

The Value of Parole

by Martin Hattersley

Saint Luke's gospel, Chapter 15, tells the story of two problem children. One left home, wasted much of his life and his money, and in the end saw what a fool he had been, and came back. The second boy stayed home, kept the family farm going, and never put a foot out of place. But when his wastrel brother came home, he was the one who sulked, and refused to share in the joy of the family reunion.

September 28th, Clergy day, was one where the clergy of the Edmonton Diocese heard a number of valuable presentations and had valuable discussions on the subject of Confession and Absolution - a practice available even if not compulsory within the Anglican communion, and much valued by those who had made use of it.

Yet in discussion at our table, something very profound came up. For reconciliation, it was not enough simply for the younger brother to come home and confess his mistakes. The elder brother, representative of the "ninety nine just persons who need no repentance" needed still to be ready to receive the repentant sinner back into the fellowship of the family. And in more than one church, there was an un-Christian attitude among many members of the congregation that had made such reconciliation entirely impossible, causing continued and unresolved dissension in the church fellowship.

For me, it seemed an appropriate introduction to the events of the evening - a public information seminar, "Community Safety - the Value of Parole", sponsored by the Edmonton Institution and North Alberta Parole Citizens' Advisory Committee, of which I am currently Chairman. As a group of volunteers who have the opportunity of meeting regularly with staff, administration and inmates, we on this Committee also have a responsibility to give information to the public on what is going on within the correctional system. This was our attempt to inform Edmontonians of the processes and successes of corrections and parole.

Speakers included Chris Price, Warden of the Edmonton Institution (that grim looking place with yellow lights all around it, that you see on Highway 15 going towards Fort Saskatchewan), Roy Trace, a former inmate still on lifelong parole, now working as an "inreach worker", travelling between five institutions in Northern Alberta, and counselling long term offenders to help them return safely to society after serving their time. Representatives of the Parole Service, the Elizabeth Fry Society, and a parolee who had successfully returned to society, completed the picture.

With all the crime and justice shows coming to us from the U.S. on TV, Canadians easily get a completely false picture of the crime and justice scene in this country. In Canada, a person has only one tenth of the chance of being murdered as in the States: one sixth of the chance of being sent to prison, and the chance of being victim of a crime committed by someone who has already "done time" in the federal system is actually the lowest in the world, around one half of one percent of all crimes in Canada being committed by such persons. Overall, rates of crime are currently falling, and have been for several years.

"Stamping out Crime" does not necessarily mean "Stamping on Criminals", though many politicians, editorialists and radio hosts make their living by having us think otherwise. The alternative method is to have the offender find a way of living without crime, and that involves basic education, as well as learning anger management and life skills, getting away from drink and drugs, and dealing with the social conditions that encourage people to become involved in crime. In many ways, this is actually what is being done, particularly through an intensively supervised parole procedure, and it is meeting with a great deal of success.

However, dealing with the problems of the younger brother is only one half of the task. The other fifty percent is dealing with those of the elder - that fearful and unforgiving attitude to offenders so deeply ingrained in our society and often enough also in our churches. In that direction, there is an enormous amount of progress still to be made. Yet to us in the church has been committed the "ministry of reconciliation".

So if any of you out there are interested in knowing more about what goes on in Canada's corrections system, please feel free to contact me - most conveniently by e-mail. You may be being called to a very interesting ministry!

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