

62nd meeting of the International Group of the Medicine of the Whole
Person

July 28 – 31, 2010, Willersley Castle, Cromford, United Kingdom

The Scandal of Forgiveness – Can a Justice System Forgive?

Christian Emphases in relation to Crime and Punishment

Talk by Chris Wood

“Society CANNOT forgive”. Thus spake one of Her Majesty’s Judges to me in a crowded room, over coffee, at the end of a day conference in Edinburgh at which we had been seeking to promote our work on Christian perspectives on the Crisis in Criminal Justice. My mouth was full of biscuit, my hand holding a glass of juice, and I was fairly exhausted after all the work that had gone into the conference. I wish to this day I had had more of my wits about me. I would have loved to give an answer or even pose a question; was he saying that society is constitutionally incapable, perhaps by its very nature, of forgiving; or just that it wouldn’t respond to the line we had been pushing? It came over rather like a judgment handed down in the court room, and I couldn’t get my head together to prepare an appeal!

So I pose this question at the start of this talk, and it is one you might care to unpack and unravel in your discussion groups later in the morning. Can a justice system, working on behalf of society, forgive? It is important, because a central notion in understanding crime is that, for most purposes, any crime has two victims. There is a person or persons or an organisation affected by the crime: but also society as a whole is a “victim”, because crime is some behaviour which is against the law. It is not just a private or civil matter. A crime is a transgression against all of us as society. Both victims need their proverbial “pound of flesh”. (Another Scottish Judge once said to me, that one reason we have a lot of crime is that we have a lot of law; both murder and not renewing your TV licence are crimes.)

The first phrase in the title, the scandal of forgiveness, is designed to underline the very stark difference between the Christian emphases I want to underline and society’s ordinary thought and value systems in relation to crime and punishment. Paul describes the Gospel, in one of his letters, as a *σκανδαλον*, a word translated in one version of the New Testament as a “stumbling block”. So it should not be surprising that our Christian emphases in the field of criminal justice are unlikely to be easily grasped or warmly understood and welcomed.

I want to do three things in the course of this talk. First I want to say something about forgiveness and reconciliation in Christianity. Second to say something about a measure within our British criminal justice system, the probation order, which reflected some of those Christian emphases, but which, alas, exists no more in its

original form. And third, to underline some of those stark differences between our Christian emphases and the ordinary or more familiar models, values and understandings which apply in society more generally.

The title of our book – because it was the product of a study group’s work over a three year period – was deliberately adopted. The term, The End of Punishment, can, in English, be used in two ways. There is “end” in the sense of purpose, goal or aim of punishment – of what we do with people who have been convicted of crime. And there is “end” in the sense of ceasing, or stopping or doing away with punishment – in favour of those emphases on forgiveness which we draw from our Christian faith and which are so counter-cultural, and a sign of contradiction, if you like.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In the first main section of this talk I want to draw out some points which seem important to me in our Christian understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation. You will find that I always want to use these two words – forgiveness and reconciliation – together. They are a bit of a mouthful in that respect, but there is an important point here. The reason is this. The first big criticism or response we experience in a criminal justice context is that forgiveness is a “let-off”. Nothing seems to happen to the person who has offended. Indeed any penalty imposed by a court other than a fine or a direct sentence of imprisonment is often perceived as a “let-off”, even a suspended prison sentence. I’ll return to this consideration in the third part of the talk, but in ordinary parlance it seems that a crime should have some visible punishment as a consequence. Fines, community service and prison can be seen or imagined more easily than probation or a suspended sentence.

So we tried to talk about forgiveness and reconciliation almost as one word or phrase in our work to try and avoid this pitfall. But first a preliminary observation.

Our starting point as Christians is fundamentally different, I suspect, from that of secular society. We believe that we are all sinners – “we have all sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God”, as St. Paul expresses it. It’s not so much that we have committed terrible deeds, necessarily, (though we may have), rather that we have missed out on our destiny and purpose – that is we are made for God and for his glory. Now I suspect this is rather different from an ordinary person’s sense that criminals are “bad” as opposed to us non-criminals who are “good”, or at least relatively law-abiding. And so we can feel superior, or project our bad bits onto criminals, rather than facing what Christian teaching suggests is our fundamental human condition and predicament.

