

Justice and Mission (Why)

Series: Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice

Date: 5 September 2021, 14th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Genesis 12:1-3, 18:16-21; Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Matthew 5:13-16, 28:16-20; Galatians 3:7-14

Evangelism v Social Justice?

If you've been around church for any length of time, you probably will have noticed that Christians like arguing about things. We argue about beliefs because we're committed to the notion that what you believe shapes what you do. Today, we're going to try to navigate one particular argument in churchland. In the red corner you have social justice. In the blue corner you have evangelism. Over the last hundred years or so these two have been pitted against each other. I try to avoid using labels, but sometimes they can be helpful for telling a story, so with great hesitation I'm going to use them now. In the late 19th century a rift opened in Protestant churches. On the one hand "liberal" churches emphasised that the mission of the church was to do justice. On the other, "evangelical" churches emphasised preaching the gospel as the mission of the church. Liberals accuse evangelicals of not caring about social justice. Evangelicals accuse liberals of letting go the "supernatural" beliefs of the church like the incarnation, the atonement and the resurrection. This divide has become politicised in the US, with, I would suggest, the result that the name of Christ is dragged through the mud.

Part of the story is also that outside of the politicisation of the US, the voice for justice has been heard in the evangelical church, although perhaps not enough. I know for myself I've got lots to learn. In 1974 the first Lausanne Congress for World Evangelisation brought together representatives of evangelical churches and mission agencies from over 150 nations. They produced the Lausanne Covenant, whose chief architect was the English Anglican John Stott. This covenant guides many mission agencies still today. It emphasises the necessity of both evangelism and social justice, or what you might call holistic mission. Article 5 of that covenant is entitled Christian Social Responsibility. Here's a snippet from Article 5 on Christian Social Responsibility:

Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and Man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ.¹

¹ <https://lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>

Today we're going to explore how the Bible presents the relationship of evangelism to social justice in the mission of the church. If you're here and you're exploring the Christian faith my hope is that you'll hear the heartbeat of the church, and Christ's gracious invitation to life and service in his name. We'll look at 3 points.

- Mission of God
- Gospel of Christ
- Life of the Church

The Mission of God

The story of the Mission of God takes within its sweep the whole of history from creation to new creation. It begins in that paradigmatic moment when our first parents chose to listen to the serpent and doubt God's goodness. They asserted their independence and own authority over and against God. This rupture in the peace between God and humanity unleashed the dreadful curse upon the whole of creation. Not only were we now estranged from and in conflict with God, we were also estranged from and in conflict with the rest of creation, each other and our very selves. But God promised Eve that one day through her seed the serpent would be crushed.

Fast forward to Genesis 12 and we read that God calls Abraham.

Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

What is the opposite of a curse? A blessing. God elects Abraham so that through him the curse can be undone. This is his plan to redeem the world. Often when the doctrine of election is spoken of, the accent is on God's sovereign choice in salvation. But here the accent is that through the one God has chosen he will bring his blessing to all the peoples on earth.

A few chapters later, God is standing with Abraham overlooking the city of Sodom. Sodom in the Bible stands as a symbol for wickedness and injustice.

The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous **21** that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”²

God sees injustice and hears the cries of the oppressed. But before he comes to bring his judgment, notice what he says about Abraham, verse 18-19.

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. **19** For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

Abraham and his descendents are to keep the way of the Lord. And did you notice what that is? Our key words from last week: *mishpat* and *sedaqah*. “By doing what is right and just.”

Central to God’s mission is that his chosen people will do *mishpat* and *sedaqah*.

In fact there is a play on words here. In contrast to the “outcry against injustice” (*se’aqah*) that God hears at Sodom, he wants *sedaqa* (righteousness/justice) from Abraham’s community.³

God’s chosen people are called to live in such a way that reflects God’s character, his righteousness, justice and love, indeed these were his original purpose for humanity. Or to put it in the apostle Paul’s words - *We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus, to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*⁴ This is what God has chosen us for, and through this his mission to bless the world is advanced. “Election means election to an ethical agenda in the corrupt world of Sodom.”⁵

This picture is filled out in Israel’s experience of God’s redeeming them from slavery in Egypt and then giving them the Law at Sinai, showing them how to live as his chosen people.

