

Views from the Pews - Crime and Punishment

One feature of our General Election cycle is the auction to see who can 'bid up' sentences for criminal offending. Sadly, the auction seems to be based on perception, rather than on science, and we tend to ignore the excellent – if challenging- research we have to hand about the probable causes of crime. We are reluctant to probe too far into what our society is really like; we prefer the image that we ourselves construct with help from the news media and from politics. Make no mistake – crime exists. The Bible is full of muggings, robberies, burglaries and violence.

So why do we not resort more often to the Gospels for possible answers? Even the most superficial reading of Jesus' interactions with people shows him to be the master of psychology and sociology. He was always on top of his subject, knowing exactly how society worked, how people thought, and how they reacted to events. He was always very clear about consequences – sin always evokes a response both from God and from society – but he preached continually about the power of forgiveness, about reconciliation, and about outcomes that suited society. Wrongdoers were never cast out. Lost sheep were to be searched for, rescued, and brought back for rehabilitation. Prison too is portrayed in the Bible as having thoroughly negative consequences.

In talking about how we talk about crime and punishment, we need to start with the Gospels, which contain a toolkit for discussion. There are indeed alternatives to what we talk about during every election cycle.

This is a wonderful opportunity for the Church. It can revert to its traditional (Christ-like) role of confronting society to think anew. It can and should be leading a debate about our response to anti-social behaviour. We need an honest discussion about the causes of crime, and we need to confront those aspects of our society that we usually hide from view. We know a lot about the effects of imprisonment, but we bury this knowledge.

Discussions of this sort are hard, but we have the perfect example in Jesus himself, who was forever challenging assumptions about society

and about human nature, especially those assumptions that gave comfort to those who held power and influence.

Next time we hear somebody promising to 'get tough on crime', we could stop, reach for the Bible, and then ask ourselves and our fellow voters – 'What would Jesus have recommended in these circumstances?'

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