

Ch Ch 16 July 2017: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness' (Matt.6.33)

If you are like me you will have noticed from your television screen that after the London tower block disaster, as after other recent disasters, what people with their placards are crying out for is 'Justice!' And last weekend huge crowds in protest in Istanbul; their placards read 'Justice!' Justice! What exactly are they looking for? What do they mean?

In medieval Christian society, justice was one of the four cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude – but these were subordinate to the primary Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. In today's society, justice is generally seen as something dispensed by the law. What we call Law is the written or unwritten code of social behaviour of what the State rules as necessary for our common welfare and which we are obliged to obey. But laws are not always just; we can speak of 'an unjust law.' Today when we speak of being just, we think of being fair; but to speak of justice is not always to speak of fairness. A judge may apply the strict rules of the law; but the end result may be seen to be unfair, so, for instance, the parents of a child killed by dangerous driving may see the sentence handed down as totally inadequate. They think that the driver did not get his or her just deserts.

So when people cry for 'justice' they are not always crying out simply for the application of the law. One thing they may be looking for is retributive justice – a stronger punishment than the law allows, something more akin

to ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’, or sometimes what may be plainly called ‘revenge’. But revenge at least is equally plainly not a Christian virtue; ‘you have heard that it has been said,’ said Jesus, ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.’ Jesus pictures a different form of justice, which is not retribution or revenge.

Judaism, followed by Christianity, and I suspect by Islam, has seen the basis of justice in the will of God. So in the Old Testament God gives the Law to Israel through Moses and the prophets. Classical philosophers saw justice as rooted in the natural order of things. Christianity has tended to see both the Jewish Law and the Natural Law through the prism of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord’s Prayer, with a strong emphasis on the Christian virtues of loving one’s neighbour and forgiving those who trespass against us.

When the victims of some major disaster cry for ‘justice’ they do not mean simply ‘let’s have the law on them’, nor in fact are they simply crying for revenge, though that desire may lurk in some minds. What they mean by ‘justice’ is what the prophets of ancient Israel required of their rulers – social justice. This is why they are not satisfied with a legal enquiry conducted by a lawyer, however scrupulously fair. What they seek is a society in which immigrants and the poor of the country are not dumped into a backwater whose housing and other social facilities are inadequate, and that is the business of government, not just a legal officer. There is nothing new in this. Many of today’s social problems are summed up in a few short verses from the prophet Amos from over 2500 years ago (Amos 5.7-12):

**You that turn justice to poison, and thrust righteousness to the ground,  
You that hate a man that brings the wrongdoer to court,  
And abominate him who speaks nothing less than the truth:  
For all this, because you levy taxes on the poor and extort a tribute of grain from them,  
Though you have built houses of hewn stone, you will not live in them,  
Though you have planted pleasant vineyards you will not drink wine from them.  
For I know how many are your crimes, how monstrous your sins,  
For you bully the innocent, extort ransoms, and in court push the destitute out of the way.'**

Every word of that could apply today. Interestingly, the ancient editor of Amos adds a very telling remark: 'In such a time,' he says, 'it is prudent to stay quiet.' The author of that remark understood very well the political situation and where power lay. And so it is not surprising that one of Israel's priests wrote a psalm (Ps. 72) for the king, that is for ultimate ruler of the state, praying this:

**O God, endow the king with your own justice, his royal person with your righteousness,  
That he may govern your people rightly, and deal justly with your oppressed ones.  
May he give judgment for the oppressed among the people and help to the needy,  
May he crush the oppressor.'**

Now these words are part of our Christian tradition. Jesus does not quote them, but he would surely have stood over them; they were part of his scriptures. Again, that is a prayer (*mutatis mutandis*) that we could pray today. Causing problems for the poor by complex legal procedures which only the rich can afford, building stately mansions in pleasant grounds while the poor live in social housing – these are problems today just as they were 2500 years ago, as our local paper reveals. It remains right for the church and church people to have a conscience about it; and whatever the legal details relating to individual liabilities, what matters is the attitude of the law-makers, the government and the people they represent. And that, ultimately, is us.

It is, strangely, true that unlike the prophets of the Old Testament Jesus says little in the gospels about the social responsibilities of government; but he does say ‘Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of heaven,’ and in his epistle, James echoes his words: ‘Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be ... heirs of the kingdom? Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court?’ It is not my purpose to mount a tirade against the wealthier levels of society; it is my purpose rather to underline that the church has a biblical responsibility to fight at all times for social justice and not let it be subordinated to the level of individual liabilities in the courts. When Jesus speaks of legal matters – murder, violence, divorce -, he does not argue points of law; he takes the debate a notch higher; ‘You have heard that it was said...but I say unto you....’ Our concern is not with the rights of individuals so much as with the creation of a society and a church which is to be part of the Kingdom of God on earth. The gospels do not speak of justice; they speak, as in the

parables of the Kingdom which we heard in the gospel this morning, of men and women seeking and giving all for the society of the Kingdom of God, which is the place where the Sermon on the Mount can be practised and where the righteousness of God will prevail. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.