

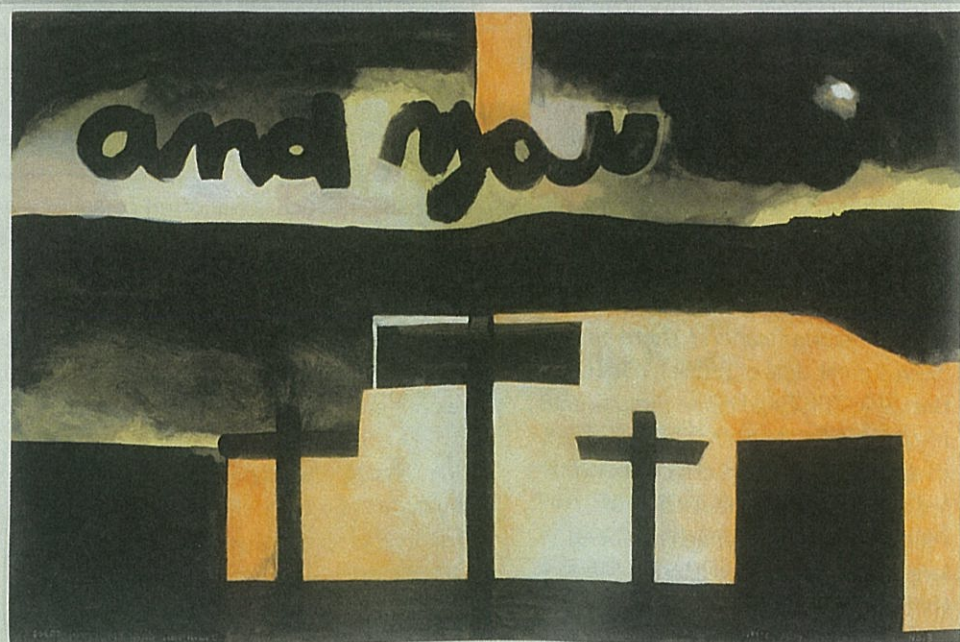
THESE ARE OUR PEOPLE

Overlooking the East River in Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, a new and thought-provoking eight-metre tall sculpture by British artist Martin Creed has been installed for the summer. It is made up of individual steel letters, outlined in ruby red neon light, which spell out the familiar word UNDERSTANDING. The sculpture rotates, sometimes slowly, sometimes faster, so that at times the word is clear and at other times puzzling and difficult to discern. The constantly changing perspective on this poignant word encourages reflection that understanding can be hard work. It requires our thinking to be stretched and reconfigured. Occasionally, as new understanding dawns, some habitual ways of thinking might have to be relinquished.

I've been thinking about the Jubilee Year of Mercy in the light of this sculpture. Understanding is a vital component of mercy. *Tui Motu* readers have been engaging with works of mercy this year and in the February issue, as we began to open the door, our editor suggested that this may involve "opening our minds, rearranging the priorities of our hearts, softening our judgements, dropping our carefully cooked resentments, reassessing our certainties, chipping away at our rigidity."

Difficulties in Visiting Prisons

Maybe the most challenging merciful work is visiting the imprisoned. There are many reasons for this. Partly it is because



Colin McCahon, *Imprisonment and Reprieve*, 1978-1979. Acrylic on paper. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased 1980. Reproduced courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust.

the general public knows little about prisoners or life inside our prisons. The majority of people in our communities do not have first-hand experience of incarceration. Those who break the law can be sentenced to places out of sight and out of mind so we don't think about them much. It is possible that fear-inducing news about crime numbs our inclination to examine critically the harsh, punitive rhetoric of those in society represented by the Sensible Sentencing Trust. These voices focus on law and order, they urge us to crack down on crime, impose longer sentences and declare a war on drugs; they are voices that complain prisons are too soft, the food is too good, prisons resemble holiday camps, too many released prisoners want to return to this easy life. I don't believe these voices are helpful.

