



## The theology of social justice

A paper by Ray Cleary delivered at the Anglican Social Responsibilities Network Conference, January 2003

The themes of justice and equality run throughout the biblical witness of God's encounter with the creation. They tell of a deep compassion for justice in the creator's agenda for communal life – a life enriched by the values of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus are the fulfilment of this promise. The cross of Christ is a sign of God's justice and compassion, freely given for the purpose of reconciliation with God and between the whole of the created order including the environment.

The principles of these encounters, this seeking after justice are to be seen in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and are incarnated in the words "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". The parables of Jesus give the reader an insight to the being of God as just and compassionate, while confronting our own expectations and prejudice.

Acceptance of this claim as the basis of a theology of justice and action provides the rationale and focus for pursuing a three fold mission agenda, namely proclamation, adoration and service, each together affirming the presence of the living God in the world. It allows the church through its parishes, sector ministries and community agencies to embrace both Matthew's call to share the good news to everyone and Isaiah's hope as told in Luke, as the vision for the church, to build a just and compassionate community. Affirmed in the resurrection of Jesus is the on-going struggle for justice, an agenda which is both personal and social. Our participation in God's justice means we share in the meaning of resurrection and redemption for the creation.

Jesus himself, as he announced at the beginning of his public ministry, his mission declaration, clearly understood the place and importance of justice in God's plan when he says:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me  
Because he has chosen me to bring  
Good news to the poor  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
The recovery of sight to the blind  
To set free the oppressed  
And announce that the time has come  
When the Lord will save his people.

Jesus practised what he preached. He sought out the rejected, engaged ordinary people, healed the sick, and reminded the leaders of the day not only of their responsibilities but obligation to the community. He dined with the prostitutes and tax evaders never compromising himself always extending God's mercy and forgiveness. He stands as the fulfilment of the prophetic tradition of Israel.

Jesus embodies inspiration and hope for Christians. He is the celebrated light of the world and provides a means by which Christians understand their relationship with God. In Jesus we see the face of God's agenda set before us. The story of Jesus provides a framework for the mission of the church and its justice and welfare obligation. It does not follow on from belief. It is the essence of belief "to love God and to love one's neighbour". Love and service in the name of God are the core of our justice agenda – an agenda which is of God, not of us.

This commitment to social justice has not been easy for the church, yet as recorded in Acts, the struggle to realise this goal was central to the church's early mission:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostle's feet and it was distributed to each as had need. (Acts 4, 32, 34-5).

In recent times we have seen Christian ethics and teachings, if not always the institutional church or its' agencies, central to many of the human struggles for a more just and compassionate community evidenced by:

- The civil rights movement in the United States.
- The abolition of apartheid in South Africa.
- The work of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador.
- The removal of President Marcos in the Philippines.

To a lesser extent, or at least not as dramatic as in my previous examples the call for a more just community and the eradication of poverty in Australia has often been lead by a coalition of churches and individual Christians. Examples of such initiatives, but not exclusively, are:

- The 1972 inquiry into poverty in Australia
- Aboriginal reconciliation
- Tax reform and the GST
- Welfare reform including the issue on mutual obligation
- The treatment of refugees and asylum seekers
- The child poverty campaign in 1982.

Many Christians today, however, as in previous generations express concern, some even outrage, when church and community leaders challenge and debate with political and corporate leader's economic and social policy which they see as victimising or marginalising sections of the community. Many reject the role of clergy and laity as social commentators particularly when such comments are made from the pulpit or do not align with views they hold. In my own experience I receive more criticisms of my own statements on issues of justice from those within the church than those outside. I am not alone in this experience. Let me quote here from 'Christianity and Social Order', by William Temple:

The claim of the Christian church to make its voice heard in matters of politics and economics is very widely resented, even by those who are Christian in personal belief and devotional practice. It is commonly assumed that religion is one department of life, like art or science, and that it is playing the part of the busy-body when it lays down principles for the guidance of other departments, whether art and science or business and politics ...

[F]ew people read much history. In an age when it is tacitly assumed that the church is concerned with another world than this, and in this with nothing but individual conduct as bearing on prospects in that other world, hardly anyone ever reads the history of the church in its exercise of political influence. It is assumed the church exercises little influence and ought to exercise none; it is further assumed that this assumption is self evident and has always been made by reasonable men [and women]. As a matter of fact it is entirely modern and extremely questionable.

