

# Visiting Jesus in Prison

---

Incarceration | Humanity | Blessing

*Join Br. Curtis Almquist on his personal journey into the heart of America's prisons, and into the heartbreak that waits inside. "Prisons can be hell," he admits, and yet entering into them brings nothing short of blessing for both prisoner and visitor. How might Jesus be calling you to bear his light into this very dark corner of our world?*

**The keepers are uniformed, professional, and follow an exacting protocol.** Every visit I am greeted with pages of instructions: what I may not do, may not wear, may not bring. I submit paperwork and my ID. I am physically inspected head to toe and under my tongue, then scanned. A massive steel door slides open. I am stamped with ultraviolet ink, to be verified on my exit. I await another steel door to slide open. I walk 100 yards to a family meeting room where I await yet another steel door to be opened. Guards oversee. I am instructed where I may sit, in a chair whose location is framed by a painted square on the floor. The prisoner whom I meet is escorted in through another door. I stand. We greet briefly. We smile. We sit, he, too, in a designated square. After some welcoming conversation, I suggest we share silence and stillness for some moments, and then either the prisoner or I will pray aloud. And then I listen. I mostly listen. The time is precious, and we talk earnestly about important things. We often share some gentle laughter and slow tears. We stand to say goodbye very briefly, and then he sits to await his escort. And then I depart, a repeat process.

Jesus shares an arresting allegory about meeting him, oftentimes quite disguised:

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

– Matthew 25:37-39

We may hear Jesus' words in two complementary ways:

- Descriptively, insofar as we experience a face and form of Jesus among the poor and imprisoned, a Jesus whom we will miss if we seek and meet Jesus only among

those whose lives are privileged.

- Prescriptively, insofar as we are called to bring an intervention of love to those who are otherwise among the least, and the last, and the lost, to whom Jesus is passionately and preferentially inclined.

My own heart has been particularly broken open to those who are imprisoned. Listening to prisoners' stories, I am so aware that many of them did not have much of a chance for good. By what was present or by what was absent, they were deeply wounded, maybe even before they were born.

Not I. I was raised in a family full of love, provided with good education and opportunities to study music, play sports, and travel. My health has been good. I do not recall being afraid while I was growing up. I am a white male, so aware of my unearned, privileged life. More poignantly than ever before, I hear Jesus' words directed to me personally: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48). To paraphrase Saint Paul, I am working out my salvation (Philippians 2:12).

---

My own heart has been particularly broken open to those who are imprisoned.

---

Some years ago I shared a number of conversations with a young man who was awaiting sentencing. He told me that his greatest fear about his impending imprisonment was that he would be forgotten. For prisoners, their most meaningful, yet most complicated relationships may be with those to whom they have belonged - their family members, friends, and colleagues. These loved ones (or former loved ones) may create distance from their imprisoned relative, friend, or colleague as a way to redress their own grief, anger, revenge, complicity, or shame. Not always, but often. So many who live behind bars do feel forgotten. Likewise, prisoners may themselves forget or try to forget their former life as they deal with their own grief, anger, revenge, depression, or shame in their imprisonment. They are also liable to forget meaningful things about themselves - what had made their life distinctive, enjoyable, and helpful; how freely they formerly could exercise their own will to make decisions; where they would choose to be, and with whom. So much of this can be lost on a prisoner. Many prisoners also feel lost in the trauma of the judicial system while they face trial, await sentencing, and endure their incarceration. Many prisoners feel lost from whom and what had given their life meaning, and lost from hope for the future. And this loss surely becomes a second form of imprisonment.

Visiting prisoners does not redress the injustice that may have conspired in their incarceration, nor does it address all their personal needs. Far, far from it. But visiting a prisoner out of love, not out of duty, may give them a rare experience of being greeted, even rescued, as a child of God whom God loves.

---

## Prisoners especially need an intervention of love.

---

When Jesus begins his public ministry, he says he has come “to proclaim release to the captives” (Luke 4:16-21). Some prisoners were physically set free; however for far more prisoners, the internal corollary is their own release from self-sentencing, finding freedom from living in self-damnation with the belief they are beyond hope, or help, or love.

Love, and love alone, heals. Love is what makes us most fully human, and yet the penal system colludes in squelching this most core need. Every prisoner will be assigned an identification number which designates their penal institution identity, classifies their daily regimen, and connects with the reasons and restrictions for their incarceration. For many years I corresponded with a prisoner. For the return address on his envelopes, he always included the title, “Mr. \_\_\_\_\_,” as did I in my responses to him. “Mr.” was a toehold into his fuller identity. He knew himself to be more than an inmate, more than an ID number, and he was clinging to that.

Bryan Stevenson, the charismatic attorney and ambassador for the imprisoned, writes that “each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. If someone tells a lie, that person is not just a liar. If you take something that doesn’t belong to you, you are not just a thief. Even if you kill someone, you’re not just a killer.” And yet, a prisoner left alone may be powerless to claim their fuller, higher identity. Their soul is starving. That a prisoner is a child of God – still a child of God – is a truth that may elude them. Prisoners especially need an intervention of love.

