

## Sermon Archive 590

Sunday 14 June, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on UNUDHR - Articles 3 & 5

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**KNOX CHURCH**

love faith outreach community justice

### Reflection: A family member is tortured

The image on the front page of the order of service is of a sculpture created by Guido Rocha, a Brazilian artist. He made the work in 1975, and it's called "The Tortured Christ". I understand that it doesn't hang in any church. Not really surprising - imagine week by week gathering in a place where you're confronted by that. Most churches prefer flowers. I understand the work mainly now appears in art galleries.

Rocha's inspiration for the work came from things he saw when imprisoned in Chile for political crimes. In 1975, Chilean prisons were busy - dealing with those whom Pinochet's government hadn't "disappeared", but interrogated for information.

Extracting information from people who don't want to part with information is probably one of today's main reasons for torture. I'm not sure how often torture is effective in this respect, but I suspect it's effective most of the time. Pain is quite a motivator.

The crucifixion of Jesus, however, wasn't about extracting information. It could be argued that it was something of the opposite - a strategy for closing information down. Silence the speech, shut down the platform, conclude the story.

They could, of course, have silenced him by killing him quickly and quietly. Some mysterious falling asleep in a cell. A silenced shot to the temple somewhere where no one could see - with a fake suicide note planted. But this was a **public** execution - with signs explaining it put up in Hebrew, Latin and Greek - communicated as broadly as language could manage. Why torture someone slowly and in public? To pull others into line! If you punish publicly, you send a message. You do that, you get this. Just pay your taxes, be a good citizen in the authoritarian state and shut up. Torture is the public disincentive. To disincentivise, it needs to be public. It needs to be painful.

One wonders about the Roman soldiers whose job it was to inflict the pain. I understand that crucifixion detail was something that most soldiers would have been rostered into for a while - not a speciality. Last week, mess duties, next week crucifixion. Maybe some of them suffered nightmares from their work - you'd hope. But maybe some of them enjoyed it - the lurid satisfaction of the sadist - a rare class of people. Or maybe there's a capacity in any one of us to mine a universal anger within. Do you remember the blue eye / brown eye experiment from 1968 Iowa, where a wee bit of classroom permission led groups of children into unfathomable acts of cruelty? The thought is that there's a cruelty just waiting there, deep within everyone, for something to activate it. Like we're creatures made in the image of a really angry God. We will think about this a bit.

But for now, let us simply confess that we are members of a community whose founder, whose Lord and inspiration, was subjected to cruel, inhuman, degrading punishment. We know that that was wrong. Love convinces us. We come to Articles 3 and 5 as family. We are not indifferent. We have an axe to grind.

**The First Lesson:** Exodus 20: 1-6

**Reflection:** Is God angry?

In light of the existence of cruel, inhuman punishment in our world, we floated the idea that maybe we do it because we're creatures of a deep, underlying anger. But are we? As creatures bearing the image of God, is anger a proper part of our nature?

**Jesus** got angry. Probably, the most famous incident of his anger was when he smashed up the money changers' tables in the temple. I've always felt OK about his doing that, because it was directed not at living creatures, but at tables (inanimate objects). Although, the tables didn't put themselves there. They were put there by people - people oppressing other people. So the anger **was** directed indirectly at people. But still, there was a sense of proportionality to it all. Human greed put the tables in place, and Jesus's anger removed them. It's properly focused. You might call it the proportionate solving of a problem. Reasonable containment, no collateral damage, not difficult to justify.

But in Exodus there's another description of anger in the nature of God. We have God imparting the ten commandments to Moses, and reminding him that he's worshipping One who punishes sin to the fourth generation.

Now, punishment *might* be appropriate for Generation One - if you believe in punishment. But what about punishment for the children, the grandchildren, the great grandchildren? Does that seem disproportionate and cruel? It certainly doesn't seem fair.

Here's a wee development. While Moses and God are talking on the mountain top about punishing people in an overwhelming way, down at the foot of the mountain the people are building a golden calf and worshipping it. God notices - of course God does. God is quite observant, so it goes. In a way completely consistent with God's promise of anger, God declares that the people shall be obliterated - destroyed completely - and warns Moses to get out of the room, because a huge anger is maybe about to explode. Whereupon Moses says to God "please don't do it". Moses hurries together a series of arguments for why it would be a shame (a crying *shame*) for the people to die. Moses becomes an advocate for mercy . . . and God relents. The people shall not die today - nor their children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. Moses, made in the image of God, maybe before he thinks about what it means, goes immediately into the role of an Advocate for mercy.

God does not say to Moses "Oi, you're made in the image of an angry God". God says "OK, let the people live. I shall be merciful". And from that point of people standing before God, perhaps our role is to advocate for mercy. Strange and cruel punishments? Disproportionate punishments? Piercing our family member, so it takes him a whole day of pain to die? No. Moses takes upon himself the role of advocacy for mercy. Anger is put into check.

P.S. Moses goes down the hill, sees the golden calf, and becomes so angry that he smashes the tablets written on by the finger of God. Anger still is natural to Moses. It's just that the people don't die.

-ooOoo-

So, there we are. We live in a world where people get crucified - cruel, dehumanising punishment. We live in a world where the United Nations says this ought not to be the case. We live in a world where Jesus did get angry, but not destructively so. We follow, as Moses followed, a God who maybe calls us (at least allows us) to advocate for mercy - so that the people may live.

Before the next reading, we pause for a moment.

## **Music for Reflection**

### **The Second Lesson:** Acts 3: 1-15

#### **Reflection:** The opposite of punishment

There is the taking away of possibility. Opposite that, there is the giving of possibility. There is the fading of wellness. Opposite that, there is the giving of health. There is the closing down of life. Opposite that, there is the granting of life. If crucifixion is punishment, then its opposite - healing - is the blessing. Rome punishes - Nazareth blesses. The apostles of Jesus, following the One who was crucified, now bless a lame person, so that he jumps, walks and leaps. The people of the punished One, now act in the world for the opposite of punishment. The United Nations say "no" to cruel, degrading punishment. The people of Jesus say "yes" to punishment's opposite.

The punishment of Jesus was done in public. All the people saw. The healing of the lame man was also public. All the people saw - astonished and wondering. With a healed person clinging to him (clinging to him - is he grateful, or grateful and frightened?), Peter addresses the crowd. In his address, he draws on the image of Jesus, the healer, as One wrongfully convicted, savagely punished, cruelly killed. He puts responsibility for cruelty fair in the lap of the ways of this world. "You killed the author of life", he says; "whom God raised for the dead".

I think it is clear that God is not on the side of the practitioners of cruel and unusual punishment, but on the side of the Giver of Life.

-ooOoo-

In the First Testament, human beings of faith are called to advocate for mercy. In the New Testament, they are called to celebrate the victory of life. In whose image are we made, as we inhabit a world of the strange and usually cruel? We are made in the image of the One who gives resurrection life.

Articles 3 and 5: everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. And ours is a God of mercy and risen life.

A moment of quiet.

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