

Justice

What is asked of me?

This week, as we continue reflecting on Justice, the question for us to ponder is: What is asked of me? In the ordinary everydayness of our lives, what is asked of us? Last week I offered some thoughts on what justice is, how we understand justice in our Judaeo-Christian Tradition. And this week I would like to offer some principles and practices that enable us to make justice real in our lives, what we might call a spirituality of justice, a way to God. Each of these principles and practices will invite us into soul-searching and honesty.

The first thing to consider is that doing justice is not something we can choose to do or not do as Christians. It is non-negotiable. It is one of the defining characteristics of Christian life. Jon Sobrino, who is a Latin American liberation theologian, says that the practice of justice is ultimately the criterion that determines whether or not we in fact have real faith:

“If persons and communities follow Jesus and proclaim the Kingdom of God to the poor; if they strive for liberation from every kind of slavery; if they seek, for all human beings, especially for that immense majority of men and women who are crucified persons, a life in conformity with the dignity of daughters and sons of God; if they have the courage and forthrightness to speak the truth – if in the discipleship of Jesus, they effectuate their own conversion from being oppressor to being men and women of service – if they do all this in the following and discipleship of Jesus because he did all this himself – then they believe in Jesus” (*Jesus in Latin America*).

Well, that’s something to ponder before we drift off to sleep at night! This truth must never be allowed to slip out of sight because any religious life which lets this slip away is merely piety – pious practice – and is by definition not Christian! James, in his letter in the New Testament, makes it quite clear that this was something the early Christian communities held to, and he puts it quite plainly when he says that ‘religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to go to the help of widows and orphans’, that is, those in our communities who are in need, and he goes on to say that ‘faith without good works is dead’. The centrality of loving and reaching out to others as constituting our religious identity itself, is something we need to keep before us always. And it is a spiritual path, for the more we love, the more we do justice, the more Christ-like we will become.

The second principle to reflect on is that in the struggle for justice, no matter how right our cause and no matter how passionate we are about the injustice we perceive, we may never mimic the very violence that we are trying to change. This is a highly challenging principle! Of course, this is saying something to us regarding how we respond to situations of injustice – the

nature of what we do and how we go about changing things – but it also suggests something else, something closer to home. It means that our private lives matter and are pertinent here. My own private life and how I lead it matter.

Moral indignation at injustice, disrespect or abuse, can often lead to the imitation of that very behavior that aroused our indignation! All too often we see actions taken in response to injustice which themselves are indistinguishable from those that aroused our indignation. Just turn on the news any night! At any given moment in our world, violent acts are used to respond to violence, injustice is perpetrated in response to injustice. But Christian spirituality requires of us that we do not respond with like behavior or attitudes. So again, another principle that opens up a pathway of growth for us and invites some serious self-examination.

The third principle to consider is that of being authentic. We all want to be authentic, to be real. I think we all value that, no one likes hypocrisy. So how do we avoid a divided life? I think most people would be familiar with this saying of Jesus: “The Kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls who, when he finds a single one of great value, goes and sells all that he owns and buys that pearl”. There’s a great lesson for us here and a great invitation, and it’s not an easy one either. Embracing something we see to be of great value almost always requires of us that we let go of something too. We see this played out time and again in our own lives on many different levels - to have that wonderful trip overseas we may have to forego something else, to achieve well in an exam we have to give up something of our social life to study. Dying and rising is the central paradigm of Christian spirituality: *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it brings forth much fruit* (John 12:24). And this dying and rising is part of what we need to do to grow into a spirituality of justice.

So we have found this ‘pearl of great price’, this way of living called justice, and we want to set out along this path. Are we willing to renounce other things? Are we willing to give up some ways of thinking and acting and choosing in exchange for it? And are we willing to live with these limits? Another great bedtime pondering!

The obvious things we will have to give up in some way if we’re going to live justice and work towards abundant life for everyone, are material things. There are enough resources for everyone, but not enough for everyone’s greed. I remember a wonderfully wise man I studied with some years ago telling me about an elderly Chinese lady he knew who lived in Shanghai. She lived very simply, frugally really, by choice, and she used to say, ‘I always try to live so others can live a little better’. What a beautiful way to shape a life. But what a challenge too! Have I done that today?

But it’s more than material things. There are lots of things we need to renounce so that justice can happen. I invite you to think for a moment about the current sexual abuse situation that

the Church is having to finally face now. Beyond those horrendous acts themselves, the cover-ups of those acts have come about as the result of wanting to save face, to appear perfect, to maintain moral authority. And that was chosen over justice. That was chosen at the expense of that great command to love and provide life for all. But they could not co-exist.

Some time ago I read an article by a Jesuit, Fr Michael Kelly, about this issue and he pointed out that in fact it is secular scrutiny right now that can save the Church. What a paradox! The institution that exists for the sole purpose of bringing life to the world – because that’s the mission of the Church, God’s mission of life for all - is in fact being scrutinised and cleaned up by institutions outside itself. Some people are saying this is a terrible time for the Church, and of course, yes it is, but I think it’s the best of times for the Church too because it is being purified and cleansed by the prophetic voice of the secular world. And that is a very important thing to acknowledge too: the prophetic voice of justice comes from many different quarters.

So we see that every choice brings with it a renunciation. This is an ancient spiritual path, one that has long been recognised and followed by all who truly seek God. It invites a significant level of self-awareness. We usually want the right things, but we want other things too. Fr Ronald Rolheiser, one of the great spiritual writers of our day, tells this story which explains it well: “A woman I know married a man she loved but early in the marriage was too immature to responsibly carry out her part of the relationship. One night she was at a party with her husband, drank too much and left the party with another man. Eventually she sobered up and repentantly found her way home, fully expecting the marital skies to be ripped asunder with anger, but her husband, though hurt and shaken by what had happened was calm and direct. When she walked sheepishly into the room he demanded neither an explanation nor an apology. He simply said to her, ‘I’m going away for a few days so you can be alone because you need to decide who you are. Are you a married woman or are you something else?’ And while he was away she sorted out the question he had put to her. She came to realise that the pearl of great price comes precisely at a price”. And we need to regularly ask ourselves that question too: Am I for love, for justice, or am I something else?

Jesus made this quite clear in many of his other sayings too: If you put your hand to the plough don’t look back; you can’t serve God and mammon / wealth. There would be so many situations we can each think of where, to make this feast of life available for everyone as well as for ourselves, we need to renounce something. We’re asked to do what Mother Gonzaga Barry did when she was about to leave Ireland and come to Australia. One of the sisters at Rathfarnham asked her how she was feeling about going to an unknown land, so far away, and in reply she simply held out her two hands and said, “My hands are in God’s hands. He can lead me where he wills”.

If our two hands are in God’s hands, we won’t be holding on to anything else.

And finally, just a thought about the Eucharist and justice. Taking part in the Eucharist as often as we can is central to justice. The Eucharist is that great meal of Life. It's there we feast on life, God's life given to us abundantly in Jesus. We're given life in its fullness, and we're told to take it out to others, to the world. This is why we look upon the Eucharist in our Catholic Tradition as the source and summit of life: we're fed and we're sent out to bring that life, God's abundant life for all, to the world.



So this week, when you have a quiet moment, you may like to sit somewhere alone, perhaps light a candle or simply sit in the sunshine, and pray those words of Mother Gonzaga Barry: *My hands are in Your hands, my God. Lead me where you will.*

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