For us who profess to be followers of Jesus, this great need among prisoners is a great invitation for those of us not incarcerated. We don’t enter the prison to adjudicate or arbitrate; we are not family systems counselors or psychotherapists. We enter prison to bequeath personhood to prisoners by our presence, by the light teeming from our face, by our being interested friends and loving listeners. We can fix almost nothing, yet we can convey such a bounty of love, dignity, kindness, simply through our respectful interest in this all-too-forgotten prisoner, who is a child of God.

Saint Teresa of Avila, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish nun, said “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now.” In Christ’s love, your coming into the presence of someone who is imprisoned may help liberate them, from the inside out, from their own hell, and help them claim Jesus’ gift of healing and hope, even amidst their incarceration.

In such an encounter, we will also be taught. We are missing Jesus if we are not meeting

---

1 Bryan Stevenson in *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2015), 289-290.

poor Jesus. We experience a powerful and necessary revelation of Jesus' presence and power among the poor and imprisoned. Not only do we *serve* Jesus there among the poor and imprisoned, but we also see Jesus there among them. An old insight about prayer is that you cannot pray if you are too full - bloated by too much food or drink, or bloated by too much privilege. We in the West can become gluttoned by our own privilege, and the truths of the Gospel can become dulled or pale in our plenty. Again and again in the psalms we read of a thirsting after, hungering for, longing toward God. Through work serving among those who are less privileged, we may get in touch again with this longing and hunger. In my experience, the poor - including among them the imprisoned - can give witness to a need for and openness to God that is oftentimes so transparent. God's presence to them is powerful. I have certainly discovered this in the witness of prisoners, so many of whom are otherwise powerless. Prisoners often cling to Jesus' promise of his presence and power because they have no other options. I find prisoners' testimony uniquely credible. In meeting with them, my own faith has been reawakened and made more real.

---

We are missing Jesus if we are not  
meeting poor Jesus.

---

The need for this kind of ministry among the imprisoned is significant, especially in America. The United States today has the highest incarceration rate in the world: 629 people imprisoned per 100,000.<sup>2</sup> The United States comprises 5% of the world's population, and we imprison 25% of the world's prisoners. In the United States, our prison population in 1970 was 300,000; in 2020 our prison population was 2.3 million. I highly recommend the book *Waiting For An Echo: The Madness of American Incarceration*, by Christine Montrose, M.D. Prisoners are largely hidden and easily feel forgotten, because they often are. Here is a huge need for us to bear the beams of Jesus' light, and life, and love to those who often live in the valley of the shadow of death: both prisoners and their families. And there is also an equally-huge opportunity to listen and learn from prisoners who understand, from the inside out, what Jesus meant when he claimed his mission "to bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Luke 4:16-21).

When I return to the Monastery, Brothers often ask about my visit to the prison. Brothers know I will not speak of any details whatsoever of my prison conversations; however they are kindly, caringly asking about me and my time away. My recurring line is that I am so grateful for this opportunity. I am deeply grateful. What I do not often name are my tears about how appallingly bad this is. Heartbreaking. Prisons can be hell. Hell for prisoners, hell for their families and friends, hell for those who have been hurt along the way. Prison can also be hell for the prison staff, who suffer high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and a suicide rate twice as high as police officers. Life expectancy for corrections officers

---

2 World Prison Brief (October 2021).

is 62.4 years compared to 74.2 years for the general population. Everyone is suffering in prison.<sup>3</sup>

I encourage you to inquire locally about opportunities to know prisoners, parolees, their families, or corrections' staff. Where could you visit, how could you help, with whom could you correspond, how can you pray? You will be blessed in this, and you will be a blessing. If you are afraid to go into a prison, I don't think you need be afraid. Everyone but you is imprisoned; everyone else is under guard. You will be safe; and who knows but that you may bring salvation with you.

You may find helpful information and inspiration from the Equal Justice Initiative's "Re-Entry Program."<sup>4</sup> If being involved with the imprisoned seems daunting or overwhelming, just remember how Jesus was so attentive to individuals. He showed us how meaningful it is to do small things with great love.

Edward Everett Hale (1822-1909), an historian and Unitarian minister in Boston, facing overwhelming needs in his own day, said:

I am only one, but still, I am one.  
I cannot do everything,  
but still I can do something;  
and because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

---

3 National Institute of Corrections  
4 <https://eji.org/projects/prep-reentry-program>.

# For Further Reflection

When have you experienced meeting Jesus among the less fortunate?

---

---

---

---

Br. Curtis shares how his own heart has been broken open around incarceration. What issue is calling out to you?

---

---

---

---

How can you bear the beams of God's love toward those in your life who may need that intervention of love?

---

---

---

---

# Discover SSJE:

## Daily



**Brother, Give Us A Word:** a daily monastic practice.

Receive brief meditations from Brothers of SSJE, sent every morning via email. Sign up at [SSJE.org/word](https://ssje.org/word).

## Weekly



**Sermons:** Sunday messages based on the lectionary to inspire your prayer.

We hope to offer a still point in the midst of the chaos of contemporary life. Go to [SSJE.org/sermon](https://ssje.org/sermon).

## Regularly



**Retreats & Spiritual Direction:** for your renewal.

We offer retreats and workshops for individuals and groups throughout the year. Go to [SSJE.org/visit](https://ssje.org/visit).

## Seasonally



**Cowley Magazine:** longform essays to deepen your faith.

Cowley is published seasonally in print and online. Read the latest at [SSJE.org/cowley](https://ssje.org/cowley).