

What is justice? What do we deserve in life?

I was struck by these questions as I have watched some of the Olympics in Rio this week, and listened to the commentary. It is very easy to get caught up in the hype as young people (and some not so young) achieve a goal they have been working at for many years. For some their goal was to compete and for others their goal was to win a medal – with the commentators noting that they deserved the win after their commitment and work.

Alongside this have been the many protests and rallies by the local community for justice in Brazil amidst ongoing political uncertainty and the future of the president there. And of course the ongoing political tensions that constantly face Rio; in that it both contains some of the richest and the poorest communities in the world.

It is a challenge to know at times how to respond to this.

Should we continue to hold world events until all people live in just and equal communities? And whose justice would be the parameters? We have learnt many things in the 70 years of the United Nations and amidst all of the collective good that has been achieved is the underlying tension that at times to achieve justice for one, another may feel that their rights are challenged.

Now of course there are some things which are clearly just, freedom, the right to dignity, food and shelter; but then there are other things which are more difficult – freedom of religion for example – because for some religions (including our own) one of the primary focuses is discipleship or sharing the faith so that others might come to experience God's love. In the Inter Faith Centre we model how this freedom of faith might be expressed with respect and dignity – but sadly this is not always the case in all contexts.

But it is not just religion that is difficult, globalisation has brought many gifts, but it also brings many challenges as our diversity becomes less and less, and one type of justice prevails over another.

It is challenging, and something that we are not going to even attempt to solve in one short sermon.

But when we consider the challenge of “the deserving” or justice - what we can notice is that it is not a struggle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century problem, it is in part at the heart of our gospel reading today and our reading from Isaiah today.

The writer of first Isaiah appears to be talking about a vineyard, but like Jesus he is using familiar images to help his audience understand.

The vineyard owner is God, and the vineyard is the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The bountiful harvest for which God hoped was a just society, but the inedible

grapes that God received instead are violence and oppression. There is a very sophisticated wordplay in this piece of poetry, and the Hebrew for “justice” and “righteousness” (*mishpat* and *tsedaqah*), are only just different to the words for “bloodshed” and “cry” (NRSV) (*mispakh* and *tse’aqah*.) It is difficult to recreate the wordplay in another language, but the New Jewish Publication Society translation captures something of the effect:

He hoped for justice,  
But behold, injustice;  
For equity,  
But behold, iniquity<sup>1</sup>!

Although Isaiah 5:1-7 is concerned with the absence of justice and righteousness, the poem offers no explanation of these concepts. It assumes that its audience already understands them. In this part of Isaiah it seems to be referring to social justice – the needs of the poor and vulnerable, rather than political justice which is address at other points in Isaiah. A disappointment is expressed that despite all that is offered by God, despite all the opportunities for justice – justice does not prevail.

And so the story continues and some 800 years or so later Jesus arrives proclaiming yet again the need for both political and social justice. But today’s reading from Luke does not appear to bring much hope of justice or peace – in fact on first hearing Jesus says– I have come to divide. But like all of Jesus teaching we need to read it in context of his whole ministry.

Jesus came to transform the world. We know this. We also know that the world – that is most of humanity - did not want to be transformed. Transformation costs! It means giving up what we know. It means letting go of power and the status quo which makes us comfortable. And Jesus wasn’t just talking to the rich and the powerful. Even those who were slaves or in service felt safe in the routine and status they knew - to be free can be a fearful thing!

Jesus says to the crowd – look you read the signs when it comes to the seasons – you know when to plant your crops; but yet you do not look for what God is teaching through signs. In our context Jesus might say to us – you know how to watch the markets, when to invest, when to buy a house or sell; when to get the best outcome for your business – and yet in faith you do not use the same knowledge, the same skills. You expect it to be done for you!

What Jesus questions at one level our integrity- we are so eager to listen to false prophets who give us easy answers; so willing to use our brain and skills when it comes to business or our families –but when it comes to faith or justice – all our skills – all our expertise – all our commitment to hard work seems to go out the window!

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2948](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2948)

There is no getting around it – it is a confronting message.

The gift however, as one commentator put it this week, is that as interesting as the historical context and background of the biblical text may be, the more pressing question is not the past of the text but its future. What, that is, might this text say to us about our life in faith and in the world? How will this passage shape our view of God, ourselves, and our neighbour? How will this passage affect us? What will it do to us?

The kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed represents a new order governed not by might but by forgiveness, not by injustice but by justice, not by fear but by courage, and not by power but by humility. In 2 millennia this has not changed! We are still called to be part of this Kingdom.

But how do we do this? At one level to be faithful in our context is not hard. Our lives are not at risk by coming to church or by praying. While some might laugh at us, there is really little oppression. What we do encounter is apathy – church and worship are add-ons to our busy lives. If I had a pound for every person who told me that when they were less busy, or less important, or less committed to their family or work or hobby – they would come to church – we would be able to build a basilica on this site and feed every hungry and homeless person in London!

So what do we do? How do we show that God is near? How do we bring peace? How do we bring justice?

Simply nothing and everything!

All that God asks is that we live faithful lives. That we honour that God is near.

Live not by might but by forgiveness, not by fear but by courage, and not by power but by humility.

Live with our heart and our minds focused solidly on Christ each day.

If each person in the world did this – no violence would exist – no conflict would dominate. We cannot change others – but we can change ourselves. And by the witness of our lives, others may seek to also be transformed.

Let me be clear – this does not mean we ignore in anyway the political situations that confront us – we must pray, we must lobby, we must act. But all of this action must be focused on the love of Christ which comes from the centre of our being.

Now, the temptation of course is for us as individual and a community to feel guilty that we do not have enough faith, or are not transforming the world enough. But this is not about guilt, it is about us considering what would make a difference for us. What would help us to work for Justice, what would help us grow in faith? Would our Sunday morning look any different than it does now? What would help

you enter more deeply into your faith in a way that would help shape the way you think about your work, or families, or money, or action<sup>2</sup>...

We don't come to Church just because it is a spiritual obligation – we come because it is a place to come to be encouraged, equipped, and sent to make a difference to the world. And a place to return to when living like Jesus creates division. Because it will. But it will also create joy.

As we come to church to be reminded of our identity as God's beloved and are sent out again in mission to tell others in word and deed that God loves them as well. And in doing this, we seek justice for all humanity, where all have enough to live, and all are respected and have dignity.

And maybe one day the words of Isaiah's poem will be transformed so that:

We hoped for justice,  
And behold, justice;  
For equity,  
And behold, equality,  
For peace,  
And behold, the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-13-c-pursuing-a-faith-that-matters/>