

# A voice in the wilderness?

As we mark Restorative Justice Week, Imelda Wickham calls for a rethink of our justice system

**H**ave you ever stopped to consider what it must be like to be locked up for over seventeen hours a day? To be locked up on your own or with two, three or even four others? Have you ever imagined what it must be like to walk a prison yard day after day in the same monotonous routine, sometimes carrying the burden of a guilt which can never be resolved? Have you ever stopped to consider what it must be like to be the victim of crime and to carry the scars and a paralysing fear within you? Maybe *you* do not have to stop or consider or imagine. Maybe you are *one* of these people.

Many people will associate November with death and dying, as a time of remembrance of those who have gone before us. Very few will associate November with prisoners and the victims of crime. Yet each year at this time a special week is set aside for us to remember them. It is called Restorative Justice Week.

Our concept of justice is basically that of retributive justice – a punitive type of justice that, while it may seem to be the answer to crime and criminal behaviour, is often no more than a short term response to deeper and more long-term issues, namely, the underlying causes and consequences of crime and more importantly the needs of victims of crime

The call of the gospel is one that urges us to love the sinner while hating the sin. The call of the gospel urges forgiveness and reconciliation. The call

of society, on the other hand, is often one that demands retribution and even revenge. It is more politically correct to hate the sinner, to label and demonise them. Lock them up, throw away the key and all will be well. But, all is not well.

Prisons simply don't work. Prison chaplains in their annual report to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform have consistently stated this and called for alternatives to imprisonment to be explored. They have been advocates of a restorative type of justice, a justice that brings healing and seeks to restore right relationships to both victim and offender.

Restorative Justice seeks to move beyond condemnation and punishment to address the causes and consequences of offending. It is a peacemaking approach and involves all affected by the wrongdoing. It is about restoring, as far as possible, the dignity and wellbeing of the victim and of helping the perpetrator to take responsibility and make amends. It is based on the values of participation and honesty, on the values of accountability and empowerment and it is based on the value of respect. What is important in the process is that victims, offenders and their communities are the principal participants rather than the professionals representing the state. It is a community-based approach.

It is important to remind ourselves that the biblical focus on crime was not so much on the individual but on the community, and corporate responsibility was central to the Hebrew way of thinking. The Old Testament rejected the idea that crime was the responsibility of a few evil

people in society. When a law was broken there was corporate responsibility. Violence and crime pointed to a crisis in the very fabric of society. The gospel teaches that justice is to be based on the principles of forgiveness and reconciliation.

I sometimes wonder are we afraid to preach the gospel in its simplicity. Maybe we too want to be politically correct. We do know that there is a crisis in the fabric of Irish society and building more prisons and locking up more people is not going to resolve it. Pouring vast amounts of public monies into expanding our prison population is an injustice in itself while we fail to stop, recognise the reality of a failed justice system and seek an alternative response. The response has to address the needs of the victim, the needs of the offender and above all the needs of the society in crisis.

Are prison chaplains lone voices crying in the wilderness? They speak from a reality that they witness on a daily basis. They witness the desperation of families affected by crimes – the mothers and children. They witness the futility of imprisonment where many languish for years having learned to cope with the boredom. Many long for forgiveness but are unable to seek it. Many find it hard to forgive themselves. They are the outcasts and they know it. This in itself can have a hardening effect – a coping mechanism for them. And all the time others too – the victims – are struggling to cope. Is anyone listening?

Maybe it is time for us to *raise* our voices, to end this 'game' of pretence. Imprisonment is not responding to the needs of the victims of crime. It is not responding to the needs of the perpetrators of crime and it is not addressing the present crisis in Irish society.

Will another Restorative Justice Week make any difference?

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