

Currently we here at Leith are in the middle of a preaching & teaching series on some of the big questions & the big themes of Christianity, & Biblical faith. And today we are going to be looking at justice, & asking **what is justice, & what is injustice**, Biblically speaking, & we are going to be looking at some Christians who's were so passionate about seeing justice done that they ended up changing history. Then we're going to look at how we can best contribute to the quest for justice in this world.

Now if you can remember back to when you were a 4 or 5, or you've been a parent of small children, you'll remember that one of the most frequent complaints made are the three words "**that's not fair!**".

And in fact social scientists tell us that the human desire to be treated fairly starts very early. Researchers have found that children as young as **19 months** can understand the concept of fairness, and appear surprised by scenes of blatant favoritism – such as when one puppet is given toys and another puppet goes without. In experiments, **by age 7**, some children will choose not to receive candy rather than get a significantly larger share than others they are sitting next to. The same research finds that **beyond age 7**, increasing majorities of those they are doing this work with would rather have no candy, or no money, rather than receive significantly more than the other people in their group.

In other words, it seems that we as humans are **hard wired** for fairness and for justice, and with the belief that people should be treated equally. And really this should not be too surprising, because we saw in our first reading from Deuteronomy that **God is just**, i.e. that **God's very character is one of justice; & that God's actions are just**. And obviously a God who didn't care about the difference between right and wrong would not, be admirable or someone we could trust. The fact that God is just and will judge between right and wrong **gives ultimate moral significance** to our lives and means that every single one of us is accountable for our actions.

And if we all are **made in the image of this God**, then it's no surprise that there is also in us a desire for justice as well.

But of course, in those experiments just mentioned, not everyone wants to share the candy or the money. We are a people made in God's image, but we are **also fallen & broken**, & there are some who are willing to take as much as they can, from whoever they can. In this world we have this tension: there is a continual cry for justice, but in so many places, we **also see injustice, & people being oppressed, & people suffering.**

The Hebrew word for "justice," *mishpat*, occurs in its various forms more than **200 times** in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people **equitably**. It also means giving people their **rights**.

A second important Hebrew word is *tzadeqah*, and it refers to a life of right relationships. It could also be translated as "**being just**," though in most of our Bibles it is usually translated as the word "**righteous**." When the words *tzadeqah* and *mishpat* are brought together - & they usually do appear as a couplet - the righteous life that results is **profoundly social**. The English expression that best conveys the meaning of these two words together is "**social justice**."

From this we see that "**justice**" in the Bible is **deeply relational**; it's about us **being in right relationship** with each other & with God.

God's laws are also very **wholistic**. As well as being designed to protect our relationship with God & each other, they are **designed to protect our relationship with our selves & our own souls**. In **Mark 3:27**, Jesus very forcibly tells the religious leaders of his day "*that people weren't created to serve the sabbath, but the sabbath was created to serve people*", & we know that having at least **one clear day of rest & recreation each week is essential** for human **health & wellbeing**. And as we look at some of the other laws in Exodus & Deuteronomy, we are told that the sabbath was given so that **labourers, animals, & even the land itself** could have sufficient rest (Exodus 23:12). And every 7th year, fields were to be

given a complete rest from production. So it's a very wholistic view, in which **justice must be done not only to people, but to animals & to the land.**

But in terms of **people**, many of God's laws were **given to protect the economically & socially vulnerable & the poor.**

One of the reasons given in **Exodus & Deuteronomy** as to why Israel should have such a strong concern for justice, & that is having **empathy for those who suffer**. Because the Israelites had previously lived for so long as an oppressed and enslaved people in Egypt, God calls on them to be empathetic towards those who are suffering.

For example **Exodus 22:21-23**

²¹ *"Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.*

²² *"Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. ²³ If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry."*

*And so we see that there are **four groups** that Israel must be especially concerned to protect & provide for: **orphans, widows & migrants & those who are poor.***

Fascinatingly, in **Deuteronomy 15:1-11** there was prescribed that every 7th year Israel should practice something extraordinary called **the jubilee year**: a cancelling of any debts incurred by the poor during the previous six years. It seems that it was God's intention was that there should never be amongst God's people **a permanent underclass of the permanently indebted**, or a people so poor they would **pass their debts on to their children**. And after seven cycles of sabbatical years, a total of **49 years**, the fiftieth year was proclaimed **a great jubilee** (Leviticus 25:8-12), and all families that had become poor and had mortgaged their **land should have it returned** to them.

This was **a pretty radical approach to achieving social justice** & ensuring that the gap between the very rich & the very poor never grew too great. Some of you may have heard of read the **2010 book 'The Spirit Level'** by epidemiologists Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett who's research showed that across every one of the 23 countries they surveyed, health, crime, education, happiness & in fact every social indicator they looked at, were

better the smaller the gap between rich & poor. And conversely, the greater the gap between rich & poor, the worse every social indicator was.

