

Sermon: Christ's Social Justice Tradition- What is its heart and how do we live it as Christians? Micah 6. 1-8; 1Cor 1. 10-18; Matthew 4.12-25

Dear Father, please open our hearts to be aware of those in need. May we be humbly used to shine your light into any darkness and to bring your joy. Amen.

Last week we heard how Andy's sense of social justice for our First Nation people came alive when he joined a Reconciliation Group in the 1990's. Joining in with others and seeing things through their eyes is a powerful way of growing in our awareness of injustice. We each have our own story to tell about that.

For me it started in 1972 when I wagged high school and marched the streets of Perth CBD during the "It's Time" election campaign. The people I met then, the things I learnt, the connections I made opened my eyes to so many things that I felt to be wrong in our country and the world. I remember writing in my diary around that time: *"People say fight- fight for peace. But I didn't realise the commandment says: You must not kill- except for ...?"* On one level, this was a simplistic expression of a very complex issue. On another level it reflected a youthful awakening to the short comings of the world I was growing into. That awakening led to being involved in many social justice campaigns over the years. And during those years I would often ask myself where is God in all this? What is the heart of this Social Justice tradition and how do we live it? Let's explore our readings today to see what answers they may give us to these questions.

What is the heart of the social justice tradition?

Throughout the entire bible there are numerous references to God caring about the poor and the needy, the sick and the orphans, indeed all those in destitute circumstances. Our Micah text expresses this powerfully. Through this prophet God tells the Israelites what he does and doesn't expect of them. He doesn't want them to forget His acts to save them time and time again. He doesn't want them to sacrifice burnt-offerings, rivers of oil or their first-born child.

So what does He want? In verse 8 we are told exactly what God wants:

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

Here, the first point to note about how to live the social justice tradition, is that it involves action. We have TO DO, we have TO LOVE and we have TO WALK. They are all action verbs. We can't live the social justice tradition by

sitting on the sideline and watching others do it for us. We have to take action ourselves, to the best of our God given abilities.

God wants us to do this because He is the essence and source of love – He cares deeply about how we treat each other. After all, we are His precious creations, his very own sons and daughters. A sound perspective on this is contained in the book “A Spiritual Formation Workbook” written by James B Smith and Lynda Graybeal. In it they say:

“If we could see the world through the eyes of God, we would look through a filter of compassion. God cares about our needs, our hurts, our brokenness. He understands our sinfulness – it does not shock or surprise him. And instead of judging us, God is ready to forgive, to heal, to restore us. We are all precious in God’s sight, and the Lord longs for us to see others as he does – priceless, unique people who need love and compassion.”

That is the heart of the Social Justice tradition – God’s heart.

What actions are we called to take?

The next logical question then, is what does taking action look like? What kind of things are we called to do? I suggest that God shows us the answer to this question through the life and ministry of Jesus.

Many theologians argue that Jesus’ entire life and ministry are wonderfully summarized in the well-known Sermon on the Mount. Our gospel text is the beginning of that sermon and is the section called the Beatitudes, which cover a very wide range of topics. I’m going to speak only to two elements of the Beatitudes which particularly shed light on the question: What social justice actions are followers of Jesus called to take?

Verse 4 declares: *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”* After a careful analysis of the Greek, William Barclay suggests that *“the real meaning of the second Beatitude is: O the bliss of the person whose heart is broken for the world’s suffering and for their own sin, for out of their sorrow they will find the joy of God!”* This makes it clear that taking action to passionately care has two aspects: first we mourn for our own issues, the things which block us from God, our own imperfections. When we do that our loving Father will comfort us. Then, on that sure foundation, we can truly care for the suffering of others. We will not judge them, we will seek only to share God’s heart with them. We will listen to His promptings and we will lean on His strength to do whatever task is before us.

Verse 7 declares: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”* This is a consistent teaching of Jesus repeated throughout the New Testament in many different passages. A vital element of its meaning is hidden within the original Hebrew/Aramaic word for “mercy”. That word implies the ability to get right inside someone else, to see things exactly as they see them and feel as they feel. Imagine what our world would look like if we all did that? Many examples are probably going through your minds right now. I’ll put forward just one: What would Australia look like if all non- Aboriginal people made the effort to walk in the shoes of the First Nation people? To open themselves to the pain and suffering they have endured? To feel how they feel about their country? How different would our nation be? Such is the power of putting Christ’s social justice values into action. Having said that though, it is well worth taking heed of the word of warning contained in our 1Corinthians Chapter 1 reading. Whatever action we take let us always humbly acknowledge the source of all wisdom and power: Jesus. As verse 31 reminds us: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

How can we practice Christ’s Social Justice tradition in this parish?

Our readings have led us to explore why and how we should put Christ’s social justice values into action. The last question I’ll ask you is: *How do you think we can practice Christ’s Social Justice tradition here and now in this parish?*

1. Pray to know God’s heart for his people in need.
2. Self-reflect on our own short-comings.
3. Write a kind, encouraging letter. Take time to tell someone how important they are to you. Or perhaps let them know you are available to talk or listen to them about any issue they may be facing.
4. Research the needs within our community and seek to address any injustice we see happening. This includes expanding our service to the community through the Boutique and Community Centre particularly by creating the Community Centre Manager as per the Mission Action Plan.
5. Using our gift and talents for the Body of Christ: Are we being called to be Wardens, PC members, service leaders? Every act of service is part of the social justice model Jesus gave to us.
6. Reflect on the Statement from the Heart in our study groups
7. Organise a community discussion about the Voice to Parliament

In conclusion, lest this all seem a bit too much, let me finish with this word of encouragement. Whenever we reach out to help others with a prayerful, kind heart it has an amazing double-effect: in the process of helping others we, too are invariably helped. May Jesus guide us as we care for one another and all those in need within our community. May we walk as they walk, feel as they feel and see as they see. Amen