

Capital Punishment

Churches, the evangelical community is even more overwhelmingly on the other side. My brother Bert and his wife in Winnipeg are very active in the Christian Missionary Alliance Church, and I am very much aware of those who think overwhelmingly on the other side of the question that we should reinstate capital punishment.

My presentation is more of a politician's argument rather than that of the professor I am on political leave. It has been suggested that we should follow the majority. Of course, as a New Democrat, I have never been partial to that argument from the beginning due to the radius to lead in what has been a minority position which, fortunately, is becoming smaller. Of course, I still want as many of those whom I respect as possible on my side of the question.

I was pleased to be able to link a past Moderator of my church of present affiliation, the United Church of Canada, and co-chairing the Alliance Against the Reinstatement of Capital Punishment and other leaders, including the present Moderator, with my Mennonite forebearers and those who lead the communities today and others.

I am a supporter of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association which held a great rally in Toronto against reinstatement at the beginning of June. I support the work of Amnesty International. I have received many letters from people connected with that organization encouraging me not to support reinstatement. I respect all of these voices intensely. I would find it intensely unsettling if they were people opposing my stand. These were consolations to a politician who has taken the particular moral stance I have taken.

In considering the position held by the Member for Kitchener and the Member for London East (Mr. Jepson) for theological reasons, which relatives and friends of mine in various parts of the country have also taken, I was interested to read an article in the May issue of the United Church *Observer* which contained the admirable title: "Do Justice and Love Mercy".

The article by the Reverend Victor Shepherd under the title "Murder and the Cross" comes to grips with what I believe is the most profound theological view on the question. Because I respect the communities for which the Member for Kitchener and the Member for London East have been speaking in their way in the House, I want to put this on the record for consideration as a profoundly powerful statement of the counterview, using some of the same Scripture that they would be prepared to accept, yet resulting in a diametrically opposed position. The author states:

Murder is dreadful. Its victims spend their last moments in anguish. There is a unique finality to the crime, since the murder victim can neither recover nor be compensated.

It's no wonder that the public reacts angrily, nor surprising that anger intensifies to rage. Rage, after all, is more than a mindless reaction to murder. Rage is an appropriate Christian response, since the Christian's rage reflects God's.

God's anger, every bit as real as God's love.

Every Hebrew prophet reminds the people that to disobey, ignore, or trifle with God is invariably to incur God's wrath. Jesus himself was livid on many occasions, not least when his premeditated violence (it takes considerable time to braid cords into a whip) flayed those who were exploiting defenceless men and women. Those who are outraged at murder, then, are not reacting in an unchristian or sub-human manner. Their response is one with God's. And when an outraged society cries out that the murderer deserves to die, God concurs: The murderer does deserve to die.

With this conviction in mind we must learn from Scripture how God does deal with the murderer. With all of us, in fact. Perhaps we are surprised to read that "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), that "none is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). While Scripture never regards murder as anything but heinous, nevertheless it insists that before God, the only searcher of human hearts, each of us is a sinner with nothing to plead in self defence. There is a solidarity-in-sinnership which admits of no excuses and no exceptions.

Yet there is also one who has come to us, stood with us, and taken upon himself the condemnation owing (or falling on) all of us. "One has died for all therefore all have died". (2 Corinthians 5:14). The apostle's word could not be plainer. For in the profoundest sense, the death of Jesus gathers up in itself the death which the murderer and the rest of us unrighteous rebels deserve alike.

This plain but profound word takes us to the very heartbeat of Scripture, the atonement. The atonement makes one of God and a runaway world.

Jesus insists he came precisely to give himself as a ransom for sinners (Mark 10:45). On the eve of his crucifixion, distressed and distraught at the ordeal before him, he ponders asking if he can be spared it all. He is jolted as he realizes afresh, "No for this purpose I have come to this hour." (John 12:27) Too often we assume that Jesus came to show us something or tell us something, as though the root human ailment were our ignorance. Really, the root human problem is humankind's defiant disobedience, a situation which God must punish even as God longs to spare the creation the condemnation it deserves and from which it cannot extricate itself.

The purpose of Christ's coming, then, is to do something; namely to act as God's agent in reconciling the entire creation to God and in restoring it to the "way" or "walk" to which God has appointed it. For this reason the cross or the atonement is the event in which the passions of sinners and God collide and from which the church's life and thought radiate.

For every New Testament writer the death of Jesus is not merely a matter of biological cessation nor even a matter of martyrdom . . . The death of Jesus, rather, is seen to be tied up with God's judgment on sin. God had always decreed that sin must issue in estrangement from God, banishment from God's presence. It does. As sinners, all of us deserve God's judgment, and all of us call it down on ourselves. Yet when Jesus cries, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"—

All New Testament writers discern that the condemnation the world merits has been borne by the one who gathers up our sinful humanity before God even as he mediates God's mercy to us. "One died, therefore all have died." All of us are fixed in the same condemnation; and as that condemnation is borne away, all of us are made beneficiaries of the same mercy. In other words, God's condemnation spares no one in order that God's mercy may miss no one.

This being the case, can it ever be appropriate for Christians to insist on adding to what God has accepted as sufficient, the acceptance which God declares in raising Jesus from the dead?

To suggest that God requires "something more" (the death of the murderer) is surely to try to do better than what God has already pronounced will have the desired effect.

As the truth of God's purpose and the effectiveness of God's act transfigure our mind and heart, we understand why the apostle says, "Never avenge yourselves. Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 12:9) The command of God is clear: Christians must renounce any claim to vengeance. But not because Christians can afford to, smugly knowing that God will "do it" for them.

The text means something else. We should renounce our claim to vengeance simply because we are near-sighted people with partial perspective and stoney hearts who cannot comprehend the murderer's entire situation. God alone sees the situation whole since God alone is the searcher of the heart. God alone discerns the many factors of which we are not aware or do not want to be: The