It seems to me that this fundamental Christian teaching ought to give Christians the starting point for some insights into or even solidarity with those of our fellow human beings who happen to have done, or been caught doing, crimes. You don’t hear the old saying “there but for the grace of God go I” as much as you used to, and I wonder about the implications of that. I sometimes wonder whether Christian worship tends rather to promote a sense of goodness or perhaps respectability or

law abiding behaviour in the average occupant of a pew rather than that old phrase “a sense of sin”? And I think the trick here is to focus on the glory of God, rather than starting with a focus on our sin, because as you see more of the glory of God, then you will start to see more of your sin. You could discuss this in your groups.

I realise that there are different theological approaches here. More recently, creationist theologians have wanted to emphasise humanity’s inherent goodness, rather than dwelling on sin and the “fall” as our basic condition. Indeed our book’s theology was criticised as being too ‘forensic’. I’ve since read more creationist theology than I had at the time and have met a number of people who find the substitutional understanding of the atonement, for example, hard to take as the expression of a compassionate and loving God. Again a subject for your groups, maybe. But two personal points here:

1. My early Methodist upbringing was indeed heavy on sin and my need for salvation, thus serving to underline the grace and glory of God in achieving for me through the death of Jesus what I could not achieve for myself. Would I have been called to be a probation officer had I not experienced the saving grace of God in the terms of that theology?
2. Much later I came to involve myself deeply in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola and would not have developed my new vocation without them. You spend a whole week – 5 or 6 hour long prayer sessions a day – meditating on sin and experiencing yourself as a loved sinner, before you even start on contemplating the gospel stories and your own vocation. And even when you do get on to the gospel contemplations, time and time again in the second and third “weeks” of the Exercises, you are taken to the foot of the cross and invited to look at Jesus there. You say “you did this for me; what am I to do for you?”. So finding your vocation is very cross centred.

So, the main purpose of putting the words “forgiveness and reconciliation” together as one phrase, as it were, is to underline the centrality of a process and the creation and growth of a new set of relationships. This starts to represent an antidote to the notion that “forgiveness” is a one-off nothing event and something of no consequence.

There are some key words in the Christian understanding of this process:

1. God is at work first, he takes the initiative in wanting to “save”. In Methodism we speak a lot about “prevenient” grace – God’s grace going before us and coming first.
2. Our response, as we become aware of sin in general or sins in particular, is to feel that sense of sin and to confess it and our need for salvation. There is sorrow for sin, remorse. Interestingly in the secular world, someone who appears not to show “remorse” is judged even more harshly, so there is something in there of a Christian understanding.

3. Then God acts and absolves us – we can experience that directly, in my Methodist understanding together with an assurance that our sins are forgiven.
4. Then we repent – that is we seek to change our whole behaviour in the direction of God and the teachings and example of Jesus. This is the bit that secular understandings of forgiveness don't see. The experience of being forgiven is but the start of a process. Salvation may have dramatic one-off events, but fundamentally it is a life-long process of being transformed and changed from glory into glory, as Charles Wesley expresses it.
5. So we seek to serve our neighbour in response to our experience of the love of God in his dealings with us, and to help bring about social justice and so on in wider society.
6. I suspect penitence is something else we have not explained to our secular friends adequately. I think it is often seen as remorse, or reflection on the past, rather than a decision to change one's way of life in the future.
7. In the Christian understanding, repentance is accompanied by a growing relationship with and appreciation of God and the service he requires of us. We have his company and that of other sinners, our Christian sisters and brothers, and the worship of the Christian community, to help us on this new road and new relationship.
8. As we continue on this road and get to know more about God, we become more aware of our sin and the cycle starts again. Regularly, week in, week out, we hear the priest or minister say "your sins are forgiven" and we set out afresh on our spiritual journey.
9. And finally a theological point which is crucial to me in my Methodist heritage. The Wesleys were absolutely emphatic that "all can be saved". It brings us back to the solidarity point with which I began this section. No one is beyond redemption – not the worst criminal or offender of whom you can conceive. So again this Methodist inheritance – and this theology of justification and sanctification – was crucial to my vocation for probation work. If we do not have this theology, if we lack the experience of regular confession and absolution, if we have no sense of the call to social justice and the mission to save all, can our faith say much useful to our justice system and wider society?

The Probation Order as an Example of Christian Approaches in Practice

In the second part of this talk, I want to describe one measure which existed in the British Criminal Justice system for nearly 100 years, but which is, alas, no more. I speak of the probation order and, to a lesser extent, of the probation service that was set up to administer and implement it.