Criticism of church leaders, welfare agency executives and others who 'meddle' or involve themselves in the formulation of social and economic policy generally however only receive the ire of the

politician or corporate leaders or church people when they express views or opinions contrary to the prevailing politically correct or acceptable viewpoint. The former Premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett, regularly criticised churches and church leaders for their engagement in politics and chastised them for not worrying about empty pews. Academics and corporate leaders regularly challenge the church accusing them of being ignorant about social and economic agenda.

In a similar vein, when leaders of faith based welfare agencies speak about the social and economic costs of gambling or the targeting of welfare reform which discriminates against women or single parents, or the treatment of asylum seekers or the impact of globalization they are often reminded by government not to become political and to remember their contractual obligations. This has been the case recently when advocates plead for a fairer treatment of asylum seekers or for the plight of homeless men and women or expressing challenges to globalisation and other social and economic policies which discriminate or exploit members of the community. On the contrary, as we see in the current debates [2003] about Iraq, there is often the expectation that the church will bless the moral agenda of a government.

Governments in recent times have sought to limit the capacities of agencies to assist disadvantaged people by placing restrictions on who is eligible for assistance or implementing punitive restrictions on those who do not live up to expectations. In recent times responses to the failure of welfare policy and programs to eradicate poverty and disadvantage have been responded to by those who oppose principles of social justice by the psychologising of welfare and a return to blame the victim mentality seen and inherent in the recent Federal Government's McClure Report on welfare reform. This has seen the growing distinction reappearing between deserving and non deserving. These sentiments are regularly expressed today by Tony Abbott and other members of the government, challenging both the moral and ethical right of faith communities to engage in social and political debates, particularly when they differ from government expressed views. This, of course, is not limited to the government of the day.

Christians often I suggest express a one sided or singular view about salvation, stating that the saving work of God is only personal in intent and has no significant communal dimensions. It is not that Christians are unaware that God's love and justice is for all of creation and that the generosity of spirit is unconditional, but rather often limit this hospitality by dogma and moral ideology which binds up rather than liberates the human person. The exercise of communal justice as servant ministry is understood as secondary to evangelism and personal commitment unless that is if it is about personal morality.

Writing in his introduction to the recently released report by the Victorian Council of Churches, entitled "The Church and the Free Market", Brian Howe, former Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Social Security and Uniting Church Minister, writes this:

Whatever conclusions one may come to about Jesus, it is important to understand the context in which he struggled to reinterpret the historic faith of Judaism, while remaining very much within its traditions. We can grasp the shift from essentially a rule based ethic to a more personalistic ethic based on love. .... God's love was not restricted to those who were free from disease but extended to those whose illness or disease seemed to be the greatest threat to the wellbeing of others. While God's love has been evident in the history of Israel it was in no sense restricted to one race or one people. The ethic which Jesus taught was based on the theological perspective which included those that seemed to have been excluded under the old order. Of course in challenging this system, Jesus also was destroying the authority of those who had a vested interest in its preservation. This undermining of the power structure would inevitably bring him into sharp conflict with those who were benefiting most from the existence of the purity system.

One outstanding contributor to an Anglican strategy of social responsibility and justice can be seen in the ministry of Bishop Ernest Burgman, Bishop of Goulburn 1934-50, and Bishop of Canberra and

Goulburn 1950-60. In his ministry there is a well documented activism in the fields of social and economic reform and the pursuit of a just society. As Peter Hempenstall says in his contribution to a publication produced in 1989: “he had a dream, a dream about a great Christian democracy evolving in Australia, which would give a lead to the rest of the world in consensus, co-operation and social justice.”

Hempenstall goes on to describe Burgman as standing in a great tradition of Anglican social thinkers. Critical inquiry embracing a whole of life approach was central to his ministry and in his engagement with others. As Hempenstall further says: “he saw in present social conditions the continuation of Calvary”. He goes on to say: “if comfortable clergymen were to escape the guilt of participating in the daily crucifixion of men and women they must actively engage themselves in the process of social reform.”

