

What is it about the word “justice” that turns us off? Is it because it sounds legalistic, moralistic, or judgmental? Is it because of recent events surrounding various Royal Commissions that remind us of how political the word “justice” can become? Is it because one part of politics has tried to monopolise and appropriate the word? Have the armchair and not so armchair “woke” activists kidnapped and tarnished its true meaning? I know I get sick of the pointy finger brigade! Or is it merely the fact that we come to church to escape all that worldly, divisive stuff? Yes, we come to church because we want to feel loved and not judged.

Actually, I find it difficult to preach the prophetic words of scripture. The words of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist and the words of that most important prophet of all, Jesus - these words do not feel very good. Because they demand personal change, they make us feel guilty. And because they demand social change, they make us feel anxious and overwhelmed. Yes, the words about justice in scripture are disturbing. If we preach them, some of us won't like them. If we preach them, maybe then we will have to do them. But the alternative is worse. If we don't preach them we are curtailing the good news, telling half-truths and sugar-coating the Christian faith. That being said, justice is as much about how we value ourselves as it is about how we value others. Henri Nouwen, dutch priest and theologian calls out “The Five Lies of Self-Identity” that lurk in society:

*I am what I have,  
I am what I do  
I am what others say about me,  
I am no better than my worst moment  
I am no less than my best moment*

I would like to add one more in recent times: *I am what I say I am.....*

When in fact our identity and value is claimed by God who created, redeemed, called us and loves us all equally beyond imagination through this life and into the next.

The word “justice” appears 83 times in the Old Testament and 34 times in the New Testament. The word “justice” in the Hebrew language literally means rightness- rightness with God and rightness with one another. It is both a means and an end. It is the way we move toward the kingdom of God and it is the shape of the kingdom once we get there. Justice was the vision in the mind of God when the creation was begun and justice was the reality of God when the work of creation was done. Justice was the reality when on the last day God sat back and said, “It is very good.”

St Luke placed this story in the Gospel where it chronologically does not belong. He placed it at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, whereas both Mark and Matthew placed it where it is much more likely to have happened - right before Jesus' death. Luke did this purposely, in order to underline the importance of this event, so that we will hear - loudly and clearly - what the Christian life is all about.

Jesus came back home to crowded, liberal, cosmopolitan Galilee, to the town of Nazareth where he was known as Mary and Joseph's boy. The local people were so glad to see Jesus that they give him the honour of reading scripture in worship - something that any male member of the synagogue would be asked to do. They were very pleased when Jesus chose to read words of promise from Isaiah. These were favourite words about the Messiah and about a time in the future when good

news will be preached to the poor, when those in prison will be released, when the blind will be able to see, and when those who are oppressed will be set free. Yes, a time when rightness with God would be established for all - a time when the original justice of creation would be restored.

Now, a couple of things need to be said about this Gospel passage. There are innuendos which tell us why Jesus chose these words. The word here for "poor" means poor, materially poor. When Matthew talks about the poor, he adds "poor in spirit," in order to take some of the economic edge off the words and focus on a valid but different angle. But in Luke's Gospel Isaiah and Jesus are clear that God's word and God's love must be good news to the poor - those who are experiencing poverty - those who are other than you and me.

The other phrase which Jesus quotes directly from Isaiah is the one that says the Messiah will come "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." It is not just a poetic phrase. It is a religious concept rooted in history and radical in its political and social implications. The acceptable year of the Lord refers to the jubilee year - a social model described in detail in the book of Leviticus.

What is a jubilee year? God commands that each fifty years the people of God are to let the soil lie fallow, they are to forgive all debts - that means all material loans - they are to release all the slaves, and most radical of all, they are to redistribute the capital and the land so that everyone has enough and so that no one has too much. This jubilee year - this radical reordering of reality is what the acceptable year of the Lord means. It is the good news that Isaiah says the Messiah will bring. And it is the scripture which Jesus chose to read in his hometown synagogue when he told the world who he was and what he had come to do.

The reading of this scripture was not the end of what Jesus did that first day of his public ministry. When he finished reading he rolled up the scroll, paused dramatically, and then announced that the words of the prophet had come true. They were no longer future words - they were present words. Yes, he, the local boy, he, Jesus of Nazareth, was and is the Messiah - and the work of justice had begun. The jubilee year is now, the good news for the poor is now, the redistribution of wealth is now, the release of the captives and the freedom for all the oppressed is now. The new creation of rightness with God for all people - not just the Jews - is now.

The people of Nazareth didn't want to hear this anymore than we do. They became stirred, got very angry. Suffice it to say that they were incensed that Jesus would interject harsh demands into the passive comfort of their faith.

There are other places in scripture where this same tension exists. There are places where Jesus does or says things that reflect God's love, and which then lay before us issues of justice. Think about that unnerving parable about the workers in the vineyard where those who laboured for eight hours are paid the same as the unemployed, those left at the roadside all day who work for one hour. It is a story that underlines compassion as the heart of God's justice based on what people need instead of what they deserve.

Think about the story of the woman caught in adultery where all the people are eager to stone her to death as the law required. That is until Jesus intervenes, creating justice by saying: "The one without sin should cast the first stone." Such a spiritual story has definite political overtones when we get to our contemporary world.

And there is Amos, that tree surgeon turned prophet, who tells the appalled people of Israel that God

will treat them no better and no worse than everybody else, that being God's special people doesn't give special privileges, it only brings special responsibilities. What does that have to say about our Church life and service?

I could go on and on pulling stories from scripture that seem to talk about love and forgiveness and compassion that have far-reaching implications for our world today. Yes these stories talk about rightness with God and rightness among the people of God. They are stories which talk to us about justice, about real justice.

Whether it feels good or not, the Bible calls us to a compassionate commitment to creating wholeness and abundance for all. We are called to be justice people, participating the righting of wrongs of society and urging our social and political systems to promote rightness with God and with each other.

When Jesus finishes reading the words of Isaiah in the dusty synagogue of Nazareth, he rolls up the scroll and says, "I am this Word. I am the good news to the poor. I am the liberty for the oppressed. I am the acceptable year of the Lord. I am the justice of God - my words, my energies, my actions, my life."

Today when we hear these words from Luke, we as the living Body of Christ are called to respond. We too must close the Bible and say: "We are the liberty for the oppressed. We are the acceptable year of the Lord. We are the justice of God - our words, our energies, our actions, our lives."

Fr Robert Newton