

‘Go and Sin No More’: Christian mercy vs. tabloid vengeance

Stuart Dew describes some biblical examples of forgiveness towards wrongdoers.

As I often do when talking in public on behalf of the Churches’ Criminal Justice Forum (CCJF), I asked the group of local churchgoers what Christian values they linked with criminal justice. The first respondent folded his arms across his chest and said firmly “Punishment for sin”. It wasn’t one of the values at the forefront of my mind, and I wondered if this might be a more challenging evening than some. However, it proved to be a good starting point for discussion, and encouraged others present to think more deeply about the issues, which is one of our aims.

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The response isn’t unfamiliar, of course. As I began to write this article the *Sun* ran a piece warning that “Whining liberals are trying to wreck Blunkett’s get tough prison policy”. An accompanying editorial assured readers that “Prison works” and stated that record prison numbers should be a cause for celebration. It was all reminiscent of the outpouring of venom that followed the death last year of Myra Hindley, who received tabloid epitaphs such as “May she rot in hell”, “Gone but not forgiven” and “The devil”.

Bible teaching on vengeance and retribution is very much of the Old Testament where the death sentence is often the prescribed penalty and a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise is recommended. Some Christians do fall back upon this to justify entrenched attitudes but others accept that the coming of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, while not wiping away all that was written before, demands a new approach. “God gave the law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” says the Apostle John.

The rules for living originally given by God had been largely about things that people should not get involved with – ‘don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t commit perjury’ – but Christ required specifically that his followers overlay these with positive attitudes and actions. Love one another, he said, even those regarded as enemies. That is a much more challenging way of us engaging with criminal justice. To acknowledge the failure of prison as a way of preventing re-offending for all but the most serious of offences is much more demanding than to chant the mantra ‘prison works’. Branding Myra Hindley

and other high profile offenders as evil is comforting, for, if they are the personification of evil, the rest of us are okay. We are normal; we are the good guys. To consider that we are all capable of doing both right and wrong requires us to share ownership for dealing with criminal behaviour. That is a message that Churches’ Criminal Justice Forum tries to put across.

One of my favourite Bible stories is where a group of men bring to Christ a woman caught in adultery. Leaving aside the fact that a man may also have had some complicity in this offence (for that was the culture of the age), stoning is suggested by the group

as a suitable punishment. Christ does not immediately object but instead suggests that he among the accusers who has done nothing wrong should be the one to throw the first stone. The point is well made; stoning suddenly doesn’t seem such a good idea.

As a postscript to the story, Christ does not ignore the woman’s wrong-doing. He orders that she should “Sin no more”. This point is important in arguing against those who feel that a more compassionate approach necessarily condones wrong-doing.

Christ was passionate about justice in action and rounded on the Pharisees, who were over-zealous in observing the minutiae of Old Testament laws, while ignoring the consequences of observing them. This, he told them, was real justice. He went out of his way to engage with those on the margins of society, who included both victims and wrongdoers. He not only preached, he also lived compassion, respect for human life and – crucially – repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration.

Another well-known New Testament story tells of a wayward son, who squanders his father’s money on wild living. When he is at his lowest he returns and confesses his wrong-doing. He is repentant. The father is compassionate and forgiving, reinstates the son within the family, and tells the older brother – who is unconvinced by this example of the rehabilitation of offenders – that re-establishing the brother within family and community should be a cause for rejoicing. It is a wonderful example of restorative justice at work. At a family conference, the son has acknowledged his offences and the harm caused, and has offered to make up for it. The victim – the father – has been able to come to terms with



what has happened and move on. The risk of further offending seems low. The significance of the story for Christians is that the father in the story represents God, who offers that prospect of restoration to those who accept him, through his own son.

The Bible teaches that all human beings are made in the image of God. It therefore follows that all are precious and of equal value, be they offenders or law-abiding citizens. God condemns wrong-doing but not wrong-doers.

contact in reducing prisoner re-offending. CCJF is in dialogue with other faiths on shared criminal justice concerns and encourages politicians to address those aspects of social disadvantage such as failure to engage with education, unemployment and lack of life skills, which often lie behind offending.

Above all, Churches' Criminal Justice Forum seeks to promote the message that criminal justice is not only about broken laws, it is also about broken lives.

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The Churches' Criminal Justice Forum is a national ecumenical network, which promotes the importance of criminal justice as a cause for Christian concern. It encourages church-going people to get involved in practical ways and suggests possibilities; together with Rethinking Crime and Punishment and the Prison Advice and Care Trust, it has helped to produce a 'What Can I Do?' pack. CCJF particularly encourages projects which help prisoners to maintain contact with family, partly because of the importance of the family within Christian teaching, but chiefly because of the proven importance of sustained family

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