

“Lord have mercy” a reflection for Prisons Week from a Magistrate

“How do you plead – Guilty or Not Guilty?” The question is legal, technical, brutal. The answer is something else – personal, painful, pointed. I’ve heard the question thousands of times, and I’ve heard the answers – “Guilty”, “Not guilty”, “Guilty...but...”. For each there is a story, a situation, a sadness. For some, the outcome is bad enough – a conviction, a stain on character, a fine. For others it’s worse – loss of liberty. If you think it’s hard being *sent* to prison, then believe me it’s hard *sending* someone to prison. Is the sentence justified? How will it impact them? How will they fare? What about the family, loved ones, partners, children...? For them it’s often much tougher – the truth, the shame, the questions, the wondering. The ignominy of visiting prison, often miles from home – it’s a sentence on the family as much as the offender.

And spare a thought this Prisons Week for those of us whose task it is to administer justice. May we apply justice with integrity, compassion, fairness and grace. May the God of truth and justice rule our minds and motives, and may our hearts be in tune with His heart and His mercy.