

Justice and Relationship (LCI 8 March 2021)

In his writing on re-imagining forgiveness, James Alison says ‘...forgiveness turns out to be a creative moving towards someone whom I am like in such a way that they will be free from death with me so that together we will be a new ‘we’.’ (On Being Liked, p. 42).

Justice is always about relationships, and how we see ourselves and the other. Justice can require us to see again, to learn our humanity in different ways. Acts 10 gives us this ‘transformation of otherness’ in a dramatic form. Peter, staying in Joppa, has a vision of a cloth on which is a selection of ‘unclean’ animals which the divine voice invites him to kill and eat. He refuses three times – ‘I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean’. And the response is ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’

Meanwhile, servants of the God-fearing gentile, Cornelius, appear, inviting Peter to travel with them to Caesarea, to Cornelius’ house. In the process, Peter is being transformed from within. His way of seeing himself and others changes. No longer can he assume that the good news of Jesus is for the ‘chosen’ people, the ‘pure’ people, the ‘holy’ people alone – he learns that it is for gentiles too, and that the gift of the Holy Spirit comes to them in exactly the same way.

The notion of Jubilee is a powerful constituent of Jewish and Christian ideas of justice. In Leviticus 25 we find a discourse on the relationship between people and the land; the land must have a rest every seventh year, and no sowing or reaping must take place. In the fiftieth year, everyone shall return to their own property. If someone falls into debt and has to sell a piece of land, the next-of-kin shall redeem it: if it can’t be redeemed, it must be returned in the Jubilee. There is an important reminder from God: ‘the land is mine; with me, you are but aliens and tenants.’ We do not own the material benefits the world gives us.

Jubilee is about the restoration of social relationships and sources of well-being. Jesus refers to it as ‘the year of the Lord’s favour’ (Luke 4) which he is inaugurating. Restorative justice borrows something of this idea. In a situation where one person has committed a crime against another, each pledges to listen to the other; the offender hears the victim speak of the impact his or her action has had on them; the process requires generosity and trust on both sides.

The Christian notion of justice is based on the principle that all are made in the image of God, all are of equal worth. The links of obligation, responsibility and care bind people together; love is at the heart of justice. Love of neighbour applies to nations and groups including our enemies. We are called by Jesus to do justice to the enemy, which is the form love may take; it requires us to seek the good of the other. Justice is not something impersonal, it is always embodied.

The language about justice that is often heard is typically around entitlement – who deserves things? Who is justice for? It is implied, if not actually stated, that justice is for those who work hard, as opposed, for example, to those condemned as ‘scroungers’ when it comes to benefits. Whose interests prevail? Celebrity and status count. The powerful have

the freedom (and the money) to pursue their own interests. There is the assumption that competition produces justice. Is the legal system able to deliver justice for all? How can Christians actively pursue justice for those at the bottom of the power heap? Is poverty a central issue of justice, or simply a by-product of the market economy, to be solved by free competition.

One model of a movement dedicated to bringing about change in society in the direction of greater justice is community organising, as embodied by Leeds Citizens. The building blocks of change are listening campaigns – gathering stories from those who are coping with social injustice, for example, in the mental health system, or those who are not receiving the Real Living Wage. It gives a voice to those who are not normally heard. The evidence provided by stories of lived experience is used in building relationships with those who have the power to change the system. Who in society deserves to be listened to? There are echoes of the Beatitudes in all this. Who is it who can discern the truth in the situation? Jesus has an answer: it's the poor and the meek who are standing in the right place to see.