

*Penology*

# PRISON METHODS.

By Rev. ALGERNON S. CRAPSEY, D. D.

A Sermon Preached Prison Sunday, October 27, 1901,  
in St. Andrew's Episcopal Church,  
Rochester, N. Y.

Published by the Prison Association of New York.

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A SERMON BY REV. ALGERNON S. CRAPSEY, D. D., OF ST. ANDREW'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH, ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Rev. Algernon S. Crapsey, in compliance with a request of the New York State Prison Association, preached a sermon on prison reform from the following text: "I was \* \* \* sick and in prison and ye visited me not." Matthew xxvi, 43. The preacher said:

As one crosses the Bridge of Sighs from the Doge's Palace to the prison of old Venice and goes down into the dungeons there he wonders what kind of men they were who put their fellow men in such dark and loathsome places. It seems to us of to-day that the real criminal was not the man in the dungeon but the man who put him there.

We have the same feeling when we read of the rack and the thumb screw, of the beatings and the branding, of the breaking on the wheel and the burning at the stake, which were the tortures and the punishments inflicted upon the victims of the law in ancient and mediaeval times. We are glad that we were not born in those days of darkness and cruelty.

The modern world differs greatly from the ancient and mediaeval in its conception of crime and in its attitude toward the criminal. It looks upon crime as partly the fault of the criminal and partly the fault of the society which produces him. In thinking of the criminal it takes into account his inheritance and his surroundings, and finds, if it can, mitigating circumstances which commend the offender to a merciful judgment. In the estimation of modern thought no man can be so bad as to lose all his rights as a man. Even the lowest are to be treated as human beings.



#### PURPOSE OF PUNISHMENT.

Whatever punishment a criminal may have to endure, is or ought to be inflicted upon him for his own good. Its purpose is not vengeance, but reformation. It is or should be the intention of the law to correct the bad habits and root out the evil principles from the heart and life of the prisoner, and so to make a repetition of his bad actions impossible. In dealing with a criminal the State may also have in view the good of society. It may inflict punishment as a warning to others that they may take care not to follow the evil ways which have brought the prisoner to his doom.

It is only recently that prisoners have been looked upon as objects of pity and commiseration. Prison reform really dates from the latter part of the eighteenth century. It was John Howard who first roused the attention of western christendom to the frightful condition of its prisons. This good man becoming acquainted, as a peace officer of his county, with the abuses of prison life, spent his time and strength in the interests of the poor wretches whom the law of the land cast into foul dens and left to the tender mercies of brutal jailors. From the days of John Howard and his immediate successor in the work of prison reform, Elizabeth Fry, the improvement of prison conditions and the salvation of the prisoner have engaged the thoughts and enlisted the efforts of the wisest and best men and women in the world.

#### DECREASE OF PRISON POPULATION.

The consequence of all this effort is seen in the more humane treatment of prisoners and in the decrease of prison population. According to the report of the New York State Commission of Prisons, the prison population of the State of New York on the 1st of October, 1900, was 10,761. In 1895 the same population was 12,661, showing a decrease of 1,900 in five years. These figures include all prisoners, those confined awaiting trial as well as those who are serving under sentence of the court. The

State Commission says: "Had the population of the penal institutions kept pace with the increased population of the State since 1895 the inmates of the prisons would have been approximately 15,000, instead of 10,761. The cost to the State and counties of arresting, convicting and maintaining 4,000 additional prisoners would be approximately \$800,000 annually." Here certainly is a fact which should encourage every lover of mankind. We can safely say that the prison population of the country is steadily decreasing; fewer and fewer men each year become liable to the penalty of the law.

