

Another Chance
12 September 2010

Exodus 32:7-14

The most positive person I have ever met is Billy Graham, and I am not talking about the famous evangelist. This Billy Graham grew up in Naenae. Back in the 1950s, the young Billy was something of a reprobate. He got up to horrendous mischief, often targeting Hoppy Hodges, the local cop. Once Billy souvineered the nameplate from Hoppy's office door in the Lower Hutt police station. Another time, after numerous unsuccessful attempts, he used a home made catapult to shoot out the red cherry light on the roof of Hoppy's police car.

Billy had the habit of finding things that people had not yet lost. When he was eight he was spotted climbing through a skylight at the Griffins factory at three o'clock in the morning. The police arrived just as he was coming out the back door with a trolley full of Mallowpuffs. When he saw Hoppy's car pulling up, he tried to make a dash for freedom.

In Billy's words, "He got his nickname because he had a bit of a limp, but it meant nothing when he saw some little rascal disappearing down the road. In mid-stride, and doing a sub-four-minute mile, he still had enough balance and timing to put a size 14 regulation police boot right up your Khyber".

Hoppy may have been tough but he was also fair. He could see the good in people and would try to bring it out. After the great biscuit burglary, Hoppy could have thrown the book at Billy but he did not. Instead he started taking him to Dick Dunn's boxing gym, as he did with many other wayward young people in Naenae.

Dick taught his charges to believe in themselves and transformed many lives in the process. He did not teach them to be thugs but he did teach them how to avoid being hurt. He taught them the value of kindness and listening. He taught them self-respect and respect for others. He also created many champions, including Billy, who achieved great success in the ring and became the New Zealand senior welterweight champion at just 16. Between them, Dick Dunn and Hoppy Hodges helped rescue many young people who had gone off the rails, diverted them from the road to prison, and gave them another chance in life.

In today's Older Testament lesson, Moses interceded with God after He declared his intention to punish His people who had turned their

backs on Him and worshipped the golden calf. There is much that could be said about this story, but I will make just two points.

Firstly, God listens to us. Our prayers are always heard. They may not always be answered in the way we want or expect them to be, but God is always listening. We don't have to be Moses on Mount Sinai for Him to hear us.

Secondly, God will forgive our sins. It is often said that God in the Older Testament is a God of judgment, yet in this story His judgment is transformed into mercy. As today's gospel reading reminds us, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. God gave the Hebrews another chance, and He will do the same for us.

How good though are we at giving other people another chance? In the western world, only the United States of America has a higher imprisonment rate than New Zealand, yet many in society are understandably outraged by media reports of horrific crimes and call for tougher sentencing.

However, tougher sentencing is an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff approach. We need look more closely at the causes of crime. Crime prospers when there is a growing gap between rich and poor, as there seems to be in New Zealand.

The 'lock 'em up and throw away the key' approach is motivated by little more than a desire for retribution, and I am concerned that the 'three strikes' approach will result in desperate criminals who have nothing to lose.

I have friends working in prison ministry, and they have told that no more than around 4% of prisoners pose any real long term threat to society. Most prison inmates are not there for serious violent offending. My friends have told me about some miracles and also about some tragedies.

One recently told me about one of New Zealand's most feared and most notorious criminals. It seemed everyone in the prison system had given up on him; everyone that is, except the chaplains, who were helping him in ways that it seemed nobody else had, such as teaching him how to read. This prisoner came to know Christ. Significant changes were happening in him as a result. His time in the prison chapel became the highlight of his existence. However, the prison authorities decided to transfer him to a different unit, and four days later he was dead.

I am not saying that we should not be kept safe from those who pose a genuine danger, but I do say there is a lot that needs to change in the criminal justice system, and we should also remember that nobody is completely beyond redemption.

So what happened to Billy Graham in the end? He went on to become a butcher, teacher, salesman and motivational speaker. Then, inspired by his mentor Dick Dunn, he opened his own boxing gym in 2006, the Naenae Boxing Academy. He called it an academy because an academy is a place where you learn.

Billy's academy is transforming the lives of marginalised, demonised and disaffected young men, who are swapping vandalism, tagging and burglary for self discipline, self esteem and self respect. The Naenae police, who of course have a long acquaintance with Billy, are full of praise for him.

One fact about Billy that is often left out of the media stories is his Christian faith. In his autobiography he said, "God plays a big part in my life and it's a great feeling in the heart department I am not alone".

Thanks to his efforts, boys who were on the road to prison are heading towards a positive future. Billy Graham is giving them another chance in life, just as God offers us a clean slate when we repent and turn to Him.

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