

Prison Visit 2024

Firstly I would like to say a big thank you to all those who wrote cards for the prison again this year. And supplied the 3 carrier bags full of Christmas cakes and other treats! It really is much appreciated by us and the chaplaincy team at the prison.

Andrew and I went to the prison on the 1st December, laden down with boxes and bags. Having arrived at 9am as requested, it takes a little while to get checked in, and be patted down to make sure we are not taking anything in that we shouldn't! They also look in the bags and boxes to see what delights we have with us. We were met by a lovely man called Graham who is a volunteer from the Christian Prison Fellowship. The first time we have met him. Unfortunately Rev'd Hanif wasn't able to be there, but we were made very welcome by Rev'd Rock who was a bit bemused by all the stuff we were lugging along with us. Andrew did sterling work manhandling the sack barrow with all the boxes on.

Once there, we were taken through to the worship space where the prison worship band were practising the music for the service and a couple of items for their carol service. I have to say they do amazingly well considering that they have to work with whoever is available and the musicians change each year we go. It is such a joy to see the work that they are putting in to helping the other folk at the service worship in this way.

Then the congregation started to arrive – small groups escorted from the accommodation. Every year I am taken aback by the numbers – it is increasing each time we visit. I think we estimated 100 men there this time, which is humbling. Out of a population of 1699 currently, that is a really good proportion.

The service starts promptly at 10am and finishes promptly at 11am. Very flexibility as there is a structure to be adhered to. After singing the first song or two, Rev'd Rock asked anyone who wanted personal prayer to stand and Graham and he went round the room administering to those standing. It was very moving to see these men actively seeking prayer for their particular concerns. Everyone else sat very patiently and quietly while this was undertaken. Then we had a hymn chosen by one of the men who was set to leave the next day and start a new phase of his life. His words about what God has done for him were very moving.

Then we had two readings that had been chosen by Andrew. One of the men read one and I did the other. I always feel a sense of privilege to be there, welcomed into what is their home. Andrew preached on Wise people still seeking Jesus. You could have heard a pin drop as everyone listened to what he had to say. The Spirit was moving in the hearts and minds of those listening. It was a tangible feeling. No dressing up for Andrew this year! Worship concluded with more music. They have a lady called Gail who goes twice a month to help with the music. She has a really powerful voice and you could tell how much it was appreciated, not least my me! Nice not to be the only female voice singing along this year.....

After that, the men are collected and returned to the accommodation blocks, but while they are waiting there is time for chat and prayer. Andrew and I both had the opportunity to pray with those who asked as well as to hear a little about their concerns. I spoke to one young man who asked about the cards we had brought. When I mentioned that we had brought blank cards this year as well as the ones we had written, so that they could send a card to their loved ones, he quite calmly said he had no one to send a card to. He then said he might send one to us, to say thank you.

Every year, whilst sourcing the cards, writing begging letters, arranging for them to be written I wonder why I put in the effort. And every year I come away from the prison completely humbled

and glad that in a small way, we are able to answer God's call to reach out to those in difficult circumstances. With a Merry Christmas ringing in our ears, Andrew and I left the prison and went to Wellingborough Methodist Church for coffee and fellowship. Those eagle-eyed amongst you may have spotted our photo outside the prison on the Nene Valley Facebook page. I have been left wondering whether it is us or them that are the wise people this year. They are definitely seeking, and finding Jesus in that place.

Wendy Sturgess