

A Community of Justice (How)

Series: Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice

Date: 26 September 2021, 17th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Ruth 2; James 2:1-17; Matthew 25:31-46

*Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.* Proverbs 14:31

Earlier this year a friend posted on Facebook an article from *the Australian* about a guy from his church. Doug Abdiel is a former US Marine and tech executive. He realised that many refugees in Australia struggle to find work. He wanted to build a business that could be operated by people who couldn't read or write in English. 5 years ago he bought a run down factory that made paper tubes. Using skills he had learned in training the Afghan military, as well as YouTube's translation function, he set up in person and video training for a multilingual workforce. The factory now turns a \$2 million revenue. Doug has given 26 refugees their first job in Australia. The company has also started a separate business employing another 22 refugees sewing face masks. Doug says, "A lot of what we do is unearth [...] talent, finding work for someone who just needs a chance, rather than being rejected because an employer might see them as a terrorist."¹

Welcome to St George's. If you're just joining us today, this is the 5th in our series *Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice*. We've seen that, according to the Bible, justice is about putting things right. As God's people we're called to make disciples and do justice. When Christ returns he will bring complete justice and that gives us hope as work for justice now, imperfect though that will be. Last week we looked at a case study, on Justice for Women. Today our theme is A Community of Justice and we're asking the question *How?* How can we do justice, personally and together as a church? To answer that question we'll look at 2 points, 1 - Injustice as a tear in the fabric of shalom, and 2 - Justice as reweaving the fabric of shalom. We'll use the book of Ruth again as an example of that reweaving in ancient Israel's life and what that might mean for us as the church today. Doug's story is an example of what someone who has been captivated by God's heart for justice might do to bring justice and blessing to their neighbours.

1. Injustice: A tear in the fabric of shalom

¹ Jackson Hewett, 'The US Marine who bought a Melbourne factory to give jobs to refugees', *The Australian*, 22.7.21

We've seen that the key words for justice in the Old Testament are *mishpat*, putting things right, and *sedaqa*, right relationships. The Psalms speak of God creating all things to be in beautiful and harmonious relationship, interwoven together like a tapestry. In his book, *Generous Justice*, Tim Keller suggests that when human beings are interwoven together in right relationships to form communities, "this is what the Bible calls shalom, or harmonious peace." "[Shalom] means complete reconciliation, a state of the fullest flourishing in every dimension - physical, emotional, social and spiritual."² When your body is healthy, everything works in unity. When you're sick or getting older, you lose physical shalom. Your body starts to unravel. Guilt, anxiety, that inner conflict of wanting something you know is wrong, these are all forms of an inner unravelling of psychological shalom. Then there is social shalom, where a society works well together, people care for each other, and no one is left out. Where there is social disintegration, crime, poverty, family breakdown, that is the unravelling, a tear in the fabric of shalom, where people fall through the holes. *Mishpat* and *sedaqa*, justice and righteousness, are about restoring societal shalom.

How does the life of an individual or a community unravel? We can get a window into this question by looking at the causes of poverty that the Bible draws attention to. The poor being one of the quartet of the vulnerable whom God is especially concerned for.

Causes of Poverty

As we consider what the Bible says causes poverty, this can open our eyes to the causes of poverty, that opens our eyes to similar causes today. So what are these?

- (1) Calamity. Drought, sickness, the death of the primary breadwinner could push people into poverty. We see this in Ruth where Elimelech and Naomi go to Moab because of a famine and then Elimelech and his 2 sons die Naomi is left destitute.
- (2) Personal Moral Failure. The book of Proverbs praises the value of hard work in contrast to laziness. For example Proverbs 6:10-11 says, *A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief*. Calamity and poverty are however not seen as the main cause of poverty in the Bible. Rather it is unjust oppression. In fact injustice makes the poor vulnerable to disaster.
- (3) Oppression. Proverbs 12.23 says, *A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away*. Oppression includes
 - Judicial system weighted in favour of the powerful (Lev 19:15). This means those with social power are able to exploit those with little social capital.
 - Loans with excessive interest (Exodus 22.25-27), or unjust low wages (Jeremiah 22.13; James 5.1-6). Here the wealthy exploit the economically weak.

² Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2012: 173-174

- Royal excess and abuse of power. eg. In 1 Kings 21 king Ahab orchestrates the judicial murder of Naboth in order to acquire his vineyard.
- Israel's laws call those with social and economic power to repent of to work for justice for the vulnerable. They are designed to prevent the accumulation of wealth and the exploitation of the poor. As such, when extremes of wealth and poverty arise in Jewish society, the prophets blame the rich. They assume it is because of selfishness and greed rather than a concern for the common good.³

All of this shows that, in the Bible, poverty is understood as a complex phenomenon with interlocking factors. For example, a person raised in a low socio-economic area is likely to have poor health and have learned habits that keep them from getting ahead. To really make a difference in their life, the whole community needs to be affected, and that comes through comprehensive, public and private, spiritual, personal and corporate measures.

2. Justice: Reweaving the fabric of shalom

If injustice is a tear in the fabric of shalom, we could describe working for justice as reweaving the fabric of shalom. How can we practically answer this call? I know that I really am at the beginning of my journey here, and it's one I'd love for us as a church to grow in. This will require sustained listening and reflection.

