

A Time for Justice

Series: Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice

Date: 12 September 2021, 15th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9; Proverbs 31:8-9; Ps 96; 1 Peter 2:11-17



Hope and Disappointment

Do you remember that poster for Barack Obama's first presidential campaign? What was the one word that captured the mood of a generation and what they were expecting from this potential president? Hope. Hope. Obama's soaring oratory painted the possibility of a future where the injustices of the past were rolled back.

Change was possible. His slogan was, "Yes we can." Fast forward 8 years, and to the shock and disbelief of the progressive establishment, someone who seemed the very antithesis of Obama was elected, Trump. The deep divisions in the US were laid bare. Hope, at least for some, crumbled to be replaced by rage.

At Deeper Conversations on Monday we were speaking about hope, and Charlotte said to me that for her and her peers it's hard to have hope, because all she has seen in her life is failure and disappointment in public life. If you think about the last 20 years we've had September 11, the war in Iraq, the GFC, the failure of the Arab Spring, Trump, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Afghanistan, and behind all of these 2 decades of inertia on Climate Change. Writing mid the US election last year, journalist David Brooks says that Millennials and Gen Z have grown up in what he calls the age of disappointment. He argues that this has meant young adults have high levels of mistrust and insecurity. This insecurity is financial. By the time Baby Boomers hit a median age of 35, in the US they owned 21% of the nation's wealth. For millennials it's 3.2%. There's identity insecurity. "All the traits that were once assigned to you by your community, you must now determine on your own: your identity, your morality, your gender, your vocation, your purpose, and the place of your belonging." And then there's social insecurity. In an age of social media, "we see ourselves in how we think others see us." "This is exhausting and deeply unsatisfying." I would suggest that disappointment and insecurity rings true here too. Brooks concludes, "in this world, nothing seems safe; everything feels like chaos".¹

In a world of disappointment, there are, I think, 2 primary emotional responses. Rage and Despair. On the one hand there is rage against people and systems that perpetuate injustice. On the other hand there is despair that things can ever be fixed. Rage gets you out there doing something, but it's exhausting. Easier to retreat into despair and distract yourself through entertainment - video games, drugs, sex, holidays, depending what you can afford. But is that all? No! The Bible tells us a story of

¹ David Brooks, 'Collapsing Levels of Trust are Devastating America', *The Atlantic*, 5.10.20

hope. That there is a God who made and loves this world, who made and loves us, and that he is not done with it. The story the Bible tells us gives us hope for tomorrow and power to act in the present because it's true. And we all need that whether you're a Christian or exploring faith with us, whether you're old or young, whatever your political persuasion.

This is the 3rd in our series, *Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice*. We've seen that justice in the Bible is putting things right, restoring relationships, social justice. Last week we saw that the mission of the church is to bring God's blessing to the nations through proclaiming the good news of Jesus, and living the lives of justice and righteousness that God calls us to. This week we're tackling the question of hope, which is a question of *when*. When can we look for justice? And of course, how might this come about? This morning we'll look at 2 main points - Justice in the Present and Justice in the Future.

1. Justice in the Present

To help us answer the question of what measure of justice we can hope for in the present we need to ask 2 questions. What is the job of governments? And what are the limits of government.

The job of governments

Behind the hope and disappointment in politics lies a sense that governments are meant to bring justice. It turns out there are good Biblical reasons for this. There are a number of texts that outline what the Bible says is the job of governments. Proverbs 31:8-9 is as good as any. King Lemuel's mother gives him this advice on what his task as king is.

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

Here it is clear that the king is to maintain justice in that wider Biblical sense of the word, using his power to defend and advocate for those who have little economic or social power. The apostle Peter summarises the task of government.

“Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.”²

Peter here focuses on the retributive aspect of justice. Governing authorities are ordained by God to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right, that is to maintain justice. They carry out this task through the whole apparatus of law, legislative bodies, judiciary, and enforcement agencies. To be able to execute justice governments backed must by force, otherwise they can only offer empty threats. As Paul says, they do not bear the sword for no reason.³ So we can look to and expect justice from governments.

