

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

(Sermon for Sunday 30th August 2020 – Pentecost 13 – partly based on today's second reading [Romans 12: 9-21](#)).

(Readings for today are: [Exodus 3:1-15](#): Romans 12:9-21; [Matthew 16:21-28](#))

Most of us are probably concerned at times about the issues of justice and injustice. We are all faced, at some stage, with decisions about what is our appropriate response to an act of nastiness, or bigotry, or injustice, or of bullying against us or our loved ones. We all see in the News Reports of crime, that our legal system endeavors to give appropriate sentences to those who break our laws. Sometimes, we possibly feel that the sentence seems grossly unfair or inadequate. That is, as far as we can judge, when we are not privy to all the finer details and complex issues that the judge and jury have available to them.

We all struggle, I am sure, with the right response, both from a Christian and from a purely compassionate point of view, and even believing in the possibility of change and some degree of resurrection or renewal. For instance, what should be our appropriate response as a Christian to the issues of Border Protection and the treatment of Asylum Seekers and Refugees? This is a very thorny and emotive issue for many. What should be our response to the Black Lives Matter Movement and the awful rate of suicide and deaths in prison of our young aboriginal men and women, and equally our response to the clear cases of violent arrest by some police to those of colour in the US and in our own nation? Our response is also now complicated by the polar opposite needs of those who want to publicly voice their dismay and anger through demonstration on issues of justice and for those needing to enforce the demands of public health restrictions in a COVID19 environment.

I remember, some time ago now, the story in the News of a mother whose daughter was being mercilessly bullied both physically and emotionally by another girl at her school. The school authorities seemed unable or unwilling to properly confront the issue which continued to destroy the well-being of her daughter. So, the mother went down after school one afternoon to confront the bully herself and try to reason with her. The girl just laughed in her face and taunted the mother as a useless piece of s...t! (This was all caught on a phone video). The mother was so incensed that she grabbed the nearest thing from her car which happened to be a plastic bottle full of fuel additive, and threw it at the girl. The top of the plastic bottle somehow became dislodged and the girl was spattered with the fuel additive which proceeded to burn her skin. The mother was then arrested for criminal assault and charged. The mother's actions were deplorable, of course, but absolutely nothing happened to the nasty bully, though she did of course suffer briefly from the superficial skin burns. The bullied daughter committed suicide as a result. What a tragedy and what is the justice in such a situation?

A Lawyer friend of mine once said to me that one of the most misnamed institutions in our society is the Criminal Justice System. He then went on to say that, in our legal system,

justice for all is way too much to ask of our legal system. We can perhaps give the victim some monetary compensation, and we can give the perpetrator some form of punishment, but we can never give back to the actual victim what he/she lost in health, well-being and personal trauma.

Here is another news story. In Iran, a girl was blinded with acid by her boyfriend because she refused to marry him. The jury proclaimed that the young man was to be blinded himself as a reciprocal punishment. Amazingly, the courageous and noble young woman, her beautiful face now totally disfigured, declared to the court that she did not want this to happen to the young man, as this does not give her back her sight and her beauty. She also said that this punishment will in the end increase her own mental anguish. Such enacted revenge for her would not be sweet, but psychologically harmful and painful.

Justice is tough to achieve. Justice and fairness may be, and are, no doubt, a worthy human goal for society, but how does God perhaps look at justice? What if God's ultimate goal for us and our world is greater than the attainment of human justice as we see it, noble though that goal may be? What if God's goal is nothing less than Love?

Perhaps, you will remember, that Jesus once told the uncomfortable story of a farmer who hired casual day workers to go and help harvest the grapes in his vineyard. (This Gospel reading is actually set as the Gospel for September 20th). Here is the story. It was a very hot day. A number of day-labourers were waiting in the town square to be selected and hired for work. Some were hired at 9am in the morning and worked all day till sundown for the agreed wage. Some were hired at noon and some at 3pm. At the end of the day, the owner paid all the workers an equal full day's pay. Needless to say, those who worked for the entire day felt hard-done-by and short-changed. But, in fact, they were paid the wage that they and the owner had agreed upon and they were not short changed at all. But was justice done as they perceived it? No. I think we would all feel somewhat miffed to work a full day and get the same pay as someone who had only worked for just three hours! I think we would all feel that this was unfair. But was it unjust?