It contained a number of ingredients which reflect, in part, some of the notions and concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation which we have been examining. It combined in a unique way a legal measure (not a punishment) with the involvement of a person who represented certain standards but whose prime role was to help the person in trouble change his or her life in the direction of “good behaviour”.

I need to tell a story and set out the relevant ingredients.

1. There had been in English law going right back a provision for a court to “bind someone over to be of good behaviour and keep the peace”, typically for a set period of time (e.g. 12 months). The measure included the option to bind the person over into the care of another; a servant could be bound over into the care of his or her master; an employee into the care of his or her employer. So the notion of combining personal help with a requirement to be of good behaviour goes a long way back. I have no idea how it originated and I do not know whether anything like it exists or existed in European countries.
2. In the late 19th century, a time of rapid growth of charitable organisations and initiatives in response to poverty and alcoholism and degradation in parts of large towns, one organisation was the Church of England Temperance Society. It set up Police Court Missionaries – people who would go into the lower courts and ask the magistrates to release people into their care. The missionaries used “the pledge” – a promise to refrain from alcohol – as an important tool in their work with people. If the person reneged on their pledge the missionary would report them back to the court, and they would have some other measure/punishment imposed on them instead. So there is a theology about mission here – reaching out to those most in need, expressing the view that “all can be saved”.
3. From this coming together of legal measure, people with a mission, and a method of social care emerged the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 in England and Wales and 1908 in Scotland. The task of the first officers was defined by the Act in words beloved of generations of probation officers – viz: to supervise, advise, assist and befriend those placed under their charge.
4. The work that went on with people in trouble was unseen by the court, but the establishment of trust between court and officers was crucial. Later official systems were set up so that courts could hear of the progress of people put on probation but the trust of the court depended on hearing that “something was being done” and that if the terms of the order were not observed, the officer would return the person to court for that breach.

5. So lurking under here somewhere is a version of the theological concept of a covenant, about which we could wax lyrical and which again is of special significance to Methodists, given the unique liturgy we observe each year called the Covenant Service, in which we reaffirm our promises to God, even though we have broken them.
6. Some more legal detail is important and fascinating. The person either admits or is found guilty of an offence. The probation order, if one is made, is made only with the consent of the offender; he or she is not told what the alternative might be if probation is not accepted but there is an importance in working with the person that he or she has consented to the measure.
7. Moreover an order is made “without proceeding to conviction” in summary proceedings (minor cases) in Scotland, and “instead of a sentence” in all cases in England and Wales and in indictment (serious) cases in Scotland. So how is that for substitution theology? Indeed an alternative to a punishment model.
8. Yes, there is discipline whilst on probation – you are compelled to be in a relationship with your probation officer and to attempt to be of good behaviour and work at your problems. Extra conditions can be put in the order – for example to take treatment for addiction or mental health. So some aspects will feel irksome to the offender as attempts to change behaviour are endeavoured.
9. If you complete the term of probation satisfactorily, that is the end of the matter. There is no punishment; an end of punishment. You do not get some lesser punishment for being of good behaviour. You only get a punishment if you breach the terms, either by committing another offence or by not observing the terms of the order – e.g. contacting your probation officer.
10. We were able to try a new development during my time in Scotland. In the early 1970s an important committee made proposals for new measures as alternatives to prison – a prison population then of 42,000 was seen as a major problem (now it is twice that number). One of the measures it proposed was described as community service and the committee proposed that this should be a requirement within a probation order, where appropriate. The government of the day thought that a separate and new punishment called the Community Service Order would earn them more political 'brownie points', and such an option was introduced by the 1972 Criminal Justice Act in England and Wales.
11. The Scottish Sheriffs (Judges) wanted this measure to be available to them, but there was no legislative time for the UK Government Westminster (NB this was before devolution of many powers to a separate Scottish Government) to get an act onto the statute books. So anticipating that in due season Scottish legislation would follow the English pattern, a number of areas were offered money for trial projects, but the provision would have to be

introduced under existing legislation which allowed for extra requirements to be inserted into a probation order. I thought this was lovely. There was a splendid reciprocity in some offenders both receiving help from society from a probation officer/social worker, but also giving help back to society, and especially to disadvantaged people and/or groups. So when legislation was passed in Scotland, we got BOTH a separate community service order AND official provision for community service to be a requirement of probation. There was thus more versatility.

