

Justice

The reading from Isaiah tells us that God loves justice. As with last week, the context is very specific. Several centuries before Christ, the land of Israel was overrun by the might of a hostile empire. Thousands of Abraham's descendents were taken prisoner to the empire's capital, Babylon, where their faith – like their beloved temple in Jerusalem – lay in ruins. But the prophets, Isaiah included, saw this as Israel's just deserts. As justice. She had been unfaithful to God, and had to be punished. And after seventy years in exile Israel completed her sentence. Justice had been served. And Israel were freed to return to the promised land and rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of figures like Ezra and Nehemiah.

The reading from Isaiah speaks of the wastelands of Jerusalem being transformed as the exiles returned home. She had paid double for her sins, and was now returning home to be healed. And that is the context for this reading that was later to be used by Jesus himself: the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and so on. That coming day would bring wholeness and peace and healing for God's beleaguered people. That coming day of justice would also bring vengeance upon the enemies of God and his people. And God loves justice, as the reading from Isaiah told us. God loves justice! ... Or does he?

It is one thing to say that God loves justice. It is quite another to say that God is justice. And the move to say that God is justice is found everywhere in our churches today. I even heard an academic paper being delivered at Kings College here in London a couple of years ago, arguing that Justice is God's main characteristic. God is justice. And by that, we mean the kind of thing that Isaiah's first listeners might have heard. That God has to punish sin. That is, God has to punish them, out there, those nasty people who are nothing like me.

I have to be careful with some stories about my children, but it is true that as years unfold, characteristics that were noticeable in infancy remain constant. And my eldest boy has always been on the side of justice. At times, when adults were, of felt unable to administer justice. For instance, at a wedding a couple of years ago, there was a 6 year old little boy who kept trying to prevent all the other children present from playing with this ball. And he was quite rough with them. And the adults who sat watching this were increasingly agitated by this little boy, but felt they were unable to tell a stranger's child off too severely. But five year old Willem came to the point where he could no longer stand the injustice, and laid into this unfortunate fellow, quite roughly. I didn't witness the event for myself, but was thanked by a parent of one of the naughty boy's victims, who told me that all the other parents turned a blind eye to Willem's rather rough administration of justice.

But when justice is your main characteristic, then forgiving others, showing mercy to others is much harder. There are plenty of stories of unforgiveness to back those up, but if I told them I don't think I'd be forgiven. Justice and mercy do not sit comfortably together. That's why that famous verse from the prophet Micah that we stick on sunset posters and hang in our toilets, is so tough. That God asks us to do justice, and to love mercy – and to walk humbly with God.

I suppose we might say that God can combine those two things because he is God. But if God is justice, I wonder whether he is God. Because there are as many claims on what counts as justice as there are people. If justice were a simple set of timeless, accessible principles – then how would solicitors ever be able to earn a living?

The reading from Isaiah said that God loves justice. It did not say that God *is* justice. Because if God is justice, then he can only become an idol. We all have our own idea of justice, of what is fair, of what is right and what is wrong. And if God is justice, then he has to obey the principles of justice that we have created. If God has to serve justice, he is no longer God! He is just the gigantic puppet that we use to endorse the Moral world that we have created for ourselves.

Justice is not some free floating timeless set of rights and wrongs. God does not love justice as he loves a set of eternal laws that are separate from him but that he rather likes. Justice is the same as righteousness. Literally, the same word. Justice is what happens when our character reflects that of God. And the bible does not say that God is justice. It says that God is love. If you say that God is justice, then a whole different picture emerges than the one that appears if you say that God is love.

Justice is the process by which the character of a loving God is imitated amongst the people he has created. And so Isaiah shows in some detail what those characteristics actually look like:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me – to preach good news to the oppressed. To bind up the broken hearted. To proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners. To proclaim to the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God. To comfort all who mourn...”

