

Sunday 12 November 2017: Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time



Look, the bridegroom comes. Go out to meet him

Those who were ready went in with [the bridegroom] to the wedding hall and the door was closed. The other bridesmaids arrived later. “Lord, Lord,” they said, “open the door for us.” But he replied, “I tell you solemnly, I do not know you.” So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour. **Restorative Justice Day – 14 November**

In recent years in Australia justice has increasingly been seen through the lens of punishment. It is retributive. You do the crime, you do the time. In public controversies about justice critics usually complain that the punishment is too soft for the crime. Practices like granting bail, giving discretion to judges to take into account when imposing sentences the circumstances of the offenders in sentencing, and awarding parole are heavily criticized. An eye must be plucked for an eye, and a tooth drawn for a tooth.

The difficulty with this simple view of justice is that people don't get along well without teeth or eyes, no matter whether they be criminals or victims of crime. Society puts more people into prison and builds more prisons, but the cost of this increased punishment is paid by society itself. Imprisonment makes it more likely that offenders will reoffend when they leave prison. Nor does the threat of punishment seem to deter others from following their example. Meanwhile, for every new prison cell that is built there is less money available for each new hospital bed and each new classroom desk. For society the emphasis on punishment, on retributive justice, looks increasingly like self-laceration.

That is why in many societies there has been considerable interest in restorative justice. This looks beyond punishment to restoring the broken relationships between offender, victims, society and society. It leads ideally to offenders acknowledging responsibility for their actions, responding to the damage done to the victims of their actions, and connecting with society in other ways.

Justice conferencing is one form of restorative justice in which we have been involved at Jesuit Social Services. It involves bringing together the offender, the victims and representatives of the State and of the community. Offenders have the opportunity to hear face to face the effects of criminal actions on their victims, to be moved by them and to see their own actions in a new

light.

Victims have the opportunity to hear the life story of the offenders, to see their remorse and to note their desire to find a better way. Community representatives can then invite the offenders, in the presence of the victims of crime, to suggest ways in which they can set right the wrongs they have done. If this process is effective it can help offenders appreciate the harm they have caused and to change their way of life. It can help victims move beyond bitterness to satisfaction that things have been set right and that life can begin again. It can give society confidence that crime is regarded seriously, that punishment does not have to be the last word, and that there are better things to spend money on than new jails.

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