

Volunteers from St. Munchin's see from 25 to 40 prisoners each week at Western Missouri Correctional Center. Most inmates stay there for a few years on convictions that deal with drug abuse and other serious crimes. We do not see long-term prisoners - most of those are at Crossroads Correctional Center.

This week two of our regular guys will be set free, and they are the happiest people in the world right now. They have paid their debt to society, they have worked on the spiritual life, they have overcome some bad habits, and they are anxious to go home to their families. They want new friends, not the old ones. Recidivism runs high; most of the guys released here will end up back in prison after another offense. But we get to work with the few who take their reform seriously, and who want to make a difference in the lives of others when they get out.

Old Testament prophets predicted that the Messiah would give sight to the blind, cure the sick, and set prisoners free. Most people would rejoice to have the blind receive their sight and the sick be cured, but many would be horrified to think that prisoners would be set free. The prophets probably meant those held unjustly - those who have been kidnapped, victims of abuse, those forced into exile, and those who cannot return to their homelands without suffering at the hands of deranged leaders. But maybe they also had in mind that reformed prisoners would be set free, prisoners who have seen the wrong they have done, and who are freed not just from walls, but from their addictions, bad company, and sins.

Before Jesus is condemned to death, Pilate gives the crowds a chance to set one prisoner free, and they choose Barabbas, not Jesus. John's gospel says Barabbas was a revolutionary; the word can also mean "robber". He was probably a zealot perceived as a threat to leadership, but he must have had a number of friends and supporters. In the heat of the moment, they ask for him to be released, and they want Jesus put to death and out of the way.

We often think this story shows how wrong the crowd was, but it may also show how good Jesus was. His death was not just a punishment; it was an act of redemption. He loved us, even though we are sinners. The first sign that the death of Jesus would set us free from sin is that his sentencing set Barabbas free from prison.

Many of us sacrifice very well for the sake of others; we accept blame, inconvenience and hardship on behalf of those we love. But Jesus did all this for someone who didn't really deserve it, someone who was in prison, and who had not yet served his debt to society. Jesus gave it all up for him, just because he was another human being in need of redemption, and that is why he came. He came to do this for everyone.

We are all guilty of sin, choosing evil instead of good, yet Christ loves us all. He shows us how to act toward everyone - not just toward those we love, but toward those society believes are undeserving. Even the prisoner deserves our support, our prayers and our love.