

## **The Church as a Model for Justice**

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The story is told of a man who lived in an area prone to the most terrible floods. One night the rains begin to fall heavily and the residents are urged to evacuate. The local police come to escort the man away, but he tells them, "It's ok God will take care of me". The rains continue and the coast guard come to take the man away to safety. "It's alright," he says "God will take care of me". Finally the man is forced up on to his roof as his house is flooded out by the rains and an army helicopter comes to rescue him but he refuses to board saying, "It's ok God will save me". The man drowned and when he got to heaven he came before God and asked "Why didn't you rescue me?"

"I tried to save you," replied God. "First I sent the police, then I sent the coast guard and then I sent the army."

As this story demonstrates, trusting and worshipping a Loving God is easier than we would sometimes make it. God's purposes are here for us if only we care to stop, look and hear. Rather than waiting for God to act on our terms, we need to see what God is already doing in our world and to step out in faith and trust if we are to involve ourselves in his purposes.

When we look at the idea of the Church as a model for justice, we need to look beyond the bricks and mortar of church buildings to the actions and movements of people inspired by their faith to take a stand for justice. We need to look at what God is already doing in our world and involve ourselves as a Church, together with the people of good will, in His purposes.

This is not mere aspiration. For the people of God this has been a reality since the time of Moses. His call to Pharaoh "Let my people Go" was made only when Moses knew that God had heard the cries of the slaves, he had seen the sufferings of his people, and God was to set them free from the bonds of oppression. Moses was doing nothing more than joining in God's plan. For centuries since men and women of God have been inspired to the same.

The story is told of an American tourist who came to England and went to Oxford and asked his guide to show him the University. The guide said "I can show you the colleges, I can show you the libraries, I can even introduce you to some of the staff and the students, but if you're looking for the University, you won't find a single place or a single building. The University is made up of all of these things and more. If you want to see it, just take a look all around you. Better still why not sign up and live the life of the University?"

In many ways the Church is like that. If we want to look at the Church we can take a look at the buildings, meet with the clergy, go to Sunday School, look at the community projects, join a youth group, eat with the elderly, sing with a worship band or even (Lord have Mercy) go to General Synod, but you won't find the Church in just one of those places. The Church is all around you.

The Church is at those men, women and children who profess a faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their lives. And it is here, in the lives and actions of these, that we find our models for justice. Men and women through the centuries and in the present day working, campaigning, crying out, calling and praying for justice. The church is not a building it is a group of people, across the globe, joined in common cause to work for the kingdom of God and to usher in its reign on earth. I want to look at some of those people and what they have done, but before that it is worth asking What is Justice?

First it is worth stressing that law and justice are not always synonymous. As Marlon Brando said about the South African Apartheid regime in the film *A Dry White Season*: "Justice and Law [are] distant cousins, and here in South Africa they are not even on speaking terms."

The relationship between law and justice can be an uneasy one – just look at the legal status of slavery at the time of the abolition of the slave trade. Trading in slaves had been turned into a system of serfdom in England in the early 12th century by virtue of the Magna Carta. Developments over the centuries, if anything, encouraged the trade which had flourished throughout the eighteenth century.

And then there are those totalitarian states who by reason of dictatorship or coup d'état become places where the law and justice walk on opposite sides of the street – parallel lines that stretch far into the distance forever walking apart.

A story is told of a young lawyer in a firm specialising in criminal law who had spent years assisting senior partners at trials. Finally one day the young lawyer was allowed to defend a case on her own.

The trial went on for eight exhausting days. Finally, the case went to the jury, which quickly returned with a verdict in favour of her client.

Ecstatic at the result, the lawyer phoned the firm's managing partner, and the moment he was on the line she announced, "It's me! The jury just came back, and justice has prevailed!"

The managing partner gasped, stammering, "Oh no! Appeal at once."

For Justice to prevail we need more than law. For Justice to prevail in the Church and in Society, there needs to be truth, reconciliation and restoration.

In extreme situations Justice demands that we may use the law in the way it is not intended to achieve a just outcome. During my time in Uganda trying to uphold the rule of law in a country ruled by a dictator, I once had occasion to send to jail men who were innocent. At first blush this would appear to be the most terrible miscarriage of Justice. Yet outside the court soldiers had gathered to take these men, if they had been released, and to kill them on the orders of the President. By sending them to jail those men were deprived of their liberty but given their lives.