Alas, all this has been swept away. I will pass quickly over this as it is a painful tale. Chief criminals in my book were Michael Howard (Tory Home Secretary) who announced one day a new policy called “prison works”; and his Prime Minister, John Major, who pretty simultaneously announced “we need to condemn more and understand less” (in terms of dealing with crime). This was the official death to notions such as “there but for the grace of God go I” and “to know all is to forgive all” (tout savoir, c’est tout pardonner), which had been implicit underlying values for much of what was attempted in the name of reform and rehabilitation. I find their move not just cynical for its political motives, but, if I may say so, unforgivable! May the Lord have mercy on their souls when they reach the judgment seat for I find it hard to!

There was a background to Michael Howard’s phrase “prison works”. There was a phase during which discussions of research into sentencing and its effects produced results which were summed up in the phrase “nothing works”. Judged by the blunt criterion of re-offending within a defined period after the end of the punishment, it didn’t seem to make any difference as to whether you put someone on community service, or probation or in prison. One of the issues in this field is that you can’t do control group experiments; you can’t take a group of people with similar records and backgrounds and randomly assign some to probation and some to prison. But this finding didn’t result in putting everyone on probation (which would have been cheaper) but rather in the continued remorseless rise of people going to prison.

I’m out of touch with the field more recently but I gather one of the current mysteries is that crime has been consistently coming down over the last 5 or 6 years at the same time as prison numbers are reaching epidemic proportions and governments propose to build vast new Titan prisons, because they have to accommodate those whom the courts choose to send there. You see why I say that rationality is not the basis of policy making in criminal justice. The public mood is not rational but it is a reason which influences judges and politicians. Who will lead on changing the public mood?

New Labour, having promised to be “tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime” certainly managed the first bit. Now we have community payback (not community service, note); and offenders have to wear stigmatising clothing in public when doing their work. And since an Act in the early 1990s, probation is now no more but is called a community punishment order; you do not consent to it and it is no longer instead of a sentence but a sentence in its own right along with others. I could go on!

A couple of long term friends and I held an official wake for the probation order and the probation service and none of us work in that field any more.

But one little beacon of hope to blow my own trumpet before I end this section. In the early years of this millennium, I was able, when Director of Social Work at the West London Mission of the Methodist Church, to attract some state money to set up a small scheme we called "arrest and outreach"; it was part of a larger initiative designed to help rough sleepers and homeless people in central London. We were able to employ three social workers who started each day in the police cells at Charing Cross and Bow Street, interviewing homeless people charged with minor offences, and exploring whether we could find some way of helping them such that arrest and going before the court could be avoided. These were exactly the same courts where our predecessors had plied their trade nearly a hundred years earlier. Alas 2007 and 2008 have passed without any new probation of offenders act being passed. But I believe the scheme still exists.

The Scandal of Forgiveness

So we have considered the centrality of forgiveness and reconciliation in our understanding of the Gospel, and we have looked at a working example of a measure which used to exist in our criminal justice system which offered glimpses of that in practice.

In this last section of the talk I want to reflect on just how radically different our Christian understanding is from ordinary secular or societal notions about punishment. I think the teaching on forgiveness goes against and seems to contradict what most people regard as the purpose or end of punishment.

I've already touched on one point, the notion that there should be some visible and normally painful consequence to a crime. We speak of a penalty, the root notion of which incorporates pain. So we inflict some pain on someone for the pain they have done. Forgiveness is in stark contrast; nothing, in that sense of visible pain, appears to happen. There is no penalty. But we say in the creed *credo* – in remissionem peccatorum. I believe in the forgiveness of sins. And we adopt this response because of our own experience of being loved and forgiven and absolved sinners. If we lack that in our own Christian experience we are unlikely to implement the teaching cold, as it were.

You might in passing reflect on whether the church can or does forgive. What happens if the lead is stolen from your roof, your lovely silver communion ware stolen, or if the treasurer walks off with the proceeds of the bring and buy sale! In Scotland the influence of Calvin has been seen as tending to emphasise an image, in the common mind, of a punitive and wrathful God, and his doctrine of predestination doesn't tend to produce a notion that people can change. How wonderful it was, therefore, that Duncan Forrester (Rev. Professor Duncan Forrester, now retired, the chair of our working group) found the following quotation from Calvin, referring particularly to the church. "We, in the sin of this our brother (sic) accuse and condemn our own sins, in his fall we lament and consider our sinful nature, also we shall join repentance, tears and prayers with him and his, knowing that no flesh can be justified before God's presence if judgment proceed without mercy . . . We all here present join our sin with your sin; we all repute and esteem your fall to be our own; we accuse ourselves no less than you; and now, finally, we join our prayers with yours, that we and you may obtain mercy and that by the means of our Lord Jesus Christ". Calvin, *Church Discipline 1571*, quoted in Wood (1991) p.72.