And this is very much a **modern, statistical confirmation** of the thrust of the Old Testament law, **& the Biblical vision of justice** – that all people are made in the image of God, & should be treated fairly & equally; & that the happiest community is the one in which resources are not hoarded by a few, & with the rich getting richer & the poor getting poorer.

Now **the first five books of the OT contains the books of the law; the last 17 books are those of the Prophets.** And whenever the leaders of Israel wandered away from the law, & began to oppress the poor & begin to live in luxury & wealth while the ordinary people were suffering, or were falling into idolatry – **God would raise up prophets** to get in their face & challenge them. Challenging them with things like this from Isaiah:

Isaiah 5:8

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.

Isaiah 10:1-3

10 Woe to those who make unjust laws,
to those who issue oppressive decrees,
²to deprive the poor of their rights
and withhold justice from the oppressed,
making widows their prey
and robbing the fatherless.
³What will you do on the day of reckoning,
when disaster comes from afar?
To whom will you run for help?
Where will you leave your riches?

And so it was the role of the Prophets to speak up on behalf of the poor & the oppressed, as well as on behalf of God himself. And of course **Jesus carried on this prophetic role when he arrived.** In his very first sermon delivered at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus announces **his mission statement** by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, which Debbie read to us from Luke 4. He says he has come, anointed by the Spirit to speak to the poor, to set free the oppressed, & to declare the year of the Lords favour, which is possibly a reference to the jubilee. And it's this prophetic call that causes Jesus to so often **clash with the political & religious leaders** of his community, the Pharisees. On a practical day to day level, as far as the lives of the ordinary people were concerned, it **wasn't the Romans**, but the Pharisees & the those who **controlled the temple**, controlled people's economic, religious & social lives.

And they instead of using their position to **shepherd the people of Israel, and to protect the poor & the vulnerable**, they were using this position to **acquire status, to build power, and to hoard wealth** - & Jesus continually attacks them for it.

But the with the closing of the canon of Scripture, God has not stopped raising up prophets. **God continues to raise up prophets & prophetic ministries till this day.**

It seems to me there are **two types of prophets** operating today – what we might call the personal or congregational prophet – those who say *“I think God is saying to you have a call of healing on your life & you should go into medicine”* etc, or those who might say to a congregation *“my people get ready, a time of great blessing or harvest or testing is about to come upon you – so be ready”* etc. And the second type are those we might call the ‘social prophets’ – who like Isaiah & Jeremiah & Ezekiel etc who prophecy **to whole societies**, calling them to greater justice & to obedience to God’s heart for justice.

Social Justice & Social Prophets.

I want to mention just a few of those social prophets here, just to give you a sample of what I’m talking about. I’ve picked 4 of these social prophets, who’s lives literally changed the course of history.

William Wilberforce, 1759 – 1833. Became a British Member of Parliament at age 21, & after becoming a Christian at the age of 25, he helped to found the Church Mission Society, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Britain. But his greatest commitment to justice came when Wilberforce threw himself into the fight for the complete abolition of the slave trade, & he became a leader of the abolition movement. He fought for this cause for 46 years until finally in 1833 the Slavery Abolition Act was passed which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. Wilberforce died just three days after hearing that the passage of the Act through Parliament was assured. Watch Amazing Grace.

Charles Finney, 1792 – 1875. An American Presbyterian minister & evangelist, and a leader in the Second Great Awakening in the United States in the 19th Century. He was deeply committed to fighting injustices such as slavery and the oppression of women, & he campaigned for the abolition of slavery, and equal access to education for women and for African Americans. From 1835 he was the President at Oberlin College of Ohio, & under Finney’s leadership, Oberlin was one of the first colleges in the United States to admit African Americans, and the first to admit women. He also led the colleges staff and students to be active in the abolition movement, & in the Underground Railroad. Finney pioneered altar calls. But on those altar calls, he’d tell his converts – “now that you are a Christian, you will commit yourself to ending slavery in this nation.” Later in the 19th century, the began a disastrous split between the ‘spiritual gospel’ of individualistic salvation, & the social gospel of societal redemption. But Christians like Finney refused to split the gospel up like that.

Kate Sheppard 1848 – 1934. Born in England, she emigrated to New Zealand with her family in 1868. Here she became an active member of various Christian organisations, including the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). While also teaching Sunday school at her church in ChCh. A brilliant thinker & powerful speaker, she organised three nation wide

petitions to parliament demanding women get the vote, the 3rd of which in 1893 was signed by 31,872 women. In that same year NZ finally passed The Electoral Bill which granted women full voting rights.

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, 1957 – 1968. An American Baptist minister. Leader & most famous speaker/preacher for the civil rights movement until his assassination in 1968. Fought against discrimination & racial segregation, & organised nonviolent protests. This led to the US passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which finally ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex or nationality. Dr King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

King's calling: late on Friday night, 1956. King slumped home, after a long meeting in Montgomery, Alabama where his movement had organised a boycott of local white businesses which had infuriated local people. He got home late and found his wife Coretta asleep. As he was getting ready for bed, the phone rang, & a sneering voice on the other end said: "Leave Montgomery immediately if you don't want to die." King's fear surged; he hung up the phone, walked to his kitchen, and with trembling hands, put on a pot of coffee and sank into a chair at his kitchen table.