It can be difficult to actually visit the imprisoned. It is impractical for large numbers of people to go into prisons as volunteer visitors. The Department of Corrections' security demands an involved process of application, approval and induction and numbers of volunteers approved to come on site are limited. But, as a society, we can revisit imprisonment as an important issue in our thinking about the well-being of our country and allow that understanding to be stretched and grow.

These are our People

The late Celia Lashlie commented once that our society will have come of age when people do not say about a proposed correction facility: "Not in my neighbourhood" but instead say: "Let us be part of their restoration and rehabilitation, for these are our people".

In 2015 a new, 1,000-bed men's prison was opened in South Auckland to help cope with the growing prison population. In the last decade in New Zealand it has been our practice to incarcerate larger numbers of those who break our laws for increasingly long periods of time and to give little consideration to the underlying reasons for their problematic behaviour.

Statistics indicate that Māori are disproportionately represented; 51 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women in prison are Māori. Alcohol and drug addiction is a factor in as much as 80 per cent of all offending in New Zealand. Mental health issues are common, as are disrupted educational histories and turbulent, abusive, violent childhoods. A growing consensus of informed comment is now making it plain that imprisonment, as a method of reducing crime, does not work. There are, however, some exciting initiatives to rehabilitate more effectively men and women whose lives have spiralled into such disorder that they come before the courts charged with crimes.

Alternatives to Prison

In November 2012, *Te Whare Whakapiki Wairua* (The House that Uplifts the Spirit) or Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Court (AODTC) began as a five-year pilot in the Auckland and Waitakere District Courts. Judges Lisa Tremewan and Ema Aitken established AODTC based on the successful US Drug Court model. In this model a person whose offending has been driven by an alcohol or drug dependency and whose offence would otherwise incur at least a three-year prison sentence, must plead guilty to the charges and be willing to enter into an intensive treatment programme under the close supervision of

the AODTC. When the main business of a court is not proving the innocence or guilt of an offender, time and attention can focus on WHY the crime has been committed and what comprehensive treatment programmes and rehabilitative support services can be put in place to achieve lasting change in the lives of individuals and their families.

Victims of crime are largely supportive of the approach taken by AODTC. They often feel relief that the offender's issues are being dealt with and they have greater hope that there will be no offending in the future. The Restorative Justice process is put in place wherever appropriate.

AODTC is no soft option. Participants must submit to frequent drug testing and some wear an alcohol detection device. They attend court on a weekly or fortnightly basis to ensure that they are undergoing treatment as directed and are participating in community work. The AODTC operates as a collaborative team comprising Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice and Police, together with drug treatment workers and social workers to create the best possible opportunities to address addiction and related issues.

To date the pilot programme appears to be achieving its goal of reducing recidivism and there is some optimism that it may be expanded to provide wider access to this urgently needed help.

One way we can effectively revisit the issue of imprisonment is to question our parliamentary candidates regarding their party's policy on extending the availability of AODTC in other centres. It is an initiative that has transformative potential for our communities.

Early Intervention and Prevention

Another positive project is being undertaken by Associate Professor Tracey McIntosh, a sociologist from Auckland University, of Tuhoe descent, who is doing important research into violence in our society. Integral to Tracey's research team are men and women who have convictions for violent crimes, some of whom are presently in prison. Tracy says: "For me, the crime-punishment paradigm is often not useful in creating real possibilities of social change. What we need to do is address social harm — to find ways of prevention and early intervention."

The Christian tradition has always been concerned for the well-being of the imprisoned. These people are human beings made by God in God's own image, full of dignity and beauty and potential for good, who, like us, fail at times and act destructively rather than creatively. Compassionate encounters such as those with *Te Whare Whakapiki Wairua* and Tracy McIntosh foster a shared sense of the value of our humanness and begin to enable imprisoned women and men to manage their own lives with dignity and courage. Understanding is Mercy's on-going challenge to us if we are to keep alive our humanity and become a compassionate people. ■



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