#### CAUSES OF IMPROVEMENT.

The cause of this improved state of affairs is doubtless to be found in the better conditions of life prevailing in the United States. The public schools, with their more reasonable methods of teaching, the prosperous condition of the commercial world, the taste for athletic and outdoor sports, all contribute to the general improvement of morality and the diminution of crime. But this desirable result is due also to the wiser methods of dealing with incipient criminals. Officers of the law are careful not to press a criminal charge against a man, and especially a young man, if they can avoid it. I have known officers of the law to take great and proper pains to save a man from the shame of arrest and imprisonment.

This may of course be done from a bad motive, and in the interest of the criminal, but in the cases I have in mind the officer acted from the best motives and for the highest good of society. Every officer of the law knows that the worst place in the world to send a man is to prison, and so does what he can to prevent it. And when a man is arrested and confesses his guilt the court keeps him out of prison if it can possibly do so. Sentence is suspended and the offender is allowed to go out on parole. There is an officer appointed to look after these men, to help them in every way to regain their place in the world. This humane system, which is now well organized in the State of New York, does much to keep down the prison population.



Another device of the law which is very helpful in shortening the term of prison residence is what is known as the indeterminate sentence. The sentence names the shortest period a man must serve, and the longest that he may serve. But within that period he may be discharged at any time by the prison authorities if they are convinced that he is ready for liberty. These and other like provisions of the law show that the steady tendency of legislation looks to the reformation of the prisoner, and not simply his punishment.

#### WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE.

But although much has been done, much still remains to be done in the way of improving our prison methods. In the good old times if a man was taken sick, the first thing the doctors did was to bleed him. By this process they made a weak man weaker and lessened his chances of recovery. Many a man was sent in this way to an untimely grave. Now we are pursuing the same course with regard to the criminal. He is a man who has little self-respect, and by our prison methods we take away what little he has. We degrade him in his own eyes and in the eyes of all who see him. We very often put him under the charge of brutal men and subject him to debasing treatment, and then in due time turn him loose upon the world a confirmed criminal. The prison has completed the work of demoralization.

Our prisons themselves contribute to this deplorable result. They are great, gloomy piles in the center of some populous town, or surrounded by a large rural population. Their very walls speak of misery and shame and degradation. Some of these prisons have been standing for years, and are saturated with vice and wickedness. The very stranger walking through their corridors feels himself contaminated. Those corridors are haunted by the memory of countless crimes.

Prison officers are, too frequently, men by no means calculated to elevate the moral and spiritual tone of the prisoners. They are without special training, appointed too often for politi-

cal reasons, and think of the prisoners as simply a means of livelihood. The one thought of such officials is their own ease and their own dignity. They have absolute authority over the prisoners in their charge, and many a story could be told of insult and outrage visited by some brutal keeper upon some prisoner far less brutal than himself.

#### EVILS OF ENFORCED IDLENESS.

Another and most fruitful cause of prison degradation is the enforced idleness of the prisoners. It is almost impossible to speak of this outrage upon humanity in measured terms. One despairs of mankind when he knows that the Legislature of a great State, in obedience to a popular clamor that was without reason, forbade the prison population to engage in useful and profitable employment. Such a law is a disgrace to our statute books and should be removed at once. If there were abuses under the old contract system, let such abuses be corrected; let the State itself employ these wards of the State in useful and profitable work. The State prisons instead of being a source of expense should be profitable to the State, these 10,000 men should earn their own living, pay the expenses of their arrest and conviction and have beside a sum greater or less at their disposal when they leave the prison.

By idleness and by solitude we are doing all we can to complete the ruin of those who are already near enough to destruction. In our own penitentiary, which is accounted one of the best in the State, the officials of which are men who are trying to do their whole duty by the prisoners committed to their care and who deplore as much as I do the system which they are compelled to enforce, the men are locked in their cells at 6 o'clock in the summer and at 5 in the winter and are kept there until 7.30 the next morning—from twelve to thirteen hours in absolute idleness and solitude. It is appalling. I know that if I were subjected to such treatment for six months I should be a moral wreck and my constant wonder is that the moral nature is able to survive such an experience and the prisoner ever



recover his moral tone. One is almost ready to say that the ancient system of torture was better than this. The tortured man was ennobled and purified by his pain. But what shall we say of a system which keeps a man well fed, deprives him during the day of useful and tiring occupation and then shuts him up from early candle-light of a winter evening until sunrise the next morning, in a narrow cell with no other companion than his own evil thoughts? Words cannot describe the wicked folly of such a system.