Then, in one of his books, King describes what happened next:

"I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face this alone."

At then, that moment, I experienced the presence of God as I had never it before. It seemed as though I could hear an inner voice saying: "*Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and I*

will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fear began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

Three days later, while he was away on a trip, a bomb exploded at King's house, and his wife & small children only escaped harm by a hairsbreadth. "Strangely enough," King later wrote, "I accepted the news of the bombing calmly. My experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it."

I think there's little argument but that King was a prophet raised up by God to speak out against oppression & for those being crushed by unjust laws & unjust leaders.

And one of uniquely Christian the things that stood out was how King was determined to use the methods of Jesus in order to fight injustice. 1 Cor 10:3-4 says

³For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

And no matter how much he was threatened or attacked, King refused to turn to violence of any sort, but demanded that his followers use only the weapons of prayer, of love, of forgiveness, self-sacrifice; & in doing so they were required to show huge courage as they marched, as they sang, as they held protests, strikes & boycotts - & in the end they won, and the America's apartheid laws, that up until then had meant that in many parts of the country coloured people couldn't use the same bathrooms as white people, & coloured people couldn't vote – these were finally overturned.

But even though he refused to use violence, King never described himself as a pacifist, because for him that word was too close to the word passive. Like the Biblical prophets, & like the counsel given to King Lemuel in Proverbs 31, he knew he had to fight, & to "speak up for those who could not speak for themselves, & for the rights of the destitute. He knew he had to speak up, judge fairly & defend the rights of the poor and needy".

King believed, & he counselled those who following him, that no matter how badly they were abused, they must never give in to hate. He once said *“Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to the night. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”*

In the Old Testament, many of the laws there have a goal of **restitution**. In other words, if you steal something or damage something you have to pay back an equal amount.

Now clearly, violence in the pursuit of justice does occur in OT, & in fact you could sum it up as the law of permissible retaliation. One of the key teachings of Exodus & Deuteronomy is “an eye for an eye & a tooth for a tooth”, This law mandates fair & equal retribution, & at the same time limits the amount of payback you can take. If someone knocked out one of your teeth, you couldn’t knock out two of theirs. If you kill someone’s donkey, you must pay back one donkey”, and if you take someone’s life, you must pay with your life”. It was the law of equal payback. And we need to understand that in the ancient world, where life was so often lawless & brutal, these were good & needed laws because they put a limit on retaliation & revenge.

But King believed that the goal of the Civil Rights movement, & indeed the goal of any movement for justice inspired by Jesus, must be not restitution or revenge, but reconciliation between people.

And we see this with Jesus. When Jesus comes, he lifts the goal of justice & of discipleship to a whole new level. In Matthew 5:38-39 ³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person by evil means. Instead, if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the left cheek also”. A few verses earlier, Jesus has already told his followers that: ²² “anyone who is angry with a brother is liable to judgment. Anyone who says to a brother, ‘You fool!’ is in danger of the fires of hell. ²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar... leave it...& first go and be reconciled to your brother”. (Matthew 5:22-23).

The strategy of Jesus is always one of reconciliation.

Now: as Christians, as followers of Jesus, we can't all be prophets, **BUT** we are **all** called to live prophetic lives, to live the kind of lives that give the world a glimpse of the Kingdom that is coming,

We are to be a people of justice stand up for justice, who fight for the oppressed, who fight for the widow, the orphan, the refugee. But again, when we fight our weapons are not the weapons of this world – they are not guns or bullets, they are not knives or spears – our weapons are far greater – they are the weapons of prayer, of worship, of compassion, of forgiveness, of love. As we've heard so many times over the last 16 days, *there is only one force in the world that can defeat hate, & it is love.*

16 days ago, on Friday March 15th, a man whose mind was twisted with hate walked into two mosques in ChCh. This was a man who claimed to be defending western Christian civilization. He began shooting & killing unarmed men, woman & children, refugees & immigrants – the very people that the Bible tells us over & over we should be caring for & defending. But in the aftermath of that evil massacre, what have we seen? The rest of NZ rising up & opening our hearts & embracing these people as never before, grieving with them, letting them know that they are our neighbours & that we love them. The spirit of God has been moving in so many hearts, & our hearts have been reaching out for reconciliation with one another. Because reconciliation is deep on the heart of God, & reconciliation is deep in the teachings of Jesus.

When Susan saw me preparing this message the other day, she said to me “just tell them that we need to practice daily acts of kindness” - & it's true. We can't all be prophets, but each of us can commit ourselves to acting with kindness each day, and practicing acts of reconciliation each day, & in so doing revealing something of God's heart for justice and equality.

Let's pray.