

**Giving Justice**

*Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37*

How judgemental are you? We all do it. Sometimes we are benign and indulgent; on other occasions our eyes narrow, our hearts harden, and whoever has the misfortune to cross our paths is guilty as charged and condemned to whatever sentence we care to hand out. But we all make judgements.

Judgements are decisions that we make in every area of life. From what we choose to wear (what were you thinking when you put that on?), to what we choose to eat (will I have the healthy but dull salad, or the full Sunday Roast for lunch?). From our choice of career or academic course to whether or not we want to have a relationship with someone that might grow into something more serious. Judgement is not necessarily a bad thing, it is the very stuff of life, so it is important that when we make judgements about things, and about people, we do so to the best of our ability; acknowledging where we might have prejudices, and seek as much as we can to be fair. What we say, what we do, and what we judge have consequences, and that matters.

How do you go about making your decisions and judgements? Do you take time, as far as possible, to gather all the information and details, to take a long, considered view, to sleep on it, before making up your mind? Or do you make snap judgements, relying on instinct and an in-built set of presumptions that have grown into your personal worldview? My grandfather, supervising my school shoe cleaning, used to intone; 'You can always tell a gentleman by the shine on his shoes.' That held true till I visited Parliament, but I had better not name names! My grandmother used to say, 'Never judge a book by its cover', and that truism has generally proven right.

We need to be aware that in so many areas of our lives we judge in different ways at different times and for different reasons. What we say, what we do, what we judge will have consequences, and that matters.

From the earliest age human beings seem to be born with an inherent sense of what is fair and what is unfair. Whether it is cheating at a family game, or gaining by inappropriate means an advantage in the business world, or denying someone their civil rights, the childhood cry of, 'that's not fair' holds good into adult life.

The motivation to right wrongs, tackle injustice, provide an even playing field for all humanity lies at the root of what is best in law, politics, economics and religion. A world not based on the principles of justice for all is a world not worth living in. Biblical faith is built on that principle of justice, where the strong protect the weak, and the rich take care of the poor. That's justice. The ancient Greek philosopher Sophocles wrote: 'If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: 'Thou shalt not ration justice.'

Psalm 82 has a striking opening scene that brings in all the tension of a courtroom drama, but one carried out at a cosmic level. It deals with issues that are immensely more important than those haggled over in a TV episode of *Rumpole of the Bailey*, or *Law and Order*.

The writer of Psalm 82 draws on ancient mythology that often portrays heaven as some kind of court where judgement and decision-making takes place. It's not made clear who the lesser gods are. Are they angels, are they mighty men and women who have been entrusted with the task of ruling. Their status is not the point; their actions are. In this parable psalm these lesser gods have been assigned to the world to bring justice to those who need it, but their failure to put down wickedness and to bring justice makes the foundations of the world unstable, and the future of creation is threatened. The cry goes out from the psalmist for God, the supreme judge, the chief justice to step into the divine council, remove the poor judges, and make decisions that end the oppression of the weak, the needy, the orphan and the destitute. God's love for those in need throughout the writing of the Bible is never in doubt. "Love is the motive, but justice is the instrument." (Reinhold Niebuhr)

The arc of God's justice is long but it bends towards justice, to paraphrase Martin Luther King. It is justice that is based on the fairness of things. Fairness of educational opportunity; fairness in leading a full, happy and healthy life; fairness for the right to earn a living wage; the right to live

in freedom; the right to live without persecution because of what you believe, or your gender, or your lifestyle choice. It doesn't always happen and when that is the case the people of God need to intervene. It is what God expects.

Of course like making moral judgements that does not come without a cost. The British philosopher David Selborne lists eleven arguments now regularly deployed to sabotage any attempt to make judgements. They are:

- There is nothing you can do about it.
- It has never been any different.
- There is no quick fix.
- It is the price of a free society.
- You must move with the tide.
- You cannot turn back the clock.
- The problem is much more complex than you think.
- It is beyond the reach of the law.
- You are focussing on the wrong issue.
- Who are you to talk?
- Everyone is doing it, so how can you object?

So often, when faced with injustice and unfairness, arguments like these are deployed. Along with that feeling that we shouldn't get involved, or we'll make matters worse. Yet it is also the case that, "Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph." (Haile Selassie)

Giving justice means standing up, respectfully but volubly, to make your point and to attempt to make change. You might be wrong, that's always a possibility. But it is better to speak out when you think something isn't fair and find out you got it wrong, than to remain silent and find out that you were right, but the injustice and unfairness continued. "Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice can never be attained." (Helen Keller) It is particularly important when those in authority misuse their power and impose cruelty through prejudice and fear. The writer James Baldwin comments, "It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."

The responsibility of giving justice is not only God's; it is ours, as the children of God. The charities that this Church supports currently, Scottish Love in Action in India working to improve educational opportunities; the Clothing Store in Edinburgh working to provide basic clothing needs for people who have little or nothing; Water Aid across the world seeking to provide people with essential clean water; Christian Aid; the Bethany Trust; the Foodbank. Each one of these is saying that we, as a congregation, and you, as individual members of this congregation, align with God's call for justice and fairness. Across the breadth of the Church of Scotland there will be so many more. Christian faith, at its best, is about standing up for justice and working for fairness. "God believes in us. God depends on us to help make this world all that God wants it to be."<sup>i</sup> "God without us, will not, as we without God, cannot." (Augustine of Hippo)

"The Jews have a word in Hebrew, *zedakah*. It is normally translated as 'charity'; actually it means 'justice.' Charity is what we give out of the goodness of our heart. Justice is what we give because we must, because equity is one of the conditions of God's blessing and because we cannot eat in freedom while others go hungry."<sup>ii</sup>

Many of us, locally, nationally and internationally, long to see justice done on earth, and to be agents of justice. Sometimes it will lead to public action, like those who campaigned to make poverty history some years ago, or those who today protest against the Governments of the world not doing enough to combat climate change. But often it is in a quiet, private way that we can do something to give justice, and make the world of even one person a better place. When injustice happens, do we speak out, or do we bow our heads, or look the other way?

When challenged by a teacher of the law to say how eternal life might be achieved, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, where injustice is heaped on injustice, until one man does the decent thing, and helps the injured man. The teacher of the law knew his Bible, and knew what the theory of God's justice said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as

yourself.” But Jesus said it is not until we treat our neighbour with kindness and fairness that God’s justice is done.

“Go and do likewise.”

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, p124

<sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Sacks, Celebrating Life, p130