

## PRAYER SERVICE AGAINST CRIME

SERMON DELIVERED BY REVD JOHN BORMAN

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Last Monday the SABC's 7 o'clock news bulletin featured the latest round of heinous crimes. There had been three cash-in-transit heists, one of them here in Durban. They went on to show that five years ago there had been 192 such attacks. And last year that figure had risen to somewhere in the high four hundreds. Every year it had got worse. I quietly gave thanks that at least we were being honest about the extent of the problem and not pretending it wasn't happening. Well, where does God fit into all this, and what can we as the Christian community do about it?

In the Bible, in I Timothy 1:8 St Paul says, "*We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers and mothers, for murderers, for adulterers, and perverts, for slave traders and perjurers – and whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God*". I don't know if it is any comfort to you – but the apostles and early Christians lived in a society just as bedeviled by evil as is ours today. I wish I had time to explain the meaning of each of the Greek words which those translated phrases convey. I haven't, and even if I had let me assure you, you would think it was a description of modern day South Africa anyway, and you don't need me to emphasize the pickle we have got ourselves into.

Now, way back well over three thousand years ago God gave the law of the ten commandments to Moses on Mt Sinai. And the purpose of those commandments was to give people life. They weren't just rules that made life unbearable or miserable, or to deprive people of fun and laughter. They were given because God wanted his people to have life. And where right down the ages those laws have been violated – as they are being violated so flagrantly in SA today – then there has come not life, but death. It used to be said, "You cannot break the laws of God. You can only break yourself on them".

Well of course you can break them – but in doing so you will break yourself – and a lot of other people as well. And that is why there is a wave of death in South Africa today. It is not because of poverty. It is not because of housing backlogs. It is not because of unemployment or lack of education. It is because people are living in open rebellion against God. There are billions of poor people the world over who do not commit crime. There are millions of rich people who do commit crime. This is more than a sociological problem. It is more than a political issue. It is also a theological and religious problem. And insofar as the church has poured vast resources of time and thought and effort into problems which were political and social and has neglected to confront, convict and convert people to Christ, which is its basic, fundamental calling under God, then it is as much to blame for the crime wave as any of the other people to whom we normally point fingers. Of course those sociological conditions do help to foster criminal intent. What I am saying is that it is to people in their hearts that we in the church should look, rather than to conditions.

If I were a doctor I would prescribe three medications for this crime- and sin-sick society of ours.

The first is PRAYER. A few verses later on from his list of sins and crimes I just read, St Paul said, *“I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness”*. We are a priestly community and our calling is to go to God on behalf of that wider society which is hurting. We need therefore to pray for the President, for the Ministers involved in the administration of justice and for the Commissioner of Police. We need to pray for the police themselves. And maybe church groups could be appointed to go to police stations and support the policemen and policewomen with expressions of care, concern and encouragement. We could love them, instead of criticizing them and instead of blaming them for the problem. And then we could pray for those in prison who have perpetrated crime, and support those who visit them as well. And there are the families of the police, and the families of the prisoners. And there are the magistrates and judges. They all need our prayers – by “our” I mean both as individuals and as praying Christian communities.

The second medication I would prescribe is that the Christian community commits itself to work for peace. I mean peace in that bigger, deeper, richer sense in which we understand SHALOM in the Old Testament. I want to make a plea that our motto be, not “Where can we moan, and whom can we blame” but rather “Where can we help? And whom can we equip”. I’ve just been reading a book about the impact of the evangelical revival on social life in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And it gave impetus to the abolition of slavery movement. It gave rise to a whole raft of laws which made day to day working conditions more humane. It inspired improved prison conditions, better mental hospitals, and led to the establishment of popular education and orphanages. Those are the sort of things I mean by biblical shalom in day-to-day life. And shalom is the Kingdom of God.

The third prescription I would make is that churches commit themselves to pray and work for a deep revival of genuine religion. In the end it is how people are in themselves that makes them go in for crime or live positive and useful lives. Seventeen hundred years ago Bishop Ambrose of Milan said “The just man has the law of his own mind, of his own equity and of his own justice as his standard; and therefore he is not recalled from fault by terror of punishment, but by the rule of honour”. We must see that God is honoured, that Christ is proclaimed and that sinners are called to repentance. Crime is the governments problem. But sin is our problem. And only we have the solution. And that solution is Christ, his cross and his resurrection. We must move out from the easy confines of our churches to the streets of our cities and offer Christ as did Paul, and all the great apostles down all the ages. This is the real solution. And this is a deep and lasting solution that no politician can ever bring about. But the Holy Spirit can. And if we are obedient, he will.

(This Prayer Service was an initiative of the Inner City Network – a group of church leaders, organisations and individuals concerned with the challenges facing the Durban inner city. The service was supported by Diakonia Council of Churches. Please visit us at: [www.diakonia.org.za](http://www.diakonia.org.za))