The limits of politics

² 1 Peter 2:13-14

³ Romans 13.4

There are however, limits to what justice governments can accomplish.⁴ First, human knowledge is finite and partial, even with the vast surveillance apparatus of the modern state. Political parties offer different accounts of what is wrong and how to fix it. How are we to discern what justice is? We swear in court to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But to tell the whole truth is beyond our knowing. Only God knows all things completely, and therefore only he can disclose the truth that complete justice requires.

Second, the power of governments is limited. Granted the modern state has resources at its disposal that are far beyond those an individual can marshal. They may have, more or less, a monopoly on force, but they have no spiritual power to transform the heart. As one commentator grimly put it, part of the failure of the West in Afghanistan was that they thought if they bombed the country enough they would discover a liberal democracy. No government has the power to bring in the final and complete justice promised in Isaiah 11 and Psalm 96.

Third, because they lack complete knowledge and have only limited power, all human governments lack final authority. Their authority is often contested. Transcendent authority belongs to God alone. And then of course governments can be corrupt and hampered by sectional and self interest.

These limitations mean that we ought not invest our ultimate hope for justice in politics. Any justice that can be achieved by political means can only ever be imperfect and partial. And yet, they are ordained by God. Bad government is better than no government.

One reason for the rage and despair that we see is because the only horizon we have in our culture is now. The only hope we have is what we can make with our own hands, and the most powerful means we have for doing that is politics, and look at the mess that's in. Perhaps more than previous generations, Millennials and Gen-Z want justice. But I would argue they lack a story that gives us hope to persevere for justice in the face of disappointment without succumbing to rage at those who stand in the way. Melbourne pastor and author Mark Sayers put it like this. We want the Kingdom but not the King.

That brings us to point 2.

2. Justice in the Future

The story of the Bible is that there is a King who will bring in a Kingdom of justice and peace. That story not only gives us an ultimate hope for the future, but it also teaches us how to act with hope in the midst of the imperfections of the present. What is that story?

Shalom

The opening chapters of the Bible present a picture of *shalom*. That is where everything is woven together in harmony. There is right relationship between humanity and God, humanity and the rest of creation and with each other.

⁴ Cf. Oliver O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, Eerdmans, 2005: 28-30

Unravelling

That picture is how things were meant to be, but it is not how things are now. Our first parent's rebellion against God tears open that fabric of shalom and now things begin to unravel. Thorns and thistles grow. Conflict and shame mark our relationships with each other. Cain slays his brother Abel, and since then his blood and all those who have been victims of injustice cry out for justice.

He comes to judge!

But God will not abandon his creation to violence and oppression. In the Exodus God heard his enslaved cry for justice and he came down with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm to save his people and judge their oppressors. Through Moses God leads Israel out of slavery into the freedom and life of the promised land. What God had done for Israel in the Exodus became for her a picture of what God would one day do for the whole world. One day God would come and bring justice and salvation.

We see this in texts like Psalm 96. It's a song of praise, inviting all peoples to worship the LORD God of Israel, the maker of heaven and earth. Did you notice where the energy and joy comes from in the Psalm? Read with me from verse 11.

11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
12 Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
13 Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Here the whole of creation pulsates with hope because one day God will come and judge the earth. Injustice will not win. The wicked will not triumph. And this is not just for humanity, it is for all creation. In St Paul's words, *the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*⁵

The prophets looked for that coming day of the Lord, a day of judgment that would bring salvation and restore the *shalom* lost in Eden. Our text from Isaiah 11 adds a key element to this hope for the coming day of the Lord. Somehow that judgment would come through God's king, *a shoot from the stump of Jesse*, the Messiah in David's line.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;

⁵ Romans 8.21

with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.⁶

Through his Messiah, his chosen King, God would bring his judgment upon the world and establish his kingdom of justice and peace. So great would be this day that Isaiah declared it would be a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.⁷