He wrote letters to the editor, published articles challenging and criticising capitalism as a distorted form of political economy. Worst off, he tried to rouse the Anglican Church, indeed all churches, in this agenda, and was active in the public arena on many social and economic issues. He went out into the open to disturb people’s minds and to challenge their pre-suppositions. He accused his own church of standing aside during the depression. In 1938 he boldly told his colleagues: “It is the business of the church to minister to sick and neurotic souls, yet it ends up far too often with these fearful, neurotic souls in the saddle so far as the institution is concerned.”

The church has failed to bear witness to international justice, as she has failed to bear witness to justice in inter-class relations. As her failure in the later case produced communism, so her failure in the former has given us Nazism and fascism.

Churches are always a danger to religion, they get interested in themselves, in their own aggrandisement and power and countless things that keep them too busy to live close to the life of the people. Churchmen get interested in the world beyond this world, largely to escape the trouble of setting right the wrongs that afflict the human race.

Reactions to Burgman, Gerard Tucker, Geoffrey Sambell, Peter Hollingworth, David Scott and others, continue to this present day. Those who seek to raise the flag for a more just and compassionate community aligned with the Christian principles of justice and equality, are often seen as ill-informed and ignorant, both inside and outside of the community of faith.

In 2000, a report of a task force of the General Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia entitled “The Distribution of Work and Wealth in Australia”, challenged views expressed by many church welfare and community leaders about the meaning and levels of poverty and growing inequality in Australia. The task force was given a reference “to respond creatively to evolving economic and social circumstances in Australia, in so far as they effect the distribution of wealth and work in this country”.

While I acknowledge that the task force report is not an official pronouncement of the Anglican Church, it has been seen by many as the official view of our church. In an article I wrote for the St Mark’s review in February 2002, I criticised the credibility of the report for its lack of consultation, engagement with justice and welfare sector and for presenting just one side of the argument regarding market economics. The very claim it made against others. I suggested it would have been helpful if the authors had examined current economic and social policy in light of the Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s Gospel, or his commission for justice, and consulted with those engaged in the field who daily work with people without resources. The report instead promoted a view that economic rationalism and wealth creation were fine and welfare agencies had the role and opportunity to respond to the fallout. It even justified high salaries to corporate executives at the same time there was only a limited role for government intervention to ensure all received a share of the booty.

All this suggests that the role of the church in promoting justice as integral to mission, is as risky and difficult today as in previous generations. Perhaps more difficult in the context that the church is no longer seen by many if not most Australians as being an institution which can provide moral and ethical leadership in the present time. Like so many of our institutions, it has been corrupted, seduced, and guilty of failing to practice its own Gospel.

Yet the church in Australia has a long tradition of engagement in society in addressing those who society regards as the downcast, the drunkards and the prostitutes. In other words the dissident, the different and the difficult.

Our solution to their circumstances has been to offer Christ, and we have done this in a variety of ways. Hospitality, generosity and compassion have been hallmarks of much Christian ministry, but it has not always been practised in a humane way and not always in the best interest of those we sought to help. The most glaring example of this is our work amongst Indigenous Australians. In recent times, our work amongst young people in institutional care has also been challenged, although it should be noted and recognised that the church alone has not been responsible for such practice. Often we have confused the word charity, limiting it to the provision of hand-outs or emergency relief or giving to others the left overs. We have not understood charity as the fullest expression of love, and have seen little relationship with justice. We feed the hungry, but don't ask why people are hungry, or seek to do something about it. This is not to say that acts of charity are not good in themselves, but they are not sufficient.

At a time in Australia's history when we have more wealth than at any other time there are:

- 700,000 children growing up in poverty;
- 105,000 Australian's are homeless;
- over 2 million Australian's sought the help of welfare agencies last year;
- and there is a growing gap between those who have and those who do not.

I began by suggesting that throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament justice themes are predominant. We can refer to Luke's Gospel on mission where I started:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, he has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

Or we can refer to that wonderful song of Mary where we hear of God's:

Special concern for the poor and marginalised  
and the rich and powerful are to be demoted.

Or we can look at the Sermon on the Plain, likewise in Matthew's Gospel the Sermon on the Mount. We can examine the Parables which always challenge our perceptions of what God is like, always challenging our understandings of justice, or the story of the sheep and goats and the day of judgement, or the great commission.