I imagine we all perceive that something greater than justice was being done here. The owner was giving to those in need over and above what they may have rightly earned. The owner showed generosity and compassion for those without work. We have just had a similar thing happen, have we not, in this COVID19 crisis? We are all aware of our Government's response to those whose jobs have been on the line as the COVID19 lockdowns occurred. All workers, in jobs that were likely to be lost as companies had to close or downsize due to the COVID19 restrictions, were able to claim a \$1500 per fortnight Job Keeper allowance for several months. Some workers may have lost money, as they actually used to earn more than that. On the other hand, some workers were paid much more than they would have usually earned. Some felt that this arrangement was unnecessarily extravagant and unfair, as some people were paid for work that they would never have actually had. But I do think, that overall a helpful and caring response from the Government was achieved.

Then, from our Bible, there is the extraordinary account of Jesus' death in agony and torture on the Cross. He died the most shameful and agonizing public criminal death that the Roman authorities could devise. Jesus was almost certainly stripped naked, which was done to create a profound sense of utter shame and abandonment. Jesus was spat upon and cursed and abused by some in the crowd, and left to die agonizingly in full view, slowly choking on his own body weight and having excruciating muscle and nerve spasms as his bodily functions slowly closed down. Yet, amidst all this, Jesus would be heard to pray out aloud to God: "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*".

Jesus could then go on, with great love and compassion, to give words of comfort to one of the condemned thieves who was crucified beside him. This suffering man asked Jesus for forgiveness and a place in God's Kingdom. Jesus said to him: "*Today you will be with me in Paradise*".

Was justice done here, when Jesus forgave those who had unjustly condemned him to a violent death? Was justice done when Jesus also forgave a probably guilty robber as well? Most of us would probably say No. But Jesus clearly puts the history and people of the world into the hands of God's love. Jesus didn't so much define what love is, he enacted what love is. He embodied it. At the heart of this awful story of Jesus' death on the Cross, is not revenge and retribution, but forgiveness and love.

In today's second reading from St Paul's Letter to the Romans, Paul sends these new Christian converts in Rome a long list of 'dos and don'ts'. He says: "*Be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, give generously to those in need, offer hospitality to strangers.*"

Paul then goes on: "*Do not be arrogant and full of self-pride, but associate with the lowly. Do not repay evil for evil. Never seek vengeance, for vengeance is mine to deal with says God. If your enemies are hungry feed them!*"

Wow! How can Paul expect ordinary people like us to live like that? Paul, however, sees this whole long list that is stated in this passage, as balanced by the reality that our wonderful awesome God is at heart to be described principally as Love. God does not give us what we deserve. But God gives us life and all-encompassing love. We are saved and embraced by God in the limitless forgiving and redeeming gift of Jesus' death on the Cross. This is not because of who we are, but because of who God is! And so, the ethical and spiritual implications of this are that we are to seek to relate to other people in the same way that God relates to us. We are not to repay evil for evil, but to respond to evil with who God is and that is utter love. We are to react to hate with love. By the grace of God, we are emboldened to expect more from God and from ourselves than merely justice. We are to expect from God love and compassion. So, we are to give love and compassion to others in turn.

Paul has no interest in increasing the number of victims and sufferers. What Paul seems to want, for those who are victims of suffering from injustice and oppression and violence, is to seek instead to take charge, and to turn things around from a place of vengeance and

bitterness. To let go the need for compensatory justice on their own terms, to seek a different way of living that desires renewal, forgiveness, love and compassion. This will, of course, require some form of response through the legal system, and thus some sort of meaningful punishment for the perpetrators of the crime. But in the end, only love and forgiveness, issuing out from the meaning and deliverance of Christ on the Cross, can give the actual abused and suffering person true justice in their heart and soul.