

## Views from the Pews – A Lenten Challenge

In this election year, we'll be faced with more quick fix responses to the problem of crime. It is too early to say, but the current climate may re-ignite calls for the return of the death penalty.

Firstly, the counter-arguments need to be repeated; namely there is no evidence that potential execution is a deterrent, that our judicial system is insufficiently robust to guarantee that we always get it right, and that execution is a very attractive option for regimes that need to wipe out challengers and detractors. The return of the death penalty leads countries onto a slippery slope away from democracy and towards secret and unaccountable autocracy.

The challenge this Lent is to focus on the events leading up to the crucifixion, to unpack the legal, political, military and religious components of Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution. We rightly concentrate on Jesus' death itself, but the challenge is to wind back the clock, back through the Garden of Gethsemane, perhaps to Matthew 26:3, where the Gospel has Caiaphas' palace as a hotbed of intrigue involving probably every element of the religious establishment, plotting to use stealth in order to bypass the people, to effect a night-time arrest, to be followed in turn by a show-trial behind closed doors, followed by collusion and buck-passing with the Roman occupiers. Even Judas passes his sell-by date in a matter of hours.

Are we too anxious to by-pass Good Friday on our trip to Easter? We seem loath to linger in our winter of discontent (especially Saturday) in our wish to reach our glorious summer of Easter Sunday. Is it because this is all just too hard, too unpleasant, and too close to what we suspect real life was like at the time, let alone what we suspect is the reality of life here, today?

Let's not forget either the role of the mob in Matthew 27:15-26. Public executions were always a big attraction. Public opinion – especially when dressed up to appear as a majority – can be a major

driving force in the arrest, trial, and punishment of both the deserving and the undeserving.

Can't happen here? Such was the disquiet about the late Peter Ellis that his right to a re-examination had survived his own death.

The events leading up to Golgotha make for uncomfortable reading and even less comfortable reflection. A Lenten challenge for us all.

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