"I Was in Prison and you Visited Me…"

Myra Hindley was one of the most notorious names in Britain in the 1960s, and for many years after that was a name that people thought about with disgust. It was over a two year period, from 1963 to 1965, that she and the man whom she was seeing took the lives of five children. When the two were apprehended, the press labeled her the most evil woman in Britain.

Obviously the public outcry over these crimes was intense, and were it not for the work of an English Lord, the name probably would have been forgotten, as the sentence of life had been handed down. However, her name would come up again and again over the years that followed, because a man by the name of Frank Pakenham, or Lord Longford, refused to see just a murderess, but a human being.

Longford, by all accounts, should have led the good life and not have much to worry about in the 1970s. He was born into a prosperous family, and while he had a difficult childhood in the shadow of an older brother and not receiving much affection from his mother, he went on to go to Oxford and graduate with honors. He went on to a career in politics, taking a seat in the House of Lords and working in government as a member of the Labor Party, including being a part of the cabinet from 1964 to 1968. In 1971 he was knighted. He also enjoyed a beautiful marriage to Elizabeth, who was apparently one of the most sought-after undergraduates at his college.

By the time the 1970s rolled around, he should have been entering retirement, but he refused to slow down. And while he could have probably gotten good publicity for doing social work and found safe projects that would have no controversy, that, apparently, just wasn't his way. Instead, he became focused on something that no one really cared about: reforming the prison system and ministering to the convicted.

He first began to visit prisons in the 1930s, and well into late life he would go two to three times a week to visit people who had been abandoned. Tabloids called him an eccentric who got a kick out of contact with infamous killers, but more than likely it was his Catholic faith (to which he converted) that served as a reason for him doing this work. In the late 1980s, for instance, he was contacted by the solicitor for a young man who was convicted of a drug offense, who was dying in jail from AIDS; his family wouldn't even visit him. Longford was the only person to do this on multiple occasions, but he of course never got any headlines for that.

What did get him headlines, however, was his involvement with the notorious Hindley, which perplexed many people then and still does to this day, especially when one considers that when Hindley didn't think he could secure her release, she really didn't want much to do with him. He began visiting her, and part of what he worked for in prison reform was to turn the public's attention away from just punishment, but to looking at the underlying causes of what led someone to commit a crime. In Hindley's case, she suffered from a horrific childhood of abuse, where she learned violence and learned that violence was in some cases the only response. In one case, when a neighborhood 8-year old boy hurt her, her own father told her to go out and do the same to him. He got to know her story, and became gradually convinced that she had been rehabilitated and was no longer a threat to society. For this, he was labeled "Lord Wrongford" by the media, but he wouldn't be bullied by the media. In fact, he fought back. He also met with the victims families, and felt the media was just fueling a hunger for revenge.

Hindley never was released. In fact, she was declared insane in 1985, and lived the rest of her years in a mental hospital, and while both her and Longford did meet, eventually she did not want to meet with him any longer. No one can say for certain whether or not she had been

rehabilitated or was in fact, as some suggested, using Longford to secure her release; she died in 2002. And by in large, while there were some changes in the prison system, he was not successful in making the changes he had hoped for.

At a deeper level though, when I read his story, I have to wonder what is it that drove him on? The tabloids and British Press certainly were not his friends, and making friends with a convict certainly caused him troubles. On top of this, it's at a point in his life where he could be enjoying retirement and no longer has to be involved in politics. But yet despite fierce opposition and even public ridicule, Longford remained firm in his convictions, because he believed in doing the right thing, even if it might not be the most popular message. Perhaps he was following the guidance of a monarch other than his queen, Elizabeth.

There is no getting around the fact that we need prisons. Some people chose evil; and some people are consumed by it and will harm society if they are set free. Unfortunately too though, we can forget that those in prison are real people. Many of them have families; many came from a rough background and felt backed into a bad decision, or fell under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Many suffer from mental illness as well. And often like Jean Valjean in "Les Miserables," even after release they are forever labeled an ex-con, finding it hard to find work and integrate into society again. As Catholics and citizens, it's important to be aware of these issues, and strive to make a difference.

The Church though invites us to remember that people in prison are created in the image and likeness of God. Justice requires a sentence for a crime. But at the same time, as a society, and as Christians, we try to bring hope to the prisoner; we try to help them make changes, and try to do what we can to help them find a better path where they chose good, and seek reconciliation and peace.

In my time at Saint Joseph's, I've met a number of people who, like Longford, care deeply about those in prison. Our parish has been a bit of a hub of prison ministry, and this coming Friday, October 21 and Saturday, October 22, we'll be having the First Catholic Minnesota Prison Ministry Conference.

On Friday, we'll welcome Archbishop Hebda, and a number of priests will be hearing confessions from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. This will be followed by a Friday evening speaker, Sister Helen Prejean, who will be speaking at 6 p.m. via a large screen presentation in the church sanctuary. Saturday morning there will be a morning Mass and healing service led by Fr. Jim Livingston, pastor of the Church of Saint Paul in Ham Lake. Paul Schnell, Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Corrections will also be speaking on Saturday, and panel discussions will look at each segment of forgiveness, healing and recommissioning.

There's still time to register for this event by going to https://tcprisonministry.com/tcpm-prison-ministry-conference-oct-21-22-2022/.

A big thank you to Kevin and Fay Connors for helping to put this event together.

Even if you can't make the event, I'd invite you to pray for those in prison and all of those who are impacted by crime, including the victims and their families, and the families of the criminal. While it can be very difficult when we see such evil constantly in the news, let us never forget that deep down in people there is this capacity for good that can come to the surface with effort - and prison ministry in our diocese is really making a difference to help that happen. As Christians, let us strive to live out this Corporal Work of Mercy by not putting prisoners out of

sight, out of mind, but by praying for them and for their conversion, and doing what we can to be people of hope.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul