

## **Gospel Manifesto 2014: “Towards a Less Punitive Society”**

### **Are we a Punitive Society ?**

Prisons are but one measure of punitiveness; but the frequency with which we place people in them, and the way we treat prisoners, tells us a great deal about the nation’s attitude to power, authority, legitimacy, normalcy, morality, personhood, and social relations. As Nelson Mandela put it;

*“No one truly knows a nation until he has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens but how it treats its lowest ones.”*

New Zealand mostly presents as a just and peaceful nation. The OECD Social Justice rankings which measures poverty, access to health, and other indicators place New Zealand well above the average. In the Global Peace Index, New Zealand ranks third in the world. In recent years there has been a steady drop in the crime rate, and modest decreases in the reoffending and re-imprisonment rates. These are all the hallmarks of a socially just, peaceful cohesive nation which cares for its citizens. But one indicator suggests otherwise – the extent to which we punish. The prison population in New Zealand went from 91 per 100,000 general population to 200 per 100,000 in 2009. This is well above other western democracies, with the exception of the USA. We are currently sandwiched between two West African nations, Gabon and Namibia in the ‘locking up’ stakes. Historically we have locked up people at a rate higher than our Western neighbours.

Criminologist John Pratt argues that while friendliness and egalitarianism was very much a feature of early New Zealand society and culture, our desire to defend ‘paradise’ led to a marked intolerance for those who threatened its social cohesion. Homogeneity was hallowed, diversity was discouraged. Outsiders were not welcome – dissent was frowned on – paradise had to be preserved at all costs. Ferocious anti-vagrancy and prostitution legislation were passed in the 1870s. Our treatment of conscientious objectors and attitudes toward homosexuals was much more punitive and harsh than other commonwealth countries.

The market reforms of the 1980’s triggered the start of a more recent trend toward increased punitiveness. Individualism competed with

collectivism, meritocracy with egalitarianism, choice with uniformity, indulgence with frugality. Crime was no longer an indicator of deprivation and need; its primary function was to signal indiscipline and inadequate controls; which must be dealt with through incapacitation. These beliefs had the great political advantage of excluding any possibility that the offender may be disadvantaged, poorly socialized, or marginalised as a result of the government's social and economic policies. Instead, the solution lay in the imposition of more controls, and a 'zero tolerance' approach to offending.

In recent years the criminal justice sector has become just one part of the government's artillery which opposes policies that appear to benefit the 'undeserving poor', exhibits increased cynicism about welfare, and supports more aggressive controls for an underclass that is perceived to be disorderly, drug-prone, violent and dangerous.

Increasingly, punishment has extended beyond the criminal justice system. The communities that most offenders come from have experienced a reduction in primary healthcare services, increased evictions from and ineligibility for social housing, decreased access to justice, increased levels of unemployment, a decline in the level of welfare support, the introduction of 'workfare', and increased pressure to 'behave' without any commensurate provision of support. In this scenario, the basic idea that all humans are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect, gets lost.

How have Christians responded to this cultural shift? In my experience, those who are actively involved in caring for prisoners and offenders find that church leaders and fellows in Christ are unsupportive. As a result many develop an ambivalent theological position between what they practice, and what they believe. There is often a gap between what we actually believe and what we think we should believe, between official and operative theologies. Official theology is the theology created by our particular orthodoxy, while operative theology consists of the beliefs that inform our day-to-day lives. In other words, Christians may feel compassion toward the least, lost and lonely, but publicly express views which are less aligned to the gospel, and makes them indistinguishable from non-Christians.

Author Richard Snyder goes further.<sup>1</sup> He proposes that the prevailing understanding of grace feeds into a punitive culture that builds upon and reinforces it. He suggests that two crucial distortions prevail. First there is an absence of creation grace – the doctrinal emphasis is upon the fall, original sin, and total depravity – it is difficult to find an affirmation of the beauty, goodness and worth in all creation. If it is only in redemption that grace is restored, it becomes easy to think that those whose condition is less favourable (criminals, the sick, the poor) are reaping the just deserts of their unrepentant state. It then becomes possible to treat them as less than human.

Second, the misguided idea that the sole focus of redemption should be upon the person who has fallen. Redemption is as much a corporate and institutional dynamic as a personal one. It is not only persons that need redeeming; it is also public policies, institutions, and the corporate structures of our lives.

In that scenario, society's own complicity in the creation of criminals is quickly lost sight of in outpourings of moral indignation at individual offenders. That in turn, feeds and supports our punitive culture.

Our task as Christians, is to recover an understanding of the social, collective nature of sin and salvation both in terms of contemporary reality, and biblical witness – a return to the social gospel of the early twentieth century. Rauschenbusch contrasted the emphasis upon individual salvation with what he understood as the heart of both prophetic Judaism and the ministry of Jesus.

*The reign of God for which the prophets hoped was a social hope on fire with religion. Their concern was for the largest and noblest social group with which they were in contact – their nation.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Snyder, T Richard, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment" William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Rauschenbusch, Walter, "Christianising the Social Order" (New York: Macmillan, 1921), p.52.

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