**Isaiah 58:1-9a. Social Justice. Keith Binns 9.2.14BN**

In 1833, the British outlawed slavery in their empire. Put your hand up if you think that that was a good thing; a bad thing? Overwhelmingly, we now look on the abolition of slavery as a good thing, a right thing, a thing that definitely should have been done. And, as I’m sure that you are aware, Christians were in the lead when it came to this issue. William Wilberforce went down in history as the great hero who led the charge.

I’m starting this sermon on social justice with the illustration of the slave trade because it is so instructive. Because, back then, a congregation like this would have had a variety of views on abolition. Some people would have been in favour, but others would have pointed to the economic cost of abolition, and I’ve read estimates that the British Empire took a hit of 25% in the years following abolition. It cost quite a bit. And there would be those who would point out, quite rightly, that the Bible assumes and condones slavery, to the extent of including its regulation in the Mosaic Law and, of course, who can forget St Paul telling slaves to be obedient to their masters?

So if abolishing slavery would cost a lot, and it was condoned by Scripture, why was it that Christians were in the forefront of the abolition movement? Couldn’t they read their bibles? One, John Newton, was even a parson. Surely he could read his Bible.

The answer lies in a very important distinction when it comes to finding out what Scripture actually means. The question is: Do you go by the letter of the law or the spirit of the law? If the abolitionists had gone by the letter of the law then they would not have been abolitionists. They went by the spirit of the law, which was summed up by the Rabbi Hillel a few years before Jesus: He said: “Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to you: that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.” Sound familiar? Jesus turns the negative into a positive: Do to others what you would have them do to you. Would you like to be a chattel slave and worked to death, literally, in the hot sun? No? Well, don’t make someone else do it.

Do you see how weird this is to a lot of us? As a youngster I was taught that if you wanted to know what the Bible said on a particular issue then you simply went to a bit that seemed to apply and that was what you did. To go beyond that and look at the spirit of what the bible said seemed so airy fairy and down right liberal when you have it all in black and white. Why, you could end up doing the opposite of what the Bible actually says! But if you want to free the slaves, which we all agreed was a good thing, then that is what you must do. You can’t do it by proof texting. The texts just aren’t there. The ones that were there opposed you. You had to launch out and make an adult decision based on the spirit of the law. You had to have the courage to say “I think that this is what the Bible really means and those texts which oppose me aren’t important.”

Of course, that’s what we all do whether we realise it or not. We are all selective literalists. We all think that bits of the bible are more important than others. And there are bits we choose to ignore. Take, for example, 1Peter 3 Wives,*3 Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; 4 rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight.* If I brought in a bucket and said “Right, ladies, all gold, including wedding rings, into the bucket. And undo those plaits, young lady, don’t you know your Bible? And you, the wife of the squillionare, off to Target to get some appropriate clothing and don’t turn up wearing Gucci again.” you’d think I was nuts. I certainly wouldn’t be invited back. But that’s what the scripture says. We just choose to ignore it. We all pick and choose. It’s not a question of whether we pick and choose, but whether we are honest that we are doing that.

And so we finally come to our Isaiah passage, a passage that I take very seriously. I’m a bit lonely because most Christians choose to ignore the Bible’s clear teaching on Social Justice. They select other passages to make a song and dance about. I choose this passage.

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

At this point in their history, the Israelites are not in a good place. They have been conquered by the Babylonians. Many have been killed, many women raped and many children brutally killed as a reading of Psalm 137 makes graphically clear. And why has God let this happen? Not, surprisingly, because of that topic that is so often banged on about today: their sexual morality. No, it is because they have failed to look after the most vulnerable in their society. They have failed to share their bread with the hungry, not given clothes to the naked and not looked after their own family. They have not done social justice.

