

SERMON: The Justice of our King - Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25.31-46

Dear Father, we give praise and honour to our King, your Son our Lord Jesus. Thank you that He is our good shepherd, who feeds and cares for us always. Amen.

The word that jumped out of me this week as I prepared this sermon was “justice”. It got me wondering just what is “justice”? And so I invite you all to reflect on: How do you see justice?

Do you think that justice is served by sentencing criminals harshly so that future crimes are deterred? Or perhaps you lean towards justice that is a mix of fairness and safety; one that provides a fair hearing and a fair sentence, that punishes not too harshly and offers hope for rehabilitation. Then there is the notion of social justice as opposed to legal justice. Does your concept of justice merge with factors of equality, opportunity and equity? Well might we remember the campaigns during the 1960’s and 70s for Equal pay for equal work; no fault divorce; free health care; Aboriginal land rights. Much has been achieved since then and yet much is still to be addressed. Today we continue to be confronted with many issues of social injustice, to name but a few, climate change, poverty, warfare and the truthful recognition of our First Nation people.

In 2014 the Hon. Marilyn Warren AC, then Chief Justice of Victoria gave an address in which she responded to the question of “What is justice?” by suggesting:

Defining justice may be like justice itself – it is an aspiration, but it might just be one of our most important and central quests.

We may not know always what it means, yet, we can say how it feels. If we feel very sharply about what is just and what is not, it is not an accident. It is because the concept intersects with all that is important in the human experience, the state of our physical, social, intellectual and spiritual lives, the relationships which exist between individuals, between groups of people and between the social, economic, religious and political institutions we have created.

And theologian Tom Wright goes even further when he says:

“Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race. If there is no justice, then deep within ourselves we know that something is out of joint. Justice is hard to define and harder still to put in practice; but it has never stopped human beings and societies seeking it, praying for it and working to

find ways of doing it better...Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions...is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from the creator God Himself. Jews and Christians believe that he will eventually do justice on a worldwide scale...God's judgement will be seen to be just. The world will be put to rights.

This is quintessential to our faith. It is a bedrock on which we build our relationship with God. He is our loving Father and we can always trust him to judge us justly. So let us explore what our Old Testament and gospel readings have to say about His justice and the example it sets for our own lives.

Ezekiel 34. 11-16, 20-24

Our verses from Ezekiel hold two elements within them.

First they provide to the Israelites in exile, the hope of God's promise to restore them to their own land. He is their shepherd who will seek them out and when they are together again in Israel He will "set up over them one shepherd, my servant David". This servant shall be their exalted one, their prince and he will feed them. This prophecy of the Messiah to come was no doubt a source of great comfort and inspiration to the Jewish people as they faced their trials and tribulations in Babylon. And it remains so for us as followers of this same Messiah, as we await His second coming. During our own war-torn and unjust times we too can find great comfort and inspiration in the knowledge that our shepherd, our prince, our exalted King will return. And when He does we too shall all be well fed and cared for. Even more comforting is the realisation that neither the Israelites nor us, are worthy of this care. Only by the grace of the shepherd, our King, are we able to be restored.

Second, they deliver a warning to some of the Israelite leaders. Some sheep have grown fat and strong at the expense of the lean and weak. In other words, as also happens in our modern world, some people had become wealthy and powerful by oppressing the poor and the marginalised. These sheep will be separated from the others and their food will be God's justice. Their responsibility for the flock will be taken away and God will give to the other sheep, those he judges to be lean, a shepherd who will care for them properly. Just as God determined the justice back then so will he always do so. God is a just God, now and always. But how does God determine his justice and what does it mean for how we live our lives?

Matthew 25.31-46

Our reading from Matthew provides us with some insight into answering these questions.

The passage starts in verse 31 by evoking the apocalyptic vision from Daniel 7. The Son of Man will come in glory. Sitting on His throne, as our King, he will pass judgement on all the people in all nations. However there is one key difference. In Daniel, as in other parts of the Old Testament, this judgement is done by God. Here Jesus claims the authority to separate the sheep from the goats himself. Just as Ezekiel prophesied, He is our good shepherd; He is our King of Kings!

What follows is a clear explanation of the basis on which our King makes that judgement. The sheep will inherit God's prepared kingdom because they showed merciful justice to the most vulnerable and needy in their community. They gave food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty; they welcomed strangers and clothed the naked; they cared for the sick and visited prisoners. And, most importantly, as Jesus explains in verse 40, "truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Jesus calls these sheep righteous, which in Greek means to conform to God's standard by obeying his commands. By caring for others they were, and we are, obeying the two great commandments given to us by Jesus- loving God and loving our neighbour.

On the other hand, the goats have chosen not to follow God's commandments. By the choices they have made they are separated from our King for all eternity. In verse 46 the Greek for punishment implies they each receive punishment which fits the individual being punished. Our King's justice is just for each person, according to how they have each lived their life.

Despite the simplicity of this overall message, there is much in the verses that is debated by various theologians. So it is worth clarifying a key point.

Throughout Matthew and the other gospels it is clear that it is by grace that we are saved and so the emphasis in this narrative on inheriting the kingdom through acts of kind works must be read in light of that fundamental truth. Our salvation comes solely from our belief in Jesus. From that faith springs our Spirit led desire to serve others, in witness to Him who sends us.

On that foundation, I agree with William Barclay when he states that the clear lesson from our gospel passage is *"that God will judge us in accordance with our reaction to human need."*

And the beauty of the criterion by which Jesus will judge us, is that they can be met by any and all of us. We can all choose to give simple human help to the people we meet every day. Just like the people in the narrative we can give that help without expectation and regardless of personal cost. As a parish we look to

do these acts of kindness in a variety of ways. Recently we had the privilege of caring for Kris, a homeless man enroute to Queensland. He sought Sanctuary in God's church. I must admit part of me was very worried about doing it. What if the power lead he used was faulty and fire broke out? I couldn't help imagining all manner of possibilities. But all was well. And after he left last week he called to thank us all for caring for him. His gratitude was deep and I knew that God had used our service to him to touch his heart. It powerfully reminded me that each act of merciful justice we perform is a witness to our King and heralds in His kingdom.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, We thank you for mercifully providing to us your Son, ur King. May we always humbly trust that His judgement will be right and true and may we strive to be righteous in our service to all people in need. **AMEN.**