The apostles, reflecting on the whole sweep of the Jewish Scriptures and following Jesus' own teaching, came to this conclusion. That in Jesus, God himself had come. That in his death on the cross the kingdom had come in weakness, not power, and in forgiveness, not judgment. That the day of judgment at the end of history had been enacted upon Jesus in the middle of history upon the cross. He had drunk the cup of God's wrath against all the injustice and wickedness of man down to the very dregs. God the Father had vindicated this act of righteous obedience in raising him from the dead. His resurrection to life was the first fruits of the new creation that Isaiah had spoken about - the light of the new creation breaking into the old world of sin and death. 40 days after his resurrection Jesus ascended into heaven, and through him the Father had poured out that second sign of the new creation - the Holy Spirit. Now at his right hand Jesus is reigning until the day he comes to bring in the kingdom in fullness, a day when God will judge the world with justice, through him, through the man he has appointed, as St Paul told the Athenians.⁸ That day will be the one the Psalmist looked for, when the heavens rejoice, when the earth is glad, when the trees of the forest will sing for joy, when all creation will rejoice because of the true and perfect justice that he will bring.

Do you long for that day? I know I do. Every cry for justice from every victim of oppression is a cry for that day. That is the great hope for justice that the Bible holds out for us, guaranteed by Jesus' own resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. It's why the creed anchors us, because we remind ourselves - that *he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end*. If you're not yet a believer, the question for you is, will you accept his judgment on your life and receive his forgiveness?

People sometimes say that one of the problems with Christianity is that it makes you so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. I have to say that sometimes how the Christian faith is presented can lead to this problem. That what really matters is the spiritual, the eternal, salvation *from* this world. And so any attempts to for God's justice *on earth* as it is in heaven, is a waste of time, or worse, a rejection of the supernatural. This I would argue reflects a poor reading of Scripture and creates an unbiblical dualism - pitting body against spirit, this creation against the new creation. Jesus' own incarnation shows that God is so committed to the creation that he has made that he has united himself to it. Jesus' resurrection shows God will complete the work he has started in Jesus' risen body as the first fruits of the new creation.

⁶ Isaiah 11:3-4

⁷ Isaiah 65.17-25

⁸ Acts 17:31

The equal and opposite error is to say that to work for justice now you must deny the resurrection and God's power to act in history at all. In his book, *Surprised by Hope*, Tom Wright argues,

The heirs of ... liberal theology are today keen to marginalize the Bible, declaring that it supports slavery and other wicked things, because they don't like what it says on topics such as sexual ethics. But if you push the Bible off the table, then you are merely colluding with pagan empire, denying yourself the sourcebook for your kingdom-critique of oppression.⁹

The Bible is a transcultural guide to critique injustice. The cross shows that human wickedness and injustice runs so deep that only God can save us from ourselves. And yet at the same time Jesus' resurrection is the promise and guarantee that injustice will not win in the end. There will be a day of full and complete justice.

And because of that day, we can work for justice now in the present. We work knowing that our attempts at justice will only ever be imperfect, and yet they are not because of that in vain. St Paul says that because Christ has been raised, our labour in the Lord is not in vain. Christ is the King who will with righteousness judge the needy and with justice give decisions for the poor of the earth. If you want that Kingdom, will you kneel before the King? If you are a follower of Christ you're a citizen of his Kingdom will you live under his laws of justice and righteousness. We do so as ambassadors of God in the city of men, shining his light in a world of darkness. And yet we can also work for justice in the city of men partnering with its citizens who hunger and thirst for justice but who do not know the King. Through our work for justice, the dawn of the coming Kingdom breaks through. And in that partnership we can bear witness to the King of the coming Kingdom, and invite others to bow at his throne and find an eternal hope.

How might we go about that work for justice? We'll tackle that question in 2 weeks time, but next week we'll look at a case study, what does the Bible have to say about Justice for Women.

⁹ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 230-232