In our text from Deuteronomy 4 we read:

6 Observe [God’s commands] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” **7** What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? **8** And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

Israel is called to an ethical life distinct from the surrounding nations, a life that reflects the character of God who saved her. Through her obedience, the surrounding nations will be attracted by her ethical behaviour and so come to recognise her God.⁶

² Genesis 18.20-21

³ Chris Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, IVP, 2004: 260

⁴ Ephesians 2.10

⁵ Chris Wright, 50

⁶ “Israel has had a unique experience of God’s revelation and redemption. As a result of this, ... they now have a unique knowledge of the identity of the LORD as God. That in turn means ... that they

Jesus sums this up in his Sermon on the Mount.

14 “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. **15** Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

The ethical character of our lives points to the God we worship and draws others to worship him. The beauty of our lives is a window into his beauty. And what is that beauty? It’s what God commanded Abraham to teach his children, even us who are Abraham’s spiritual descendents - doing what is right and just. *Sedaqah* and *Mishpat*.

But is this all? That brings us to point 2.

The Gospel of Christ

Jesus’ last words to his disciples in Matthew’s gospel are these:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

This is the mission that Jesus has given to his church - to make disciples of all nations. How are we to make disciples? Jesus tells us: through baptising people and teaching them to obey everything he has commanded.

Up to this point we’ve been basically talking about that second point - teaching obedience. This is keeping the way of the LORD that he gave to Abraham, to do what is right and just. The good deeds that shine God’s light and draw people to worship him. Jesus puts it most succinctly in Matthew 22.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ **38** This is the first and greatest commandment. **39** And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40** All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.⁷

But making disciples is not only about teaching. It begins with baptism. Baptism is a sign of ownership by and worship of a particular god in distinction to all other gods, the one God who is named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We get a deeper picture if we look at Jesus’ words to his disciples in the equivalent passage in Luke’s gospel.

now have a unique responsibility to live in the midst of the nations in a manner that reflects ... the ethical character of the LORD ...,” Wright, 53-54

⁷ Matthew 22:37-40

The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, **47** and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things.⁸

Baptism you see is for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus' command to baptise is first a command to preach about his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and to call people to respond to this in repentance. As in the exodus, so now definitively in Christ Jesus God both reveals himself and redeems a people for himself.

You see the problem is this. All our work for justice in this world will not heal a broken relationship with God. So perverse are our hearts that we can look to our work for justice in the world as a source of pride and a way to justify ourselves. Depending on your political persuasion you might say in your heart, "I thank you God that I'm not like those bigoted, racist, climate change deniers. I voted for gay marriage. I marched in Black Lives Matter. I'm going plastic free and carbon neutral." Or you might say, "I thank you God that I'm not like those immoral, godless, cultural marxists. I don't sleep around. I protested against abortion and euthanasia. I support missionaries." What has happened? We're looking to our moral performance, our works to save us. That's the vertical dimension. And what is the result? We dehumanise others. That's the horizontal dimension.

Throughout the Bible idolatry and injustice go hand in hand. When we treat sex, or money or power or tribe or even religious obedience as god - trusting them to save us, setting our moral compass by them, looking to them for identity - when they come under threat we react with violence and malice. We deface the image of God because we defy God. When we don't love God as we should we fail to love our neighbours as we should. We don't just have a problem with other people, our bigger problem is with God. We stand under his just judgment. We need saving from that judgment and we need our hearts to be remade so that they love God and love our neighbour. And that is not something we can do for ourselves.