Keller suggests that we as individuals and as a church can work on three levels to help vulnerable people: **Relief, Development and Social Reform**.⁴ **Relief** is that direct aid to meet immediate physical, material and economic needs. The Good Samaritan provided relief when he gave protection, medical treatment and a rent subsidy. In the book of Ruth, this is where Boaz generously loads up Ruth with food from his table to take home to Naomi. Some of you may know Sally Fernando who used to help with our playgroup. Her son Martin is a dentist. Teeth are the only thing that is not covered by Medicare. So lots of people can't afford to go to the dentist. In the northern suburbs of Hobart, dental health is terrible and this leads to all sorts of other problems. Martin saw this need and so when he finished his training he set up a low cost dental clinic in Glenorchy. That meant he didn't get the profit margins he could have, but he has made a big difference in the community. And God has blessed this. The practice has become so successful that Martin took over 2 other practices.

³ For example Isaiah 5.8-9 says, "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land. The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing: "Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants."

⁴ *Generous Justice*, 109-134

The next level is **development**. This means giving an individual, family or community what they need to move beyond dependency on relief into a condition of economic self-sufficiency. In the Old Testament, an Israelite might find themselves in such a place that the only asset they had to pay debts was to sell their labour. In the law God said that every 7 years debts had to be cancelled and those who had sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts were to be freed. What is even more astonishing is that when they were freed, God instructed their former master to send them out with sufficient grain, tools and resources for a new self-sufficient economic life.⁵ What might it look like to apply this law today to help an individual or family get out of a state of constant dependency? That might include education, job creation and training, financial counseling, and even helping a family to home ownership.⁶ All of which is to say development is far more time consuming, complex and expensive than relief. Development requires proximity. It means being part of a community and listening to those in need. It cannot be done from a Messiah complex, but as a servant. It's not me coming from above to help you below, but rather coming alongside, and together we work out solutions.

Each level of doing justice goes further up towards the source of the problem. Relief addresses immediate needs. Development of individuals and communities empowers them to change. The third level of doing justice is **social reform**. This seeks to change the conditions and social structures that cause poverty and dependency. If you think about the Good Samaritan, Social reform is asking, what can we do to make the road safe? This often means implementing just laws. The Old Testament laws were designed to create a just society. The book of Ruth illustrates how these laws worked in practice. 3 key laws for justice stand behind the story. We saw one last week - the law of levirate marriage. A second was the law of gleaning. In Leviticus 19.9-10 we read,

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10 Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.

When Ruth goes out to glean she is making use of this law. Boaz is aware of her needs, and it seems the needs of other women, as he invites Ruth to glean with them. He understands the spirit of the law, and goes beyond it telling his harvesters to pull out extra stalks and leave them for her.

The story also shows how God provides for the poor. In chapter 2 Boaz says to Ruth,

⁵ Deuteronomy 15:13-14

⁶ Cited in *Generous Justice*, 114-115

May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.⁷

Then in chapter 3, Ruth appeals to Boaz to “spread the corner of your garment over me.” The word translated as “wings” and “corner of the garment” is actually the same in Hebrew. Boaz it turns out is the means by which God spreads his wings over Ruth as she comes to find refuge. God’s call is for us personally and together as a church to be like Boaz, the means he uses to enact his justice in caring for the vulnerable. In fact, how we care for the poor is a litmus test of faith. Proverbs 14:31 says,

*Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.*

James 2 says,

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.

In his parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus says,

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

And when the righteous ask, “when did we do this?” Jesus says,

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

In serving the poor, we are serving Christ himself.

But what about helping an entire community move out of dependency to self sufficiency? The great problem with impoverished communities is that when someone makes it they leave. There is a loss of financial, social and spiritual capital. All of this leads to a community unravelling. How can this be reversed? Real change only happens when the people and churches are willing to get close for the long haul. Justice in this sense is incarnational. It requires proximity. When you stick around then people begin to trust you and share what is really going on, and then you can partner with people to bring about change. As I heard it in one sermon - for people to get clean it requires someone to get dirty. This requires costly and sacrificial love. Doing justice means going to where the fabric of shalom has broken down and weaker members of society are falling through the holes, and repairing that fabric. How

⁷ Ruth 2.12

can we do that? The only way to reweave the fabric is by weaving yourself into it. If we keep our money, our time, our power to ourselves, then our communities will stay frayed and fractured. Reweaving shalom means to sacrificially thread your time, your goods, your power and resources into the lives and needs of others.⁸ That starts here at church, with those in need in our own spiritual family. As we learn to meet the needs among us then we can ask our neighbours, what are the needs of the community around us?⁹ How can we be present as a community of healing and hope?

And as we start to speak in those terms we see that the call for justice is in response to and imitation of God's generosity toward us. Indeed, our efforts for justice can only be a pale reflection of the love that God has lavished upon us in Jesus. He did not stay safe at a distance, but left the comfort of heaven and came near. His love was a costly love of the closest proximity, carrying our burdens and making our sin his own. He wove himself into this world, sacrificing his life to bring us shalom, that deep and full and flourishing peace with God.

⁸ Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, 177

⁹ Cf. Galatians 6.10: *as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*