

Just and Merciful God 1: Intro – God is Just (Isaiah 61, Luke 4:14-21)

As I was finishing my sermon yesterday afternoon, I spent some time looking at the latest news. I wonder what you consider to be the main news story at the moment?

- This week it's been dominated by Boris Johnson's decision to suspend parliament for an extended period and the various legal challenges and demonstrations that have accompanied that decision
- Perhaps you're most interested in the ongoing crisis in Hong Kong
- Maybe it was the arrest and charging of two men in Cardiff accused of murdering 17-year-old Harry Baker
- Or maybe your eye was caught by the state of Assam in India suspending the citizenship of 1.9 million of its inhabitants, amid claims of electoral ethnic cleansing and forced internment of foreigners

These are not the only news stories, of course, but what's interesting is how much of our news involves justice at some point. That may be *legal justice*, such as the murder of the young man, or *whether an action is just or not*, such as the protests in Hong Kong and the actions of the government in Assam.

Either way, what is clear is that as human beings, issues of justice and fairness are central to who we are. We can see it in our TV watching as well. I love a good detective drama – that's partly because it's a puzzle to solve, but also because we like to see justice done, don't we? So whether it's DCI Barnaby or Inspector Morse, Saga Noren, Kurt Wallander, Reg Wexford, Castle and Beckett, Sarah Lund or Inspector Montalbano, whatever your favourite is: we love detective dramas because ultimately they give true value to a human life. It matters that someone is caught and punished because people are precious and we have a deep instinct for justice

But where do we get this sense of justice from? Not from evolutionary biology. When Richard Dawkins first published 'The Selfish Gene' more than 40 years ago, he made a compelling case that evolution ultimately requires selfish behaviour to work in the animal kingdom. More recent studies have softened that stark view to understand that sometimes animal behaviour works in favour of the good of the whole group – but the basic point is sound: evolutionary genetics are wired for our survival and only the strong survive.

So this deep sense of justice, which protects the weak and sometimes punishes the strong, has to come from somewhere else. You won't be surprised to hear that I believe it is God-given. Or to put it another way, the capacity to understand and practise justice is central to what it means for us as human beings to bear the image of God. The idea that we as humans are made in God's image gives us lots of unique capacities – to love our friends, to create, nurture and organise – but also to know right and wrong, to have an innate sense of justice.

Sadly the effect of the Fall is that we often have a strong sense of justice when it applies to ourselves and less so when it's others. You only have to stand on the terraces on a Saturday afternoon to hear the howls of indignation from rival fans when a decision goes against them

– but rarely do they remember the ones they get away with. Funny, that. (You’ll hear the same with managers too: Arsene Wenger famously never saw any of the fouls his players committed.)

But even though our sense of justice is often skewed in our favour, it’s still there. And our main passage for today tells us exactly where we get it from: **v8 ‘For I, the Lord, love justice.’ Our God is a just God.** Justice lies at the core of his being. Yes, he’s love, he’s holy, he’s powerful, he’s wise – but He is also just. That’s where we get it from.

And I don’t think we celebrate that central quality of justice enough; we don’t focus enough on it. We love mercy, and rightly so – but we forget that mercy is only mercy because God is also just. He justly judges – and then in His mercy and grace and compassion, He does not bring the true or full outcome of his justice. If there’s no justice, there’s no mercy either.

So this Autumn we’re going to set the record straight. From now till the end of November we’ll be thinking about these two major themes – justice *and* mercy. The bigger share will think about justice, but to make sure it’s balanced, we’ll never stray too far from mercy either. I’m really excited about it, because I think it will help us to look at familiar ideas with new lenses and also broaden our perspective. Justice is the sort of issue that relates to everything else. So we’ll think about Harvest in the context of Justice for Creation. We’ll think about Remembrance in the context of Justice and Peace (‘No peace without justice’ as the Truth & Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa used as its slogan). And of course we’ll think about the cross as the place where God’s perfect justice and perfect mercy meet.

