

At coffee last Wednesday morning, we were discussing the knife attack in Southport during which three young girls lost their lives and others, adults & children, were severely injured. Since then, there have been shocking riots, targeting asylum seekers, mosques, people of minority ethnicities and non-Christian religions. During the course of this mayhem there has been much damage to property and police officers have suffered injuries – some of them serious. I have been disgusted to hear these thugs claiming to be British or English patriots and defending our Christian heritage. They bring disgrace on our flag of St George, whose legend is the protection of the vulnerable, who gave up his life for his faith, whose emblem represents his own blood mingled with that of the Prince of Peace, Whose Death on the Cross teaches us that love overcomes hatred, that life is more powerful than death, that the Light will always shine in the darkness, and that the powers of evil are defeated not at the point of a sword or out of the barrel of a gun, but by self-sacrificial love. There is no other way. Evil can only be finally conquered through self-sacrificial love.

After coffee, I went home and read the *Times*. It happened that its daily extract from the *Times* 100 years previously featured this passage, beginning with a reference to the way things were done 101 years before that.

Crime has always been a problem for society to deal with. It was in 1823. It was in 1924. So it is today. But what do we do about it? In the early C19, the proposed remedy for crime was ever harsher sentencing. It didn't work. Cruel punishments, especially when administered to children, resulted in a feeling of revulsion on the part of decent people for the whole legal process. In fact, sometimes, even in those days, juries would refuse to convict someone who was quite clearly guilty because the likely sentence would have been hideously cruel.

Brutal punishments seldom make guilty people into better people. They are more likely to brutalise them further. Fear is not a deterrent if people do not expect to get caught, which is the not wholly unjustified expectation of most criminals; nor if a crime is committed without thought on the spur of the moment; nor if the criminal is so desperate, perhaps because of extreme hardship, that the risk of being caught and punished is, in the opinion of the perpetrator of the crime, outweighed by the certainty of being cold and hungry.

The *Times* of a hundred years ago debated three then available types of punishment. There was the birch, which the *Times* tells us, even the magistrates regarded as useless in the deterrence of crime or the reformation of criminals. Most criminals don't consider the risk of being caught or, if they do, regard the risk of punishment for, say, burglary in the same way as a miner considers the possibility of a pit accident or a deep sea fisherman the chance of drowning, simply as an unavoidable aspect of the job. As for the likelihood of reforming the criminal by such a barbaric punishment as birching, surely the probability is much greater that he will be brutalised beyond redemption.

It was reported that fines were often paid by parents. Sometimes, no doubt, they are paid out of the proceeds of subsequent crime. Fines are also tougher on poor people than on rich people who can easily pay.

Prisons have rightly been described as universities of crime. Many come out worse than they went in and recidivism rates have always been high.

So what is to be done? The *Times* of 31st July 1924 put its hope in probation and special schools. The hope would be that, by treating criminals firmly, fairly, decently and with respect, and offering appropriate education, it might be possible to reform these juvenile delinquents, or, rather, give them the incentive and the opportunity to reform themselves.

The purpose of sentencing is that justice is done – the criminal suffers in proportion to the crime committed (though, as a Christian, I would assert that justice ought always to be tempered with mercy); that others are deterred from committing similar offences; and that the bad guy comes out of the process a better person.

All this is very difficult and, in a sense, too late. It would be much better if the crimes were not committed in the first place than that offenders are caught and punished or even reformed.

There is a place for fear in deterrence. I don't like it. It seems wrong that a human being, made in the image of God, for whom Christ died, should only abstain from doing what he ought not to do and apply himself to do what he really ought to do just because he is afraid of the consequences of doing otherwise. Fear does have a place, however, in deterring us sinful human beings from neglecting our obligations. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*

Ultimately, it is only God we ought to fear. Jesus says: *Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.* Martyrs of long ago like George and dissidents today in Putin's Russia or Xi's China have not been deterred from standing up for what they believe to be right by fear of what the authorities might do to them.

Fear doesn't have the final say. That honour belongs to love. There is in the Litany a prayer, *That it may please thee to give us an heart to love and dread thee, and diligently to live after thy commandments.* Fear has a role in keeping us in order, but ultimately what makes us good people is love. Good people do what is right and refrain from doing what is wrong simply because they are good people. They need no other motive, no fear of the consequences of doing wrong, no prospect of a reward for doing right, only love – love for God and for our fellow human beings.

We are what we eat. What we feed on nourishes us and makes us the people we are. We hear of prisoners being fed on bread and water as punishment. The Bible teaches, however, that Jesus is the Bread of Life and that He is the Water of Life. If we are nourished by Jesus, if we feed on Him, we become like Him. We take up our cross and follow Him. We grow into the likeness of God Who is love. It follows that the way to prevent crime is to introduce the world to the Truth of God, to bring up our children in the fear of the Lord, to share our faith with our contemporaries – to demonstrate God's love in our lives, including in our dealings with those who have really messed up.