

*Sunday December 2, 2012*

## **Karma for five gangland killers**

By Jim Taylor

I feel sorry for the jurors. They spent 18 months – a year and a half out of their lives – listening to the horrific details of three gangland killings, while prohibited from discussing with anyone what they were going through. And another 12 days, sequestered, totally cut off, trying to achieve a unanimous verdict.

The length of both the trial and the sequestering set new records in B.C.

In the end, the jurors found five men, members of a gang called the Greeks, guilty of killing three other men.

One victim stole some cash and a gang cellphone while delivering drugs for them. He was tortured with a blowtorch and a hammer, and finally beaten to death with a baseball bat.

Another had his own drug network and competed with the Greeks for territory. He too was beaten with a wooden bat, then stomped by his killers' boots. It took him 17 days to die of his injuries.

The third victim had a relatively easy death – he was shot. The Greeks suspected him of blabbing information about their gang to the police.

## **Path of no return**

It would be easy for me to rant about drugs, crime, gangs, and what The Shadow used to call “the evil that lives in the hearts of men.” (Yes, I’m old enough to remember those radio dramas.)

But what interests me more is how human beings can so utterly, totally, submerge their natural feelings of compassion that they can callously beat to death someone who was probably screaming for mercy.

Yes, I do believe that even gangsters have feelings of compassion. Or they did have, once. They cuddled kittens. They fell in love. They rocked their babies in the night. They enjoyed having friends...

And then something changed.

At some point, each of those five convicted killers made a momentous decision, probably without knowing it. The decision might have come in early childhood, in their teenage years, perhaps even as young men seeking kicks. Whenever it happened, they decided that ruthlessness would serve their purposes better than kindness, brutality better than gentleness.

And having committed themselves to solving their problems with violence, they could not turn back. Because those they had treated with violence would retaliate with violence. Their only option was to be even more violent.

I remember a line from an ancient Boys’ Own Annual: “If you’re going to cheat, you’ve got to cheat more than the other guys do.”

And so the members of the Greeks gang ended up beating their victims to death with baseball bats and boots. Once they started down that path, they had no choice but to continue.

## **No turning back**

I once preached a short sermon based on Luke 9:51, which states that “Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Having made the decision to go to Jerusalem, I suggested, Jesus' crucifixion became inevitable. He set in motion his confrontations with the Temple priests and the Roman authorities. He could no longer retreat to the boonies of Galilee.

A colleague with an interfaith portfolio came to me afterwards. "Do you know what you've done?" he demanded. "You've articulated a Christian version of karma!"

Karma – the Hindu belief that all events are linked together in an endless chain of cause and effect.

Karma is not the same thing as fate. Fate does not randomly make you suffer or succeed. Rather, you harvest what you sow. Hinduism requires re-incarnation to explain karma. What you did in a previous life influences this life, which then affects what will happen to you in some future existence.

I don't buy re-incarnation. But I do recognize that my actions today will determine what I'm capable of doing tomorrow. To take an obvious example, if a moment's carelessness while woodworking loses me a finger or two, I will have difficulty typing these columns for the rest of my life.

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## Tracing things back

Karma can be good or bad. A single positive act can send ripples through a lifetime. But it's easier to track negative acts. You probably never heard of 19-year-old Gavrio Pincip. He seized an unexpected opportunity to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, on June 28, 1914. Nine million casualties followed in World War I.

The World Trade Centre may have been Osama bin Laden's way of giving the finger to American imperialism. However it happened, it set off two wars that cost 6,000 American lives, turned American indifference to Islam into hatred, and triggered continuing instability in the Middle East.

At some point, each of those members of the Greeks gang took a first step along a path of violence and lawlessness from which they could not retreat.

I don't offer that as an excuse their actions. But if they'd had a helping hand at the right time, three brutal deaths might not have happened. And a lot of lives would have been a lot less miserable.

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## YOUR TURN

First, a comment from Freda Stewart in Calgary, who felt that other responses to my column about the death of Ashley Smith took the easy way out by blaming politics and politicians. "Just blame the political system," Freda wrote, "and forget the first people who came in contact with Ashley Smith. Stuff the political yim yam. It's too late for Ashley. Who was in political power 18 years ago? Who was the Minister of Whatever 18 years ago? For whatever reason and for whoever is responsible, certain actions led to the death of this girl. Her bad behavior should have been seen to ten to twelve years... Who washed their hands of her and let her behavior worsen? Who thinks she enjoyed being this kind of outcast? The people who should have protected her let her down, whoever they were."

The rest of the letters deal with, umm, politics and politicians.

Allan Baker wrote, "Elections are both a blessing and a temptation. They are a blessing in that the political elite is answerable to citizens on a regular basis. They are a temptation in that we are asked by the elite to believe that this is democracy. It is also a temptation to believe that partisan politics is the way that we can bring about social justice in Canada. We have sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Canadians have succumbed to these

temptations. Real democracy includes elections, and it also includes an equitable distribution of power and economic means.”

John McTavish: I'm with you of course on the anchovies. Why can't we learn from our American cousins here? They split the vote even one little way on the left (and thank you Ralph Nader for the reminder ) and the most idiotic Republican can help himself to the keys of the White House. But not us. As you point out, we split the vote four or five or six different ways and -- with the exception of the Christian Heritage party -- those ways all lean to the left. Politics is the art of the possible. But you'd never know it to hear most Liberals and NDPers talking about how it's more important for them to stay apart than to get rid of the right-wingers. If somebody other than the Conservatives does get in on the strength of an intelligent protest vote, there goes the chances of an organic union for another five years.”

John Sutch from Penticton recalled “Pat Paulsen, the American comic who ran for President a couple of times partly, I guess, to prove how absurd politics can be. He used an easel and with 3 parties running to show that if one party received 40% of the vote and the other two 35% and 25% this meant that respectively there was 60%, 65% and 75% who did not want to be governed by those parties. Add the 60%, 65% and 75% together and divide the resulting 200% by 3 and Paulsen claimed this proved that 66.667% of the people do not want to be governed by anybody....

“Seriously, what really does concern me is how such a small number of people actually run and control the political parties especially at the local level. At riding meetings, one has to be surprised at how few people actually control what is going on.

“A major shakeup is long overdue as 30 years working for the Federal Government left no doubt in my mind that the major parties have become too corrupt to be allowed to continue running the country. My experience was that the Liberals were just as corrupt as the Conservatives but had become more clever at covering things up.”

Dale Perkins wrote, “As a first step, proportionate representation is an obvious one to take. It might make a momentary improvement and I expect that would be considered desirable. However, I think the pathology goes much deeper than tinkering with the electoral system.”

Eduard Hiebert, whose analysis I borrowed for part of last week's column, noted that “Your speculation that a person can be elected with but 10% of the electorate was not far off. In Alberta, Joan Crockatt was elected with just under 11% of the electorate's support, and just over 70% of the electorate not even bothering to vote for any of the candidates!”

Crockatt's riding got most of the mass media attention, for various reasons. “Regardless of what the real source of attention or dissatisfaction, they ended up with anchovies while a 1-2-3 voting process could have settled the matter by avoiding the very dilemma you articulated.”

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## **HYMNSIGHT**

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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