Likewise Paul's letter to the Church of Rome: let me quote:

I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not for its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that the creation its will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation is being groaning in labour pains until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, growing inwardly while we wait for

adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved, now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for we do not see, we wait for it in patience.

Let me summarise to this point:

- Justice and welfare ministries are grounded in Scripture. They are not an optional extra. Scripture is the account of the pursuit of God's justice.
- Justice and welfare actions can be seen in the ministry of Jesus.
- God's creation is to be a just creation.
- There is an obligation, if not expectation that followers of Jesus will act and do as he did.
- Justice and welfare ministry is a part of the mission of every faith community and not to be regarded as an optional extra, or add on. I often say to myself if the church spent as much time as it does on discussing sex on issues of injustice and inequality we would have no poverty.
- Hope is what we have to offer – we are called to share with God the great act of reconciliation.
- Engagement in a ministry of welfare and justice will be risky, challenging and at times demoralising.

In essence, the Christian understanding of justice is the task of restoring the covenant relationship between God and his people, fulfilled in the events of the cross and resurrection. The biblical texts confirm for me that justice is an integral and essential part of the identity and integrity of God confirmed in both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. A God, who throughout history, deals justly with his people, always remaining faithful in an environment of sin and human unfaithfulness.

Earlier, I commented that social justice should not be confused with charity or good works. It is not that both charity and good works are wrong, but they are only part of the answer. Charity relieves symptoms. Social justice addresses and seeks solutions to issues of poverty, homelessness, abuse and lack of housing.

Social justice involves both the giving of resources and one's self for the kingdom of God. It involves both personal and community sacrifice for the benefits of others.

Social justice is not about welfare programs; it is about the building of community, respect for human dignity and self worth, a fair share and distribution of resources and the search for wholeness. All are values of God's community or kingdom.

Social justice is about the well-being of the community. Welfare programs are a means of achieving this goal. The challenge for each of us as Christians and as activists in the area of social responsibility, is about the naming of God, the recognition of the divine in the least of my brothers and sisters, and this applies equally within the church as it does to the wider community. Social justice involves listening to the pain, common distress and humiliation associated with poverty, unemployment, homelessness, abuse and drug dependence. It is about the embodiment of God's kingdom. Dare I say that it is equally about the sharing of the church's resources within its own community?

Responding to these issues means engaging in the politics of life, challenging sacred political ideology and sharing what we ourselves possess. At times this may mean experiencing the hurt and pain of those who are marginalised. It means not embracing policies or programs which seek to blame victims or control the destiny of those on the margins of society.

I recall in my early years as a professional in the welfare sector listening to words of wisdom from a religious sister who explained to me that at times the only response we can make to the hurt and humiliation, pain and suffering of others, is to sit with them in the gutter and to feel their pain.

In our Christian tradition, justice comes from the Hebrew *s-daqah*, meaning God's fidelity to right relationships built upon the ideas of covenant. This notion of covenant begins in the Hebrew Scriptures with Abraham. The idea of covenant binds God to the act of unconditional love and calls human kind to be faithful to God's providence. The Exodus story is evidence of covenant, despite the fact that the people of Israel in their frustration and disappointment seek to break it down.

Throughout the New Testament, the covenant imagery continues, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the healer of the brokenness and separation of humanity from God. This healing occurs as a result of God's generosity and heartache for reconciliation. Jesus, the victim, offers forgiveness, and reveals the fullness of God's love. As followers in his footsteps we are invited into this partnership to work with him in forwarding and building this community.

Essential to covenant are social relationships. Justice, involving the commitment to living in harmony and balance with all of creation is to be the outworking of God's own covenant with human kind. "To do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with your God" as proclaimed by the Prophet Micah becomes the working out of God's continuing self disclosure.

Where the commitment to God's justice is absent or marginalised by the actions of individuals, institutions, social and economic policies, the fulfilment of God's love is diminished by this act. God, however, remains faithful to those offended despite our failure.

In conclusion I want to draw your attention to Luke's Gospel. Luke's Gospel I believe provides a model for a church agency, parish, community committee to engage in issues which effect communities. Luke's Gospel provides a model consistent with God's call for a just Kingdom. Luke interprets the Scriptures and the Jesus tradition within the experiences of his own faith community.