Let’s look at another example: Sodom. We all know what the sin of Sodom was, don’t we? It was a variety of sexual sin. It’s even become a word. We’re wrong. When you consult the prophet Ezekiel, 16:49, and get scripture to comment on scripture, we find, *This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy*. If you have the Apocrypha in your Bible turn to the Wisdom of Solomon. Commenting on Sodom that Jewish writer said Sodom: *refused to receive strangers when they came to them, but these made slaves of guests who were their benefactors*. It was not for sexual sin that Sodom was condemned. It was for failing to honour the ancient and sacred traditions of hospitality. Have a look at how Abraham treats his guests. That wasn’t a one off because they were angels - that was normal procedure. How did the people of Sodom treat their guests? We all know the story. If you don’t, read it tonight when the children are in bed. God does not look with approval on those who exploit the poor and fail to help them. He is particularly down on those who violently oppress the poor.

Jesus makes this abundantly clear in his first recorded sermon. 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, **19** to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." **20** And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. **21** Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." His listeners, familiar with the historical context of Isaiah, would not have taken that as simply meaning saving people from their sins, as I heard recently preached. They would have thought that he meant what he said.

Social justice matters to God, because God is a good Australian: He is always barracking for the underdog. And how should we react? With action, of course. But I hesitate at this point because Christians are so divided over so many issues, just as they were over the abolition of slavery. So I make only a few pleas and a few suggestions:

Realise that a certain percentage of what you give should go to promote social justice rather than evangelism. God is interested in both. If you support either World Vision or Tear Fund they do both.

Identify an issue that you get annoyed about that is a matter of injustice, not of morality. For me, the current federal government policy to privilege private schools over public schools when it comes to funding is an issue that I get steamy about. What is it for you? Then, act. Write to the appropriate Member of Parliament. One of the confronting things about doing social justice is that it is always political. You can’t escape it.

Join a group of like-minded people. I’m a member of Get Up, for example, an on-line group. One of the fun things is that you don’t have to support all the campaigns, just the ones you agree with. It’s not like a political party or a conservative church where you have to toe the party line. But it means that you have a lot of people trying to influence government, not just lone voices. I just gave a donation to help fund the legal battle to stop the dredging on the barrier reef, for example. That’s something I wouldn’t have a hope of doing on my own.

Think through issues that you feel strongly about in the light of social justice. A good example here is Climate Change. You can argue till the cows come home on whether it exists or not. But, if it’s real, then those most affected will be those who are the most poor. They will have no buffer. They will starve. According to World Vision’s Tim Costello, many already are. So the question is not, does climate change exist? The question becomes: If all those poor people will be so adversely affected if climate change is real, is it just to do nothing? Is it worth the risk of all that injustice? That is a different question. Climate Change is also an interesting issue because the sub-text of so many of the arguments are economic. It has a lot of parallels with the slavery issue because of that.

Try and think through issues from the point of view of the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. If Christians had not learnt to do that then we’d still have legal slavery in Australia and you wouldn’t have Carol as a rector. Women should, after all, keep silent in church. The next time you get hot under the collar about an issue, ask: If I was them, would I like to be treated that way? Is what is happening so awful that I’ll have to have the courage to give up on proof texting? That’s what the abolitionist had to do and to a lesser extent what the advocates of women in church leadership had to do. I suggest to you that you will change the way you look at the issue, even if you don’t change your mind.

Be prepared to end up in some odd places. If, for example, the sin of Sodom is to fail to welcome and protect the stranger, how does that relate to boat people? Which of the three major political parties, Coalition, Labor and the Greens, welcome the stranger best? Which are guilty of the sin of Sodom? Depending on your own political preferences, that may not be a question that you care to answer.

Social justice matters to God and so it should matter to us. Isaiah tells us so. Jesus tells us so. But in case you missed it, the Gospel according to Matthew takes the extraordinary step of linking our own personal eternal destiny to how well we do it. We all know *that if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead then you will be saved.* But, according to St Matthew, Jesus hadn’t read Romans and so said something slightly different:

 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,**33** and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. **34** Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **35** for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' **37** Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' **40** And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' **41** Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; **42** for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' **44** Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' **45** Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' **46** And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."