Those are familiar words, taken by Jesus to describe the shape of his own ministry. Although Jesus makes some changes to the list. He omits a couple of things. He chooses not to say anything about mending the broken hearted. He chooses not to mention the day of vengeance of our God.

In terms of binding the broken hearted, I don’t know why Jesus didn’t include this. If he had, then it would be an aspect of his mission and ministry in which he failed. If he represents a God of love, then it is clear enough that if you love anyone or anything, you run the risk that your heart will be broken. The only way to avoid having your heart broken is to avoid loving anyone properly. C.S. Lewis had a lot to say about this. Love anything and your heart will be torn and quite possibly broken. To love is to make yourself vulnerable. Unless you keep your affection to yourself, where it will go bad, and your heart will eventually die in the coffin of its own selfishness. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, if you want to love a God of love, then you run the risk that your heart will be broken.

Jesus also omitted to mention the day of vengeance of our God. Jesus was not coming to pass judgement on a godless world. He was not coming to exact revenge on the enemies of Israel. And in fact, when he read this passage at Nazareth, where he had been brought up, they tried to stone him to death. After all, he had played with this scripture, and stopped mid-sentence, refusing to read the most satisfying part about vengeance. Luke tells us that they were horrified that Jesus was talking about grace. He had misused the scriptures, and people from his own town decided that this made him worthy of judgement, worthy of death by stoning.

Jesus saw himself however, as the fulfilment of all that Isaiah foretold in the reading we heard from Isaiah. Jesus chose to use this reading as a description of who he was and what he had been anointed to do. And in advent, we await with heart broken Israel, captive in a strange land, with our faith damaged and our hope spent. And in advent, we await the arrival of the

one who is anointed to fulfil all that Isaiah foretold. And it is John the Baptist again, who comes into focus.

Jesus was not the only one to describe his own ministry and calling using the words of Isaiah the prophet. When he was pushed, John the Baptist quotes Isaiah as well. This was the passage that we looked at in a different form last week. “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord.” He did it by baptising people.

As we saw last week, being baptised was not simply a provocative ritual. Part of its purpose is to bring death. To put to death even our most treasured beliefs and assumptions. And part of what goes down into the watery grave is our belief in justice. Our assumptions about what is right and what is wrong. Because those things change when we encounter this Messiah. I don't mean that we suddenly discover that drinking, smoking, swearing and speeding are wrong. I mean the wider rules that govern our lives.

Being baptised does not mean that we suddenly become a blank sheet, so that we no longer have any assumptions or beliefs. But being baptised is the beginning of a process of baptism, where – we have a little baptism every day, when we take up our cross every day, and allow precious laws, and cultures and habits and rules and rights and wrongs and things we deem appropriate and inappropriate – all of them are up for grabs when we are living the life of a baptised believer. That is why being baptised prepares the way for the coming of this Messiah and the justice he brings.

I remember the 1980s teaching we used to have on justice, - that for many people it simply meant what is right or wrong for us, for me, just-us they called it. And it's true that justice instead opens up our eyes to the world beyond our comfort and security and interest. The whole world which God so loved he sent his only son.

Being open minded is one of the cardinal virtues of our age. And I have been locked in countless debates with anti-Christian people, keen to tell me how closed minded Christians are and how open minded they are. So open minded, that they refuse to hear what Christians really think. Some of the most closed minded people I know are those who shout most loudly for openmindedness. But in many cases their criticism stands. Christians often assume that because we worship God, we have a monopoly on truth, and a privileged position for understanding and assessing what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, and what justice really is. The reality is that it is hard for anyone to seek justice, or in biblical language, to hunger and thirst after righteousness – which means exactly the same thing. And it is almost impossible.

This quest for justice cannot be real without facing broken heartedness. And that hurts. The quest for justice cannot be real whilst we assume God will punish those with whom we disagree.

And the quest for justice entails death, the death of beliefs and views and opinions and habits that are deeply precious to us. That is why a little baptism every day is the way that we prepare for the coming of the Messiah who brings justice because he represents a God of love.