But we’ll also look with fresh eyes at famous texts like this one. This passage is one of the most famous and well-known texts in the bible – it’s the one Jesus quotes when he starts His ministry, which we also read. And it’s usually seen as one of the great ‘mercy’ texts. We think of Jesus setting the prisoner free, restoring sight to the blind and we think of his *mercy*.

But it’s not just a mercy text, it’s a justice text too. Good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed are cries for *justice*, for the vulnerable and downtrodden of our society to get not just the mercy, but the justice they deserve. And v8 makes that clear – I love justice says God, and also ‘I hate robbery and wrongdoing’. God hates to see the weak abused, people taken advantage of, people oppressed by the powerful in our society.

And this idea that God longs to see justice at the heart of human society, that He weeps, in fact He gets angry, at injustice and abuse and oppression is one of the central ideas we’ll come back to. But it doesn’t stop there, because we then have to ask: well *how* does God see justice done on earth? And the answer is: as much as possible, through us. He needs human beings, made in his image and carrying his Spirit, to be those who seek justice for the oppressed and vulnerable.

We are called to be justice bringers. To be those who speak for the poor and the oppressed and the downtrodden. The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on those who do. Think of all the great scandals of our world:

- At least 20 million in bonded labour, effectively slaves in the 21st century
- Millions caught in human trafficking
- Child soldiers, teenage prostitutes, hidden atrocities – the list goes on.

We're lucky to live in a society where the leader disrupts the democratic process and we *can* go to court, we can protest peacefully. That doesn't happen in many countries round the world.

Likewise, our legal system has failings, but it's still one of the best and fairest in the world. That's also not true elsewhere: so many abuses go unpunished because the perpetrators can pay off the police and the judges. Who will fight for them? Who will be the voice of justice? PAUSE

40 years ago the World Council of Churches adopted a definition of mission which basically describes five dimensions, or Marks, of what the Christian faith should be about. The first 3 are obvious:

- To proclaim the good news of the kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service

And most churches, like us will look around and say: well we're doing alright at that. Here at SM/AS we're starting the Alpha course in 3 weeks to proclaim the good news. Our home groups are starting up again to nurture believers. And we'll be doing all the things we usually do to serve people in need. Job done?

Well, not quite, because the last two marks of mission are these:

- To transform unjust structures, and...
- To safeguard the integrity of creation

It's that 4th one that gets so overlooked, isn't it? And we're going to set the record straight on that – this whole dimension of how we bring justice to our world, made in the image of a just God.

I've been profoundly touched by a remarkable book I've read over the summer by one of my heroes: 'Good news about injustice' by Gary Haugen. He is a Christian lawyer who founded the 'International Justice Mission', the only global charity dedicated to fighting systemic legal injustice. IJM hires lawyers and investigators and other legal professionals to free slaves, rescue women trafficked into prostitution, protect street children from gangmasters, and so on. I can't recommend this book highly enough, but be warned: it changes you.

And I was reminded by the book that the place where we have to start is with teaching about it – giving it rightful airtime. One of the striking things about reading the book is how many biblical texts there are about justice and injustice in the bible. Isaiah 61 is just one of them, and we'll be looking at lots of others over the next couple of months. And at the end of it, I hope we'll be able to declare *both* of these profound but equally important truths:

- **We want to be people of justice because our great God is just, AND....**
- **We want to be people of mercy because our great God is merciful**

Justice and mercy together. We can't have one without the other. I hope along the way many of us will be inspired by a bigger vision of what means to follow Jesus in our world. Perhaps even some of us will feel called to get more involved in justice issues – defending the vulnerable, protecting the weak, bringing freedom for the oppressed. I'd love to see more of us praying into this stuff, we can all do that – but also acting: letter writing, volunteering time, getting passionate about a particular cause, whatever it is. *Because when justice and mercy come together, look at how beautiful it is:* some verses from Isaiah 61 READ v3-4, v6, v12

I'm going to close with that famous story of the beach covered in starfish... EXPAND

How do we bring justice to our world? One person at a time – each one an oak of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour. Amen.