So if the church does not constitute an exemplar of forgiveness, can we even begin to propose that society might forgive?

A second consideration is that forgiveness is perceived as unfair. There is a said to be in the British a great sense of fairness, and forgiveness offends this sense of fairness. One of Duncan Forrester's favourite parables in this context was that of the labourers in the vineyard; those who only did an hour's work at the end of the day got the same as those who had worked since dawn. He was fond of saying that

this was not a parable about economics so much as about justice. And he spoke of its message that God's justice was generous; it was unfair and perceived as wrong. So there is a theme here about generosity and love, as well as simply mercy and forgiveness.

A great deal of the sentencing in our criminal justice system has to do with the calculation of proportionality, of matching the punishment to the crime. If a crime is somehow aggravated (for example because there may be a racial component) it is worse and the penalty will be heavier. On the other side, there may be mitigation, which works in the opposite direction. I sometimes think Her Majesty's judges need a degree in higher mathematics to do this part of their job. The underlying image is that of the scales of justice. A crime tips the scales one way and the penalty or punishment has to restore them to balance. Equilibrium is the normality that is disturbed by a crime and which has to be restored. You may want to consider in your groups to what extent fairness and proportionality may have been shaped by Christian thinking or teaching – for example, an eye for an eye may have been an advance on what went before. But you may want to consider this notion of God's generous justice as one example of how New Testament teaching goes beyond that.

A third point to consider is the kind of myth or construct which underlies the law. The assumption is normally one of "mens rea" – that is a balanced and thinking and rational mind. People are responsible for what they do. At the edges, there are provisions for psychiatrists to judge that people may be irresponsible because of some mental condition, but these exceptions only serve to underline the norm. I am speaking here about how occasionally a medical view will interrupt the normal view of the law about the establishment of guilt. This point is a separate one from the consideration of those myriads of offenders who are guilty at law BUT WHO ALSO have issues of mental ill-health, addiction and so on. I'll touch on that aspect a little later. (One of the most interesting papers we considered in our working group was one on the subject of guilt as seen respectively by a lawyer, a psychiatrist and a theologian – that could be another subject in your discussion groups.)

Now it may be that some criminals do indeed sit down and plan or contemplate a crime and assess their chances of getting away with it and what the standard sentence may be if caught; the aspect of deterrence in sentencing assumes this kind of rationality. But how much crime is opportunistic and thoughtless; may be born of passion or rage or loss of emotional control or balance; or may be committed under the influence of alcohol or in pursuit of funding a drug habit? So the concept may serve the purposes of establishing formal guilt at law but seems pretty irrelevant to real human life. It is also a notion which assumes a level playing field, as it were. It has no regard to social injustice and unequal life chances; what account can it take of early childhood experiences such as maternal deprivation or child abuse. The concepts of causation are very different in social science and psychology from those assumed in the ordinary business of the courts. So our theology about the human condition and broader concepts of social justice and fairness have little room here.

A fourth point arises also out of that notion of the scales of justice and returning them to equilibrium or balance. In the English language a number of words to do with the purpose of punishment start with the letters “r” , “e” – re. Words like retribution, reparation, and even rehabilitation have this backward look, returning to what was before. And as I hinted before the notions of remorse and repentance in ordinary parlance have also to do with looking back, being sorry for what you did, but no more. However the Christian understanding of repentance is about working towards a whole new situation of changed behaviour and new relationships with those you have offended against and also with society more generally.

For many years we did consider that approaches to punishment and sentencing could incorporate models variously described as “welfare” or “treatment”. Once psychiatric theory and understanding became more widespread in the 20th century, the police court missionaries became social workers. They put on the garb of psychiatry and counselling as tools in their armoury, perhaps increasingly replacing the pledge! We spoke of the “medical model” – crime was pathology, not sin. It was a symptom not just of early childhood issues but also of sociological considerations – such as belonging to a gang. So if you could treat the underlying pathology, the crime would stop!