#### LINES OF PROGRESS.

We suggest as lines of progress in prison methods first the careful preservation of the self-respect of the prisoner. His dress should not be a badge of degradation. The striped suit which has so long been the prison garb should give place to a uniform that has not its evil associations, a uniform of which the prisoner could be proud instead of ashamed. The prisoner should not be subjected to any shameful personal treatment. Anything like unnecessary exposure should be avoided. The discipline of the prison should be as far as possible military. The prisoner should have his morning roll call and his evening parade. He should be called by his name, not by a number. He should be made to feel every day that he is a man, capable of manly deeds.

Prisons should never be built near centers of population. They should be in remote parts of the country, in the midst of a large acreage of ground, surrounded by stockades, guarded by sentinels and away from the reach of curious people. The State of New York should destroy at once its two prisons at Sing Sing and Auburn. These prisons are reeking with criminality and are foul with evil associations; their names are names of evil omen. They should be leveled to the ground and in their stead should be built houses in the midst of green fields, where the influences of nature would aid in the restoration of the moral health of the prisoners. I was speaking to one of our

wisest judges and he said that the destruction of Auburn prison could not come too soon for the good of the State.

It is absolutely necessary that the officials of the prisons should be men trained to their work. It would be just as sensible—yes, far more sensible—to commit the care of a hospital to some farmer or lawyer or merchant or political worker, as it is to commit the care of our prisons to such men as these.

No man should be thought of for prison employment until he has been schooled to his work. There should be institutions for the training of prison officials, all except the very lowest workmen should have a knowledge of criminology, and they should look upon their business with all the pride of a professional. They are dealing with moral and spiritual disease; they should be physicians of the conscience and of the soul. No great improvement can be looked for in prison life until every prison official is trained to his work and looks upon it as a profession.

The proper employment of the prisoner is absolutely necessary to any hope of his moral recovery, and any employment that will benefit his moral nature must be useful and profitable. Mere carrying of stones from place to place or walking round in a circle can do nothing but degrade the man who does it. A prison should produce all that it consumes. Its food, its clothing, its furniture of all kinds, should be made in the prison and by the prisoners. The most approved machinery should be used in this work. The prisoners should be trained in the various arts and industries. They should be made to understand that if they would eat they must work, and that their comfort in the prison and their speedy discharge from it would depend on the quality and quantity of their work. No other mode of discipline can ever take the place of the discipline of nature which is the discipline of work.

Nature says work or starve. To escape starvation men go to work, and by means of their work their whole nature is developed. This should be the method of training in the prison as it is in the outside world.



## CITIZENS AND PRISONERS.

We have now to consider in conclusion the relation of the citizens of the State to the prisoners of the State. These two are members of the same organic society. They act and react on each other. At present they are natural enemies. The criminal preys upon the citizen and the citizen avenges himself upon the prisoner. This warfare will continue until the citizen looks upon the prisoner, not altogether as an enemy, but as an erring brother, and gives him a chance to earn an honest living in the world. Prison associations stand in this attitude toward the prisoner. The men and women of these associations wait at the door of the prisons and receive the discharged prisoner as a friend and give him a helping hand and in this way try to change him from a criminal into a law-abiding citizen. Let the present good work go on and the time must come when the prison will pass away with the rack and the thumbscrew.

That day may be far away, but it is a day to dream of, to work and to pray for. By showing kindness here and there to a brother who has fallen we shall ourselves hasten the day when the prisoner shall go forth from his prison house to walk in the light and the air of the world which God has made, a free man among free men.