Luke describes his own community of faith as grounded in orthodoxy, but changing and emerging with new understandings as the Jesus movement of the time gained prominence and strength. Luke's community has similarities to the experiences of many today.

In the post-modern experience, the ease with which agencies, parishes and communities can forget or misplace the significance of the Jesus story is real. The pressure on all of us to conform to emerging ideologies and restrictive agendas are a threat. To be constantly aware of these dangers is essential, but the challenges and threats are not just from the outside. They also come from within, both the agency (the church) and theology itself. The art of compromise and co-option is alive and well, and we are all susceptible. Whose side are we really on, asked Robert Fitzgerald to a gathering of church welfare agencies?

The Gospel writer of Luke presents responses to social and ethical issues which enrich and develop relationships within the human family based on God's enduring and faithful justice. Luke draws on the religious traditions of the past presenting an ethic of love which, while common to other religious traditions, is grounded in the Hebrew faith and active ministry of Jesus. The "word made flesh" becomes the model for response to acts of discrimination and abuse in today's world. God's presence is a living reality and involves struggle and rejection in building a just community.

Central to the Luke narrative are three themes; the poor, justice and the inclusive community – the kingdom of God. The essential elements of Luke's Gospel which are important in understanding his approach to ethical issues of the day may be addressed in the following way:

First, Luke's narrative is clearly placed within the history of Israel and the community's journey and relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Luke understands Jesus as standing within this prophetic tradition and as the fulfilment of Israel's messianic claims.

Second, Luke, throughout his account, illustrates God's special concern for the poor and marginalised by affirming their exalted place, while the rich and powerful are reprimanded and berated.

Third, Luke's 'rhetorical method' as it is described is continually emphasised throughout the Gospel, with each new story, parable or account adding a dimension to the life and ministry of Jesus, as a demonstration of God's justice and faithfulness.

Fourth, Luke weaves Old Testament imagery and blends his themes of justice and mercy throughout his account of the Jesus story to demonstrate the nature of true and faithful discipleship.

Fifth, Luke is well versed in the Septuagint and the traditions surrounding Jesus. He integrates them both into the text to strengthen his own understanding and to highlight to those who oppose him, their lack of scriptural commitment to their own faith.<sup>1</sup>

Luke then goes on to discuss the poor and the marginalised, the role of the prophet, table fellowship, the responsibility of the rich and powerful, the kingdom of God and the year of jubilee.

I want to suggest that Luke, in his interpretation of Jesus, provides an authoritative foundation for developing and defining what may be a distinctive role for a ministry of social justice. Luke makes clear that the distinctively Christian role for all of us engaged in a social justice agenda within the church, is to centre around the life and ministry of Jesus, and his story should inform and enhance our commitment to building a just community. The task here is to establish and articulate social goals which co-relate with our economic needs and future. An agenda which sets forth a vision that seeks to utilise and distribute the world's resources in a way which ensures proper housing, health, education and income for everyone so that all may reach their potential.

A distinctive Christian understanding of creation embodies a belief in our common humanity, communion in its fullest sense. It calls for a naming of the divine in our midst and the recognition of Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters. Structures and policies which diminish the human person, marginalised or exploit should be challenged. Building a just community is not the same as managing or psychologising the poor. Instead, a just community is about rights, relationships and responsibilities. It is about sharing an participating in God's vision.

Let me then conclude with this quotation attributed to John Chrysostom, 4<sup>th</sup> Century Archbishop of Constantinople:

"You who fatten yourselves and enjoy your ease. You who drink well into the night, and then cover yourselves with soft blankets .... you dare demand a strict account for the needy who is little more than a corpse, and you fear not the account you will have to render before the court of Christ, terrible and frightful. If the poor fake, it is out of need that they fake, for it is your merciless inhumanity and your cruelty that forces them to do so."

Uploaded 28 August 2007

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina, D.J. Harrington (ED), Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1991, p.4. The author describes Luke's original contribution to Christian literature 'connecting the events of the early church to those of Jesus' ministry and to the whole Story of God's people, indeed of humanity, all the way back to Adam'.