools, borstals, prisons, and now detention centres; and older men whose records had been such as to incur the longer sentences of corrective training and preventive detention. These compulsory categories are to be extended still further in future. The Central After-Care Association (an official body appointed by the Home Secretary) and the managers of approved schools have in the past appointed a number of specialist officers to supervise some of these offenders, but the great majority have come under the care of the probation officers in the areas in which they live.

Surveying the whole question of after-care in 1962, the Advisory Council on the Treatment of Offenders concluded that the distinction between those entitled to voluntary and compulsory after-care had no relevance to the real needs of those coming out of prisons and other institutions. The same quality of personal help and support should be available to any who were willing to accept it on a voluntary basis as much as to those obliged to accept supervision by statute. Accordingly it was recommended that the whole responsibility should be passed to an enlarged probation and after-care service. This recommendation is in process of being put into effect and has already been carried out in many areas.

That does not mean, however, that the contribution of voluntary service is no longer needed. On the contrary, if more adequate help is to be given a much more lively and responsible participation by the community is going to be essential. Even before the Committee reported, individuals like Mervyn Turner, organisations like the W.V.S., had already taken the initiative in testing ways to give more effective support to former prisoners, as well as to their families, who may be in at least equal need. More recently a maximum-security prison, dealing with men undergoing preventive detention, has encouraged voluntary associates to visit and correspond with selected prisoners for at least a year before their release, and to continue to befriend them afterwards in collaboration with the

official after-care authorities. There have been schemes for finding employment and providing centres where men or their families can bring problems and feel welcome.

In the specifically Christian sphere, the Langley House Trust already has six special hostels, with another four in the planning stage, designed to 'provide a family life on a Christian basis' for inadequate recidivists of various ages, so as to pave their way to independent life in the community in due course. In Bristol a parish church has bought a house, where three ex-prisoners at a time can live for an average of six months, 'mothered' by a rota of church members. The Salvation Army has opened special hostels for prisoners' families and for alcoholics. The West London Mission has both a hostel and a non-residential centre for alcoholics. Christian Teamwork is engaged on a tentative scheme to provide 'associates' for short-term prisoners, comparatively neglected in the past: it hopes to work, as does the W.V.S., by making initial contacts through probation officers at the time of sentence so that friendship can be continued throughout. These are only a few of the projects afoot (anyone interested can find full particulars, with addresses, in the *Directory of Prison After-Care Projects* recently published by the National Association of Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies, 289/299 Borough High Street, London, S.E.1.).

Alongside such centres as these are plans for enlisting voluntary 'auxiliaries' to work with probation officers in connection with particular cases. The idea is that volunteers, if accepted, would attend some preliminary briefings (in evenings or at weekends) to give them an idea of the kinds of people and problems they would be likely to encounter, and would thenceforth work in fairly close contact with the probation officer ultimately responsible, being able to rely upon him for advice and support as necessary, but making their own direct and personal contributions in interest, friendship and encouragement. Here, as in all the other attempts to reach out to former offenders in after-care, we come back to the needs for acceptance, companionship, a sense of being cared about, a sense of purpose.

Perhaps I should finish with a comment on this word 'acceptance', which slides rather glibly off the tongues of those of us who have been trained or deeply immersed in modern social casework, but which may well give rise to much misunderstanding. I have sometimes heard Christian people suggest that all these attempts to help offenders, whether on probation, in institutions or through after-care, somehow imply a softness towards sin, a slurring over of the harm done to their victims, a denial of their responsibility. But acceptance, and the attempt to help, involve none of these. On the contrary they involve facing reality, including the realities of distorted personalities, of evil behaviour and its evil effects on others. We have to accept people as they are if we are to help them to move beyond that. Is not this what God does for us? Can we hope that they will believe God can accept them if we cannot?

This, surely, must be the Christian attitude to after-care, whether expressed in general attitudes to the way offenders should be treated in the community, or in any specific service to which we may be called.