So Justice is not simply a matter of law, but neither is Justice simply a matter of punishment or retribution.

When people are crying out for vengeance, mistaking it for justice, those ancient words "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" are trotted out. The Jewish law of an eye for an eye established the principle that a penalty should never exceed the wrong suffered. Revenge is ruled out: love and magnanimity are the basis of punishment. Because the purpose of punishment is penitence. For me justice was best expressed by the great teacher from Nazareth who said:

"You have heard that it was said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...if someone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5:38-41).

Teveye, the Fiddler on the Roof, presented his own take on the ancient proposition for vengeance, when he said, "If you insist on carrying out an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the whole world will end up totally blind and toothless!"

This practice of citing a mistaken idea of justice in the pursuit for vengeance was seen time and again in the case of Myra Hindley, the cold and merciless Moors Murderer, on whose behalf Lord Longford campaigned so tirelessly. Lord Longford recognised that traditional retributive justice was not necessarily the most healthy way forward for building a better society, and better relationships, because feelings of anger and revenge, however understandable, serve further to dislocate our ability to relate to one another as human beings. Longford, inspired by a deep and real Christian faith, was mocked, pilloried and roundly abused for standing by Hindley and taking up her cause. Yet Longford understood that Justice is not a one way street and that the need for reconciliation and even restoration was a model that Jesus Christ had set before us.

Of course it is vital to respect the anger and damage caused to victims, and communities by acts of criminality and violence, but as Aristotle said, "Anyone can become angry - that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way - this is not easy".

Anger always blurs the real human features of those we're angry with. If it didn't, no one would ever be persuaded to violent action. And so often the anger comes from the sense that I'm not being seen as a human being in the first place.

This is what happens to us when our outrage at a crime cries out for vengeance. We don't wish to see the perpetrators as human, as being someone who was a child who wasn't raised to be a criminal, who is even now a person loved by a parent, a brother, a sister, a partner.

To be redemptive, punishment must be more than removing the perpetrator, permanently or temporarily – it must provide an avenue for total transformation of the situation.

Total transformation means the changing of lives so that the maladies that cause division are eliminated – total transformation based on renewal as was the case in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's restorative justice in the South African context; and Nelson Mandela's encouragement of Black people to focus their rage into acts of reconciliation.

A clearer understanding of what Justice is comes from Thomas Porter on his short analysis of the power of restorative justice:

"Restorative justice, for me, is more clearly the place where truth, justice, mercy and peace meet; truth is seen as the deep sharing and hearing of other's stories in a way that vindicates and empowers.

As a society, and indeed as a world, we are bound together, and one of the hardest things to do is to deliver restorative justice to the perpetrator and at the same time stand side by side with the victims.

Justice is seen as acknowledgement and restitution and respect for the other. It isn't retributive, but restorative. Mercy recognises that apology and forgiveness are mutually needed for restoration and reconciliation as well as the acknowledgement that is key to justice. Peace becomes a real peace based on right relations".  
(Thomas W. Porter - Restorative Justice: Justice as Peace Building, Eastern Mennonite University 2003).

There is an intrinsic and interwoven connection between mercy and Justice. In the Bible we are reminded of this link by the Prophet Micah whose call to each one of us echoes down through the centuries:

"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

I should add here that my references here are to Micah the prophet of the tribe of Israel and not to Mika the singer who has been at number one in the charts for the past five weeks singing about Grace Kelley.

Micah's injunction continues to inspire the Church to cry out for Justice, not least on behalf of those who are denied justice at its most basic level on a daily basis.

Hence this year Christians have come together to form Micah challenge and have launched a campaign this year to hold governments to account for the Millennium Development Goals set by international leaders in 2000 whose aim was to fulfil them by 2015.

But this challenge is not only to international leaders to fulfil their promises to halve poverty by 2015; it is a challenge to the Church to get more engaged with issues of

poverty.

For me, Faith is the spiritual engine of change. Thank God that old dualism between the personal and social gospel is breaking down.

Desmond Tutu's oft quoted remark that "I don't know what Bible people are reading when they say faith and politics do not mix" has never been more readily apparent. We need to rediscover a new faith-based movement for social and economic justice which has hope, rather than anger, at its core.

There is a need for the strengthening of both faith-based initiatives and the prophetic witness of the Church in the face of global economic inequalities. Jim Wallis of the Sojourners movement argues that the aim of both should be to 'change the wind', rather than to secure incremental changes or to exchange one set of political leaders for another.

