

I have been struggling this week with the notion of what justice means and looks like? The problem is that often justice is portrayed in a way that is self-serving to one particular group – even when it is not. It felt that every person I spoke with this week, had a different idea of what justice or fairness looked like. Many of these conversations revolved around how we are all responding to the impact of the pandemic on our way of life and on the issues it raises for each of us.

It is amazing to me that when we are giving a set of readings each Sunday by the lectionary, how much the theme of those readings come up in the course of the week – it may be that its because I am thinking of them – or maybe God is helping us to unpack what something might mean. For the last few weeks now all our readings, particularly from Matthews Gospel have focused on parables which describe what the reign of God – what the kingdom of God and true justice, grace and mercy might look like. And despite this effort Jesus places on this teaching, humanity seems to always struggle with this concept – and I have spent a great deal of time wondering why this is!

I have been watching a sci-fi box set and I reached the final episode, after many weeks, on Friday. In the closing episodes we watch as one the lead characters is murdered by a stray bullet aimed at someone else. The characters partner is consumed with grief and plots to destroy the world. It is only when she allows herself to feel the pain of her loss – that all-consuming pain of grief that the destruction of the world is halted – we are all saved by another feeling and owning their grief.

This wasn't the ending I was expecting! But I was struck by the raw honesty of it. Not just in the pain of grief, but that often our human nature in seeking justice assumes we can fix everything and in the face of something which is beyond our comprehension - we often come to a point where we believe we are the only ones who can solve it – even if that brings the destruction of others.

There is so much in the world at the moment which is outside of our individual control and it can feel scary and frustrating – and for many this results in anger – but how we seek justice when we feel this way is at the heart of the readings that we hear on this 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Trinity. From Jonah who thinks God is too nice – to Paul who is wrestling with death and the hardships he faces we are challenged to see that justice is something which is found when we come to terms with our relationships not only with each other but with all God's creation.

The parable of the workers which we hear in Matthew today records the story of a landowner employing day labourers – all day he takes on anyone who turns up – at the end of the day – all are paid the same – regardless of the work that they have done. This parable has often been used as an example of the welcome of God's Kingdom and that all will be treated the same, regardless of the amount of time they have served God. I have been very challenged this week by an article written

Stanley Saunders<sup>1</sup> who suggests that this is not what the parable is about at all. Rather he suggests that the parable is an example of the kind of false justice that Jesus is trying to warn his disciples of falling in the trap of.

In the parable, at the end of the day, while all the day labourers - are paid the same, they all return to the same level of uncertainty. Tomorrow they will need to wait and see if there is any chance of further employment. The fact that so many have worked today, suggests that less work will be available tomorrow. It is true that, at one level, the landowner treats the workers with equality. But at the same time, Saunders points out that this supposed justice is cast into question by the landowner's actions and words from the point the payments begin to be made. He stipulates that those hired last will be paid first (Matthew 20:8). Why? This arrangement serves no evident purpose but to make his gesture of "equality" evident to those who worked all day. If the goal is really to create equality among the workers, the landowner could do so without making a public display - he seems to be wanting a reaction. The balance of power in this parable does not change anything for the workers and those who are most vulnerable. While the workers will have left happy, they were paid, the landowner in these interactions takes away some of their dignity.

In all the parables we have heard over the previous weeks, Jesus has been trying to help the disciples, and us, notice that things need to change. Justice is false if it brings about envy and division, rather than wholeness and healed relationships. It is more likely that this parable is a warning to us all that we are mindful that justice is about wholeness.

At the moment, we are all having lots of conversation about what is fair and just, about how there is equality for all, and even who is excluded from the conversation. These conversations raise many important questions : what does real equity look like? What is fair about what's going on right now? What does God want from us, expect from us, and look for from us?<sup>2</sup>

There aren't any easy answers to these questions. The readings we have explored in Mathew's Gospel today and in previous week invite us to see that for any of these conversations to have meaning we have to start by forming relationships - being willing to share our story, and for many of us , particularly those of us who have a lot of power making space to hear their stories. It is not easy, and it can be challenging.

I think this is a good question for us when we come to our postponed Annual Congregational Meeting. Today we receive reports of the work that we undertook as a parish in 2019, and also hear of some of our hopes for the future. We have lots to feel proud of and thankful for. From the ability to provide a warm and welcoming space to lots of community members during the week - we continue to have around

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4574](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4574)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/09/pentecost-16-a-not-about-deserving/>

350 people during the building each week to different classes and meetings. We have continued to provide practical and financial support to Laurence's Larder, Salusbury World, St Mungo's as well as some of our neighbours. We hosted a number of events for local schools and community events for Remembrance and Christmas. We have a team of very generous volunteers and supporters.

As much as we have things to be thankful for we also have challenges as we consider what it means to be a single congregation in this building, and what God is calling us too now that London Inter Faith Centre has closed. But like Jonah, whose story we also heard today – we must learn that justice is not about 'me' as an individual, or even 'us' justice is about community. God calls us to be a community in this place who are not just worried about our worship or this building, but to be a community who speak and act words of justice – a justice which works for wholeness and healed relationships

The community we live in is changing a lot and it raises issues for many. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on many of the injustices faced within this community and beyond. Issues of social and racial inequality as well as whose voice is heard.

Like Jesus disciples we need to be listening to these parables again and again, seeking to discern what God would have us do.

I was reminded this week by a friend of the experience of those who worked in indigenous communities in Australia. One of the learning from the elders is that one of the primary differences from a western mind set in relation to justice is that we focus too much on the 'rights I have'. Within the indigenous community everything begins from the position of obligations I have. This is also the mind set Jesus speaks from – I am born not to rights, but born with obligations to serve past, present and future generations – and all God's creation.

As we give thanks for our community today, we are invited to remember and give thanks for all who have taken this obligation to justice seriously – who challenge us to continue to share the love of God in this place.

Because like Paul, Jonah, Matthew and all the disciples we are invited to remember the responsibilities and obligations we have in faith – to work justice. Justice that is expressed through vulnerability, love and grace and starts with having the courage to listen for voice of God. Amen.