One of the critiques of this notion from the “justice model”, which precisely emphasised fairness and proportionality, was that, if you had a need or a problem, you could get an unfair length of sentence, to give time for the “treatment” to work. A lovely story from my Birmingham days underlines the point. A colleague was asked to look into the background of a man who had stolen ladies’ underwear from a washing line. You could positively hear his Freudian theory bristling and he recommended a period of probation with a condition of psychiatric treatment. The Stipendiary Magistrate declared; “I have read the report; you are nothing but a common knicker-stealer. Fine £10.” If you were told you could choose between a £10 fine and a 12 month probation order, which would you choose?

So now we have to distinguish more carefully between pathology and ill-health and addiction and the like, and the crime. Each has to be considered separately and then possible links explored. Not every alcoholic gets into trouble with the law. (Indeed I can recall a case in Edinburgh where the defence lawyer was seeking to mitigate the court’s penalty because his client was drunk; “that makes it worse”, declared the Sheriff, albeit perhaps with a little bit of a twinkle in his eye.) We have to be able to show that the risk of reoffending can be significantly affected by any non-custodial measure and within a given time scale. The offence is one thing to which the courts have to make a punishment or other response: the offender is the person who may have a condition requiring treatment, whether medical, social or counselling.

And the final point under this heading is that in the life of the courts, you might get probation or some kind of “chance” once! But you rarely get more than one chance – after that you’ve blown it. But you can repeatedly get prison or other punishments which may be futile, especially repeated short sentences. And the very worst kind of offender is described as a serial offender – serial paedophiles, serial rapist, and so on. And I wonder sometimes about whether the increasing number of cases where

judges say “life shall mean life” reflect an increasing social mood not just of plain punitiveness but also of loss of any belief in people’s capacity to change. We are a risk averse culture. And our faith about people’s capacity to change is hard to maintain in the face of the evidence about people’s behaviour; their record when given a chance; and psychological assessments which can suggest no “cure” for a particular condition.

Jesus, however, teaches serial forgiveness! You recall the story where Peter asks him how often he should forgive his brother and suggests 7 as a generous approach. Jesus replies “not seven, but seventy times seven”; and if you are still counting at 489, you have missed the message here!

Summary

So how do you answer my learned Judge – can society forgive? I don’t know whether it is constitutionally incapable of doing so, but it doesn’t look likely or frequent in practice. And can it unless the church leads by example?

Interestingly our book produced some other types of reflection. One sheriff said “perhaps I should ask the offender’s forgiveness for what I am about to do to him particularly knowing the conditions faced by many prisoners and the fact that they are not likely to be there long enough for any good to be done”. And in similar vein a prison governor who was a member of our group said that at a personal level he felt ashamed about the conditions (in a large local prison) in which he had to keep people. His background was in the now extinct Borstal system – a place to which young offenders deemed to be in need of training, especially in employment, were sent. But the same conundrum applies. If, as a person, you need training and employment you should be able to get it without having to go to prison. It is an offence which justifies imprisonment, in straight legal justice terms. I remember a teenager I had on probation in Bradford saying “can my brother come on the probation camp?”. I couldn’t say what I was thinking, which was – “yes, if he commits a crime and gets put on probation”.

My theme then is that forgiveness and reconciliation – as ever using those words as a pairing – is central to our gospel. And this gospel is indeed a “scandal”, a stumbling block, and that to ordinary good thinking people. It is so against concepts such as mens rea, fairness, proportionality, looking backwards, return to some notional previous equilibrium. God’s generous justice offends our ordinary sense of justice.

And I suggest also that if this gospel is only a teaching and not part of our Christian experience we are unlikely to commit ourselves to this scandal in our attitudes to crime, justice and to offenders. If our faith is but nominal or we see it as primarily being about being good or respectable, then we may not grasp this. The same Duncan Forrester used to ask “are we about middle-class respectability or the Gospel of Jesus Christ?”. If we lose sight of the glory of God, we lose our sense of sin. Unless we have a vision of his glory for us, for society and for the cosmos, we are unlikely to become fellow workers with Him in putting it right. If we do not in our worship regularly experience both a sense of sin and of absolution and assurance of sins forgiven we are unlikely to proceed to repentance, to that spiritual journey of changing how we think and feel, of changing from glory into glory, as Charles Wesley puts it.

So the invitation from Jesus is – be a serial forgiver!