

## Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11 JUSTICE

What does the word ‘justice’ mean in the Scriptures? A multiple choice answer follows. See which answer you prefer:

Is it a) punishment for wrongdoing? A couple of months ago, I was coming home from my eye appointment in Sydney at around 8.30 pm. I entered the Bodalla town limits, without slowing down much till I was actually in the built up area. My bad. I received a polite request requiring payment for my inattention to the placement of the sign, courtesy of a hidden speed camera.

Is it b) Making sure the world’s resources are fairly distributed? Andrew Carnegie was once accosted by an angry socialist, who believed that Carnegie had way too much money. He believed that all wealth should be equally distributed amongst the people of the world. Carnegie whispered to his secretary, who came back to him moments later with a slip of paper. “Here you are,” said Carnegie, handing him some change. “This 16c represents your share of my wealth.”

Is it c) Getting our just deserts? St Chrysostom once said, “God is just. This (we) all acknowledge. But many sinners have had their departure into another world without punishment, while many righteous men have had their departure after suffering ten thousand grievous things. If then God be just, where will He reward their good to the one class, and their punishment to the other, if there be no perdition and no resurrection?” His case for heaven and hell, perhaps.

or is it d) Something that is restorative rather than retributive? Catholic priest and theologian Richard Rohr says, “If we read (the prophets) carefully and honestly, we will see that God’s justice is restorative. In each case, after the prophet chastises the Israelites for their transgressions against YHWH, the prophet continues by saying, in effect, “And here’s what YHWH will do for you: God will now love you more than ever! God will love you into wholeness. God will pour upon you a gratuitous, unbelievable, unaccountable, irrefutable love that you will finally be unable to resist.”

Which definition of justice sprang to mind first, I wonder? Throughout my early Christian years, I thought God’s justice was all about punishment. I had much to learn....

let me continue with more of the quote from Richard Rohr:

He says, “God “punishes” us by loving us more! How else could divine love be supreme and victorious?” Interesting! He continues, “Love is the only thing that transforms the human heart. In the Gospel we see Jesus fully revealing this divine wisdom. Love takes the shape and symbolism of healing and radical forgiveness—which is just about all that Jesus does. Jesus, who represents God, usually transforms people at the moments when they most hate themselves, when they most want to punish themselves or feel shame and guilt. Look at

Jesus' interaction with the tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). He doesn't belittle or punish Zacchaeus; instead, Jesus goes to his home, shares a meal with him, and treats him like a friend. Zacchaeus' heart is opened and transformed.

As Isaiah says of God, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). Yet I am afraid we largely pulled God down into "our thoughts." We think fear, anger, divine intimidation, threat, and punishment are going to lead people to love. Show me where that has worked. You cannot lead people to the highest level of motivation by teaching them the lowest. God always and forever models the highest, and our task is merely to "imitate God" (Ephesians 5:1 - Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children).

It is this definition of justice - restorative justice - that we see in our Isaiah reading this morning.

Jesus quoted part of this passage as his own mission statement in Luke 4:18.

Let me read it to you again...

**"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."**

Let's look at how Jesus did this and how we can imitate him...

**Jesus was sent to preach the good news to the poor.** In his ministry, Jesus lived simply and frugally. He associated with the poor, the destitute, and the 'low lifes' of his culture. He not only shared with them the message of God's love, but he *lived* it by his unconditional acceptance of them, by eating and drinking with them, sharing his time and his gifts with them, and including them amongst his closest friends.

In our service of Jesus, we are called to minister to the poor as he did.

That doesn't just mean finding the poor wherever they are, and sharing the message of the cross with them.

It is that, but more than that, it is working to set to right that which is unjust. It is working to bring the love of Christ to bear on the poverty in the world. It is working to *alleviate* poverty wherever and however we can. Only then are we proclaiming justice, and only then does the preaching of the cross carry its full weight.

It may mean that we are called at times to reassess our consumer driven lifestyles, and live a little more simply. It may mean looking outside our church and our families, and befriending those who are the 'poor' in our community, assisting them to find help in their situations. It may mean becoming actively involved in setting right the social injustice we see around us.

I remember a quip I heard recently: Someone asked, “How much would it cost to feed all the hungry in the world?” The answer was, “A lot less than it costs to bomb them!”

**Jesus was sent to proclaim freedom for the captives and release to the oppressed.** Jesus got his hands dirty. He touched a leper - held captive by his disease. He healed the demonised, the insane and the broken - oppressed by society. He welcomed a prostitute into his inner circle. He set them free by showing them they were people of worth - that he cared for them, and by bringing God’s healing touch into their broken lives.

In our own service of God, proclaiming freedom for the captives and release for the oppressed doesn’t just mean visiting prisons, and sharing the Gospel message with the prisoners. Yes it is that. But it is also so much *more*. It is doing what Jesus did.

Whenever we visit or care for someone who is house-bound, or in hospital, or whenever walk with someone who is mentally ill, or disabled; or whenever we get involved in the plight of the refugees, or advocate for someone who is ‘imprisoned’ by their circumstances – we too are proclaiming freedom for the captives and release for the oppressed, by showing people that they are valued and loved and worthwhile. We become God’s agents of deliverance.

**Jesus was sent to proclaim recovery of sight for the blind.** The physical actions of Jesus often carried a deeper spiritual truth. We know that Jesus physically gave sight to the blind. In our culture, we often miss the impact of that. A blind person in Jesus day was a beggar; an outcast, deemed a sinner, and was completely dependent on the mercy of others for everything. In giving them their sight physically, Jesus completely transformed their existence! He gave them a life and a future.

Restoring physical sight was a powerful metaphor for how a person is transformed and renewed when they receive spiritual sight, and are cleansed and forgiven by God!

We may not often be called to physically heal someone who is blind – though God has used his servants on occasion to do that. However, we all have the very great privilege of being able to lead a person to Jesus, where they can receive spiritual sight, and so be made a completely new creation.

**Lastly in this passage, Jesus was called proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.** He did this of course in his preaching. But he also did it every moment of every day. He did it as he lived his life for his Father. He and His Father were one. For Jesus, every encounter, every word, every action, was dedicated to proclaiming the Lord’s favour, dedicated to proclaiming God’s unconditional love, compassion and forgiveness.

We too are called to live in this way.

Sometimes, though, I suspect we carry around a lot of 'oughts'. I really 'ought' to visit so and so. I really 'ought' to invite so and so to church. I really 'ought' to pray for so and so more. It can be a burdensome way to live our Christian lives.

We can walk around feeling guilty - or we can live as Jesus did. Just love God. When we are God focused, we seek to please him in all we do; when we allow him to transform us as we keep our minds stayed on him, then a lot of 'proclaiming' happens naturally. It becomes a result of who we are (or who we are becoming) not so much a result of what we feel we *ought* to do.

Justice is more than just punishment for wrongdoing; it is more than equitable distribution of wealth; it is more than getting what we deserve. Justice includes these things, but more than anything, justice means the setting right of what is wrong, and the making just (or fair) what is unjust. Justice is bringing to rights the whole of creation in the love and power of God. We are a called to be the champions of God's justice.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas, and look forward to his return, may we also renew our commitment to love God - becoming his voice, his heart, his hands and his feet, - bringing about a fuller justice on this earth for the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed.

Let's pray