Of course there are those who would point to the Church and tell us to get our own house in order before we start urging others to get involved in matters of justice.

I heard recently of a bishop who was engaged in a conversation with a man who declared "the problem with the church is that it is full of hypocrites", "yes", replied the Bishop, "but there's always room for one more". As one of my predecessors, Archbishop Michael Ramsey, responded to an outburst, "It is a pity that the leaders of the Church are so rotten". "Yes, indeed", he replied. "It is a worse pity that, when leaders are picked, there is only you to pick them from!" (A.M. Ramsey, *Introducing the Christian Faith*, SCM: 1970, 32).

The Church has never and should never claim to be anything other than a body of people waiting, straining with all creation to be fully redeemed by Christ. (Romans 8:22-23). But we are not called to be passive in waiting for the Kingdom of God to come, but to be active agents of God's grace in bringing about his reign on earth through responding to Prophet Micah's call.

Because the Church holds the central belief that all people are created in the image of God – "So God created Humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27) – its mission is to worship God and to infect God's world with God's Righteousness.

R H Tawney is quoted as saying: "The essence of all morality is this: to believe that

every human being is of infinite importance, and therefore that no consideration of expediency can justify the oppression of one by another. But to believe this it is necessary to believe in God." And further, "Unless a man believes in spiritual things - in God - altruism is absurd. What is the sense of it? Why should a man recognise any obligation to his neighbour, unless he believes that he has been put in the world for a special purpose and has a special work to perform in it? A man's relations to his neighbours becomes meaningless unless there is some higher power above them both."

If we believe this, our faith may mean taking risks - not just for ourselves, but on behalf of others. We are bound up together, and it's in our own interest that harmony exists.

This came home to me very strongly at the end of the questioning of the five suspects in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. There was a very angry crowd outside who were ready to give those arrogant and unco-operative young men a good hiding as they left the Inquiry. A major incident was quickly developing. Like a fool I agreed with Chief Superintendent Godsave (!) to go and calm things down. Amongst the throng I noticed four angry young men with iron bars concealed down their trousers, waiting their chance. But of course the danger was that, if they succeeded in taking vengeance, they would end up in trouble. I said to them, "It's understandable that you are angry, but violence isn't the answer." They replied, "Bishop, we don't believe in God." And I said, "It doesn't matter. God believes in you." They laughed, and didn't use their iron bars.

It is self-evident that there are people of good will, of all faiths and of none, who join together in common cause to seek justice for humanity as a whole. Yet whilst this may be a choice for those without a faith, it is an incumbent duty upon those who confess the name of Christ as Lord.

Small wonder that the abolitionists were men and women of Christian commitment and conviction, for they walked the paths of peace and were convinced of the liberating power of Christ, and sure that, because Jesus Christ came to reconcile all things to God, all human beings are brothers and sisters. As the Medallion with a black figure in chains, manufactured by Wedgwood, for the campaign, aptly asked, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?"

As a society we are in danger of suffering from collective amnesia when it comes to considering the work of those who have campaigned for social justice and in

particular seem to have airbrushed from history the motivation of these social pioneers who have been inspired to act by a passionate and vivid faith in the God who caused “his light to shine in the face of Jesus, giving us the knowledge of his glory.” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Hence it is through faith that as a nation we have arrived where we are in the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire, the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, free education for children at primary and secondary school, the introduction of licensing laws for the protection of children, soup kitchens, housing for the homeless, and the improvement of prison conditions, all of these were achieved through the work of those acting as God's agents of change, grace and justice in the world.

Then there are those organisations and charities founded by Christians, many in the last century alone, which have contributed an incalculable amount: The Hospice movement, Amnesty International, Shelter, Save the Children, the Samaritans, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Shaftsbury Society, Jubilee 2000, the YMCA, the trade Justice Movement, the Children's Society, and National Children's Homes.

For me, Faith is the spiritual engine of change. We need to rediscover a new faith-based movement for social and economic justice which has hope, rather than anger, at its core.

I believe that movement is the Church and it is my hope that as we commemorate the achievements of the abolitionists over the coming months we might also re-dedicate ourselves to being that change which we want to see in the world.

On the 24th March this year I will be part of the Walk of Witness, a walk of repentance, reconciliation and restoration, through London. Justice requires repentance, it hopes for reconciliation and it is delivered in restoration. We are each called to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with the Lord our God. My walk will take me to London on March 24th. I will be glad to walk with you there.