Human stories of criminal monsters

Joe Caddy | 24 October 2013

For 11 years I worked as a chaplain in a maximum security prison at Melbourne's Metropolitan Remand Centre. In that setting I would at times meet inmates who were accused of serious crimes that had shocked the community.

In a number of cases I would end up reading about the crime in the newspaper or seeing it presented on the TV news long after I had met the accused person. Invariably the person presented in the media was barely recognisable to the one that I had encountered — often being portrayed as a dangerous and irredeemable monster. And yet that would not be anything like my experience of the person I met.

Portraying a criminal as a monster makes it possible to disregard our shared humanity. It distances us from the person who has done wrong and refuses to recognise that we have more in common with them as fellow humans than we would like to imagine.

In coming to know a little about those who stood accused I came to see that they too had a story. More often than not that story included enormous deprivation, grief and sadness. They had relationships that they cherished, and I never met anyone who in their heart did not want their circumstances to be better. They wanted 'the good' but had done wrong. Certainly their wrongdoing has to be addressed, but as the famous old Pentridge chaplain Fr Brosnan used to say of his charges, they had been sinned against infinitely more than they had sinned.

For many of those who I met in prisons I could truly say that 'There but for the grace of God go I'.

Once we have labelled someone, we lose the opportunity to hear their story. If we call a person escaping oppression and seeking asylum a queue jumper or an illegal or dismiss them as 'just' an economic refugee, it becomes easier to overlook their desperate human plight. Those who are unable to sustain decent employment can equally be labelled bludgers; those who are mentally ill or homeless might be dismissed as no-hopers; those suffering from addictions as junkies.

Each of these labels that our society so readily applies does two things. First, they fail to acknowledge the enormous disparity between the relative privilege of those standing in judgement and the deprivation of those who suffer. Secondly, they dismiss the lived human experience of the 'other', making it possible for us to fail to appreciate what 'of us' is 'in them'. Labels allow us to distance the 'other' and to escape the obligations that arise out of a sense of solidarity and shared humanity. And so it is easy to become indifferent to suffering.

In July, Pope Francis visited recently arrived refugees on the island of Lampedusa. He blasted the rich world for its lack of concern for their suffering and denounced a 'globalisation of indifference'. 'We have become used to the suffering of others,' he said. 'It doesn't affect us. It doesn't interest us. It's not our business.'

If we allow comfort and privilege to blind us to the suffering of our brothers and sisters; if we allow our society to label those who are lost and on the margins of our world, thus rendering them invisible, then we are all diminished. We begin to create our own world that is exclusive, lacking in compassion, intolerant, judgemental and unable to embrace diversity.
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Man despondent in prison image from Shutterstock (http://www.shutterstock.com/pic-83010310/stock-photo-alone-man.html?src=0HS0O9MAPHmeqP9PxIjRg-1-17)

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