Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11 JUSTICE

I want to begin this morning with some discussion. I’d like to get some impressions from you about the word ‘justice’. What does the word ‘justice’ convey to you? What does it make you think of? What does it bring to mind? I’m not interested in theological correctness here – just in what that word makes you think of. Well? Talk to me…

Discussion

What you (or some of you) have contributed is very much the generally accepted definition of justice – i.e. punishment for wrongdoing – such as we would expect from court of law, where a criminal is punished for his or her crimes.

If one person murders another, and is apprehended, tried and convicted, their crime proven beyond any shadow of a doubt, we expect that person to be punished, usually through imprisonment (though some cultures still observe capital punishment) We would expect that convicted child molesters, rapists, thieves, terrorists – whatever – to be punished for their crimes. The law must be upheld and justice served, or anarchy prevails, and no person is safe. Justice and the upholding of the law are central to a functional society.

When we reflect on what justice means to the Christian, our eyes are drawn to the cross, are they not? We see the cross as an expression both of God’s love and God’s justice. We recall passages such as Romans 3:23 and 6:23, in which Paul tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and that the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. These verses are central to the Gospel message.

But is that all there is to justice? Is that all there is to the Gospel?

Recently, I’ve been reading about the ‘servant songs’ in Isaiah. These are four poems found in the book of Isaiah which introduce us to God’s servant, the Messiah, whom we see as Jesus. These songs or poems give us an increasingly clear picture of the character and mission of this special servant of God.

The first one is found in Isaiah 42, and says:

*Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;   
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.   
I have put My Spirit upon Him;   
He will bring forth justice to the nations (42:1).*

*He will bring forth justice to the nations.* What does Isaiah mean by justice?

In today’s reading from Isaiah 61, we have a clearer picture of what he means by justice. It’s the same passage that Jesus quoted as his mission statement in Luke 4:18.

Let me read it to you again…

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Justice is more than just punishment for wrongdoing. It is the setting right of ethical and societal wrongs. And it is the bringing of ‘wholeness’ to God’s creation.

Jesus, who the Messiah, and the embodiment of this Servant, is the bringer of Justice.

So how did he do it, and how can we, in our calling to follow in our master’s footsteps, also be champions of justice? Let’s look at how Jesus in his life and ministry, fulfilled this commission

Jesus was sent to preach the good news to the poor. In his ministry, Jesus lived simply and frugally. He associated with the poor, the destitute, and the ‘low lifes’ of his culture. He not only shared with them the message of God’s love, but he *lived* it by his unconditional acceptance of them, by eating and drinking with them, sharing his time and his gifts with them, and including them amongst his closest friends.

In our service of Jesus, we are called to continue to minister to the poor as he did.

That doesn’t just mean finding the poor wherever they are, and sharing the message of the cross with them.

It is that, but more than that, it is working to set to right that which is unjust. It is working, and working *hard* to bring the love of Christ to bear on the poverty in the world. It is working to *alleviate* poverty wherever and however we can. Only then are we proclaiming justice, and only then does the preaching of the cross carry its full weight.

It may mean that we are called from time to time, to reassess our consumer driven lifestyles, and live a little more simply. It may mean looking outside our church and our families, and befriending those who are the ‘poor’ in our community, assisting them to find help in their situations. It may mean becoming actively involved in setting right the social injustice we see around us.

I remember a quip I heard recently: Someone asked, “How much would it cost to feed all the hungry in the world?” The answer was, “A lot less than it costs to bomb them!”

Jesus was sent to proclaim freedom for the captives and release to the oppressed. In his earthly ministry, Jesus got his hands dirty. He touched a leper. He ate with the scum of society. He healed the demonised, the insane and the broken. He welcomed a prostitute into his inner circle. He set them free by showing them they were people of worth - that he cared for them, and by bringing God’s healing touch into their broken lives.

In our own ministry, proclaiming freedom for the captives and release for the oppressed doesn’t just mean visiting prisons, and sharing the Gospel message with the prisoners. It is that – Christian ministries such as visitation to jails, and Kiaros are very valuable.

But proclaiming freedom to the captives and release for the oppressed is so much *more* than that. It is doing what Jesus did.

Whenever we visit or care for someone who is house-bound, or in hospital, or whenever walk with someone who is mentally ill, or disabled; or whenever we get involved in the plight of the asylum seekers, or advocate for someone who is ‘imprisoned’ by their circumstances – we too are proclaiming freedom for the captives and release for the oppressed, by showing people that they are valued and loved and worthwhile. We become God’s agents of deliverance. We become vessels through which God can minister his justice.

Jesus was sent to proclaim recovery of sight for the blind. Sometimes in the ministry of Jesus, his physical actions carried a deeper spiritual truth. We know that Jesus physically gave sight to the blind. In our culture, we often miss the impact of that. A blind person in Jesus day was a beggar. He had no hope, no future. He was an outcast, deemed a sinner, and was completely dependent on the mercy of others for everything. In giving them their sight physically, Jesus completely transformed their existence! He gave them a life and a future.

Physically giving the blind their sight was a powerful metaphor for how a person is transformed and renewed when they receive spiritual sight, and are cleansed and forgiven by God!

In our ministry, we may not often be called to physically heal someone who is blind – though God has used his servants on occasion to do that. However, we all have the very great privilege of being able to lead a person to Jesus, where they can receive spiritual sight, and so be made a completely new creation.

Lastly in this passage, Jesus was called proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. He did this of course in his preaching. But he also did it every moment of every day. He did it as he lived his life for his Father. He and His Father were one. For Jesus, every encounter, every word, every action, was dedicated to proclaiming the Lord’s favour –dedicated to proclaiming God’s unconditional love, compassion and forgiveness in response to repentance.

We too are called to live in this way. Listen to these words of Paul in Romans 12:

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Sometimes I suspect we carry around a lot of ‘oughts’. I really ‘ought’ to visit so and so. I really ‘ought’ to invite so and so to church. I really ‘ought’ to pray for so and so more. It can be a burdensome way to live our Christian lives.

We can walk around feeling guilty - or we can live as Paul teaches – and as Jesus did. When we are God focused, and we seek to please God in all we do; when we allow him to transform us as we keep our minds stayed on him, then a lot of ‘proclaiming’ happens naturally. It becomes a result of who we are (or who we are becoming) not so much a result of what we feel we *ought* to do.

Justice is far more than just punishment for wrongdoing. Justice is the setting right of what is wrong, and the making just (or fair) what is unjust. Justice is bringing to rights the whole of creation in the love and power of God. We are a called to be the champions of God’s justice. There is no other way he has chosen to bring it about. It is a tough calling, yet it is a calling that warms the very heart of God.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas, and look forward to his return, may we also renew our commitment to being his voice, his heart, his hands and his feet, in bringing about a fuller justice on this earth for the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed.

Let’s pray