

The trouble with normal

Back in the early 80s the singer Bruce Cockburn wrote that ‘the trouble with normal is it always gets worse’. As it stands this statement is about as useless as the faith in ‘progress’ that sustained many in the 19th and early 20th century. But after attending the forum on Crime and Punishment run by the Centre for Theology and Public Issues I was thinking again about the trouble with normal. One speaker began by announcing that “NZ is the second wickedest country in the western world”, meaning we have the second highest levels of incarceration (after the USA). It was unclear whether he had some tongue in cheek about wickedness at this point. What was clear was that although incarceration seems necessary in our kind of society, as a way of protecting people from the worst and most dangerous criminals, no one should be under any illusion that it does anything about reducing the problem of crime. What’s more it is very expensive (costing around \$90,000 p/a per inmate). Moreover, both the current government and the previous government have, under popular pressure from the electorate, been steadily increasing the rate of incarceration. In other words, increasingly enormous amounts of money are going into a process which does nothing to address the problem. In the current political climate prison is primarily about retribution in the name of the victim.

This raises the big question what is the best way to respond to the cries of the victim. In this Sunday’s reading the letter to the Hebrews speaks of the blood of Jesus as ‘speaking a better word than that of the blood of Abel’. Abel, you might recall, features in the ancient story of the first murder. He is the victim. Elsewhere we read that his blood cries out from the earth for revenge. As a society how do we respond to these cries? The Christian faith tells us that the blood of Jesus creates a new kind of society – we call it ‘body of Christ’. It is the place where, in the words of U2 ‘we get to carry each other’.

The question is, How do we get there? Because surely the alternative to obeying the cry of the blood of Abel with revenge by imprisonment, is, at least and wherever possible, creating a world with less crime. What might be involved in this was hinted at in the briefest possible way by a couple of people who spoke at the forum. One person suggested that the problem of crime might be related to the loss of ‘karma, sin, and hell’. Although these words may not best capture the issue, they perhaps suggest a crisis of meaning in which we no longer have a ‘big picture’, or better a ‘big story’, within which our life has direction and purpose. The second suggestion was that those who are most caught up in this ‘wickedness’, the extreme criminals, lack empathy – i.e. they don’t know how to walk in the shoes of others. Restorative justice is a term for a process of discovering the feelings of others and learning to ‘walk in their shoes’.

A common response to this challenge is to suggest that ‘these things can be taught’. My worry is that our western tradition still tends to think of education as ‘information giving’ rather than formation. Formation is what parents do. Formation is what a community does. It takes a village to raise a child. Perhaps in this case it takes a face-to-face restorative village. Imagine a village centred around the blood of Christ!

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