

Minister's Message – July 2013

Convicted Murderer

Men convicted and sentenced for murder are roaming the streets of our city. Have they escaped from prison? No, they were set free. A woman at a bus stop was attacked and almost killed by a convicted murderer. We read about serial killers, but this is different. This was a man who was caught, convicted and incarcerated. People are asking 'How can this happen in our civilised society?' 'How can we feel safe if convicted murderers are on the street?'

This would not have happened some years ago. In 1967 Ronald Ryan was convicted of murder and was executed in Victoria. Since then the death penalty has been removed from the law in all states. Since 2010 a Federal law, based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, prohibits capital punishment in Australia.

Why this change within the last fifty years in the law regarding capital punishment? Surveys shown that there was a change in public opinion. Laws, of course, reflect public opinion. But why the change in public opinion? This change in public opinion parallels other changes in society such as a turning away from theism and the truths of the Bible, and the rise of humanism.

The theory of evolution has undermined the truth that human beings are created in the image of God. After the Genesis flood God told Noah 'whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God he made man' (Genesis 9:7). Human beings are made in the image of God – we have an eternal soul. In the theory of evolution the killing of a man is no different to the killing of a whale or a cat.

Liberal theology also arose at this time, partly as an attempt to accommodate the theory of evolution. This theology served to undermine the authenticity and authority of the Bible. The Old Testament was largely discounted, and a 'loving Jesus' was portrayed as being indifferent to sin. Yet Jesus upheld the moral law and the command 'do not murder'. This law states that 'if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbour to kill him by treachery, you shall take him ... that he may die' (Exodus 21:14). This is God's law and it is not abrogated in the New Testament.

Man's law tends to disregard the rights of the innocent victim because they have no voice. Man's law puts the rights of the living murderer above those of the dead victim. We rightly question the justice of such law.

The possibility of executing an innocent person must be considered. One criminologist writing on the ongoing debate about capital punishment said 'Those who argue for the death penalty on the grounds that at least the killer is removed permanently from society, have also to keep in mind that in practice the death penalty is often administered capriciously, and that there is always the possibility that an innocent person may be executed'.

For sure we do not want to see people being executed for all manner of crimes by a corrupt judicial system, as seen in some countries. The Bible does not condone vengeance or capricious execution. But it does say of the governing authority appointed by God that it 'does not bear the sword in vain' (Romans 13:4). If we do evil we expect the ruling authority to punish us. We expect this authority to judge every case with credible witnesses and evidence, and to do so without partiality. We expect the offender to be punished according to the crime. We are left to ponder how many more innocent people will be attacked or murdered by convicted murderers set free in our society.