There will be a day when God comes to judge all the injustice of this world. We'll look at that next week. But because he loves us, he would not see us perish under the curse. The Gospel of Christ, the good news of Jesus is this: that in Christ God has stepped in and taken the just judgment against injustice that you and I deserve upon himself on the cross. As such as we turn to Jesus to trust him as Saviour and to obey him as Lord he will give us the forgiveness his death has purchased. What's more he will give us the Holy Spirit to make us new and change us from the inside out so that we share his heart for justice. Baptism is for the

⁸ Luke 24:46-48

forgiveness of sins. It's a sign of death to the old way of life turned against God and his creation. It is a sign of the new birth that the Holy Spirit brings.

This is the blessing that God promised through Abraham. That Christ has born the curse for us to redeem us. And as we trust in him we receive the promise of the Spirit. That Christ had to die for us crucifies our pride. That he loves us so much he was glad to die for us lifts us to the skies. That brings us to point 3.

The Life of the Church

The church is not a palace for saints. It's a hospital for sinners. It's a community of those who have been baptised for the forgiveness of sins and who are learning to obey all that Christ has commanded. It's a community who have been captivated by the grace of God. We know we only stand because of God's abundant grace and generous mercy poured out in Jesus. The Gospel moves us to worship the God who made us and loves us and who showed that love by dying for us.

But second, the Gospel moves us to love our neighbours. Take the Good Samaritan. We're the ones who are lying naked and bruised on the road. Christ is the stranger who has stooped down to rescue and restore us. If that's the case, how can we fail to offer that same care for those we see in need?

The apostle James shows us how we treat others is a sign of how our hearts have been melted by the grace of God.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? **15** Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. **16** If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? **17** In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.⁹

Or put it another way. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."¹⁰ That is, God's kingdom and salvation comes to those who acknowledge they are spiritually bankrupt. That means to see that you're deeply in debt to God and there is no way you can even begin to work off that debt and redeem yourself. God's free generosity to you and to me is that he has paid your debt, at infinite cost to himself in the cross, and this is the only thing that saves you. But what if you're not poor in spirit? That would mean you don't think you're so sinful, so morally bankrupt, so lost that only God's free grace could save you. You might think that the classic Christian teaching about the universal sinfulness and guilt

⁹ James 2:14-17

¹⁰ Matthew 5.3

of humanity is too harsh. You might believe that God in fact owes you, he ought to answer your prayers because of the good things you've done. You could say that you're "middle class in spirit". You feel you've earned a certain standing with God. You might believe that your success and resources are primarily due to your own hard work.

If you're middle class in spirit, you'll be indifferent to the poor. But if you grasp the gospel of grace and realise your spiritual poverty, you'll find your heart open to those in material poverty. In fact you'll see in the poor a mirror - reminding you of God's grace to you and moving your heart to generously meet their needs.¹¹

What is our mission as the church? It's to make disciples through baptism and learning to obey Christ's teaching. It's proclaiming the good news of God's saving grace in Christ and shining his light through the good deeds he calls us to. It's Loving God and loving our neighbours. Through the history of the church there have been times where we've done both of these beautifully.

- The church in Rome in the 2nd century was feeding over 1500 widows per week.
- In the ancient Mediterranean world, unwanted babies were left to die on rubbish dumps. The early Christians rescued and raised these orphans.
- The early church started the first hospitals.
- When the plague came, the elites fled the cities. Who stayed behind to care for the sick and dying? The Christians.
- By the 4th century the pagan emperor Julian complained that the old gods were not being worshipped because these new "atheists" who followed Jesus of Nazareth cared not only for their own poor and sick but the poor and sick in the rest of society.
- In the 18th and 19th century the Clapham sect, a group of English evangelicals led by William Wilburforce started not only the Church Missionary Society and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, but also the RSPCA, they led the campaign to abolish slavery in the British empire and also introduced the first child labour laws.

We're called to continue this legacy and witness of our spiritual ancestors.

To be salt and light. To shine the gospel in word and deed, evangelism and social justice. We do what is right and just to bless our neighbours and point to Jesus.

What does this mean for our life as church and what measure of justice can we hope to see done? For that, you'll have to come back next week.

¹¹ Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2010: 101-103