

# On Earth

as it is in Heaven



## Background

A FOUR PART TEACHING SERIES ON JUSTICE

SCOTT HIGGINS





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Rev. Scott Higgins

2018



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# Introducing the document

This background document gives you an in-depth understanding of how to do justice by exploring what the Bible says in both the Old and New Testaments, focusing on how Jesus lived, and what he taught his followers about how we should live justly.

The background document is divided into four sections. Each chapter connects to a Sermon Outline, the Discussion Guide, and specific Prayer Cards focusing on a specific vulnerable people group.

The background provides detailed notes and an exploration of scripture pertaining to each of the four groups in focus.

**Chapter 1: The world we want to see** – group focus is people from a refugee background

**Chapter 2: The justice of Jesus** – group focus is people experiencing homelessness

**Chapter 3: Where does the problem lie?** – group focus is people living with mental illness

**Chapter 4: How can we do justice?** – group focus is people exiting the prison system

# Chapter 1:

## The World We Want to See

In 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. went to Birmingham, Alabama to lead a march protesting the lack of civil rights for African-Americans. His presence was resented by many, including a large number of white church leaders, who felt the civil rights movement was proceeding too fast. Dr. King was arrested on trumped up charges and, while languishing in his cell, composed a reply to his critics amongst the white clergy of the day. His "Letter from an Alabama Jail" includes this section:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait!"

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim;

When you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters;

When you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;

When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Fun Town is closed to coloured children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people;

When you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat coloured people so mean?"

When you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you;

When you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "coloured";  
When your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.";

When you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments;

When you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.<sup>i</sup>

Martin Luther King's letter is a powerful cry for justice. It is a reminder that we cannot have a good society without it being a just society, that the absence of justice erodes the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressor.

## **A faithful, merciful and just community**

When God delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to a land of their own, it was so that they might build a community *unlike* the one they had left and *unlike* the nations around them. Their life together was to be marked by three things:

- 1. Their relationship to God.** They had been rescued by the one and only God and had become God's people. They were to worship and serve Yahweh and Yahweh alone.
- 2. Their relationship to each other.** In Egypt they had been exploited, oppressed and subjected to indifference and cruelty. They were to be a community in which they valued each other and extended themselves to each other in love, compassion, kindness, generosity.
- 3. Their relationship to the land.** God had brought them to "a land flowing with milk and honey" and divided it among them, so that every person would be sustained by the goodness of the land.

Israel was to model life under the reign of God, so that other nations would see and turn to Yahweh. And so, these three relationships constitute the call of God not only on Israel, but on all humanity. We find our place in this world as the creatures of God, made to reflect God's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness etc. to one another, and commissioned to enjoy the abundance of the earth and to nurture it.

Biblical scholars often describe the life the Israelites were to enjoy as the experience of "shalom", which refers to

The positive presence of harmony and wholeness, of health and prosperity, of integration and balance. It is a state of soundness or flourishing in all dimensions of existence – in our relationship with God, our relationships with each other, our relationship with nature, and our relationship with ourselves. Shalom is when everything is as it ought to be. In this sense, Shalom encapsulates God's basic intention for humanity – that people live in a condition of "all rightness" in every aspect of life.<sup>ii</sup>

Shalom then was the very reverse of the individualistic and selfish pursuit of wealth and wellbeing. It was the enjoyment of life in right relationship to God, each other and the land.

## **The importance of justice**

As the biblical story unfolds, we discover that justice is central to the formation to the biblical vision for community. Where justice fails, communities fail (e.g. Micah 6:8-10; Isaiah 10:1-12; 58:1-22).

But what does the Bible mean when it speaks of justice? As might be expected "justice" is a concept with many nuances and Bible scholars debate which of these nuances are present and primary in the biblical story. In particular, there is debate as to whether justice should be understood as primarily retributive (i.e. focused on the penalty for sin and reward for doing good) or restorative (i.e. focused on God's work of liberating people from situations of oppression, exploitation and evil).

One way forward is to see retribution and restoration as two sides of the same coin. If justice means people should be treated as they deserve to be treated, then at times justice will be retributive, giving people what they deserve on the basis of their actions, and at times it will be restorative, giving people what they deserve because they are created by God, loved by God, valued by God and they are heirs to the promises of God. Then, in the biblical way of thinking, justice should be focused on “the widow”, “the orphan”, “the resident foreigner” and “the poor”. These four groups show up repeatedly in scripture when justice is discussed.

Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:16-19 NRSV).

Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry (Exodus 22:21-23).

The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.  
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.  
The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Psalm 146:7-9 NSRV)

Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:16-17)

The widow, the orphan, the resident foreigner, and the poor were those who were commonly exploited, oppressed and excluded from the good gifts of God, and particularly from enjoyment of land.<sup>1</sup> Land was passed down from father to son. A widow who had no son, or who was unable to participate in a levirate<sup>2</sup> marriage could find herself and her daughters suddenly landless, without an adult male to protect their interests which was the requirement of that day. A child who was without a father or other adult male protector could likewise see their land stripped away. The resident foreigner, whether an Israelite of a different tribe or someone who was not an Israelite, similarly had no ancestral lands. And “the poor” most likely refers to peasant farmers who had either sold their land under the burden of heavy debt, or were on the verge of doing so.

It’s not simply that the widow, the orphan, the resident foreigner and the poor were more vulnerable, but that their vulnerability was the cause of systemic injustice that translated into further experiences of injustice. Nicholas Wolterstorff comments that:

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1. N Lohfink, ‘Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible’, *Theological Studies*, vol 52, 1991, pp. 34-50.; N Steinberg, ‘Romancing the Widow: The Economic Distinctions between the *almānā*, the *’iššā-’almānā* and the *’ēšet-hammēt*’, *Women and Property in Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean Societies Conference*, Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University, 2003. Steinberg points out that three different terms were used for a widow in the Old Testament. The first described a widow who had access to her husband’s ancestral lands through her son. The second was a widow who had access to her husband’s ancestral lands through the law of levirate marriage. The third was a widow whose husband had no ancestral lands and she was therefore destitute. It is this third group, along with orphans who have no access to ancestral lands that are described in the biblical references to orphans and widows as those in need of justice.

2. Levirate marriage was the custom in ancient Israel operating ‘on the assumption that the family as a whole was responsible to ensure the continuity of the line of a dead relative. If he had a brother it would fall to him to take the bereaved wife, and any children of the union would become the heirs of the dead man.’ If there wasn’t a brother then a near relative would marry the widow. JG Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12 – 50*, Inter-Varsity press, Nottingham, 1986, pp. 164-165

Israel's writers must have believed that when we look at the actual condition of widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the poor and compare it with the condition of other social classes, we discover that the former are not only disproportionately vulnerable to injustice but usually disproportionately actual victims of injustice. Injustice is not equally distributed. The low ones enjoy those goods to which they have a right – food, clothing, voice, security, whatever – far less than do the high and mighty ones.

It takes no special insight to understand why Israel's writers believe this. For any society whatsoever, it is likely that those at the bottom are suffering the most ... injustice. Here is why. Robbery and assault are events, episodes. If the victim of a robbery is a wealthy person, the robbery is an episode in a life that likely has been going quite nicely. By contrast, it is all too likely that the daily condition of those at the bottom is unjust. Widows are burglarised and assaulted; episodes of injustice also occur in their lives. But in addition, the situation is all too often unjust – demeaning, impoverished, voiceless...<sup>iii</sup>

Over against this injustice, it was incumbent on the people to ensure that the widow, the orphan, the resident foreigner and the poor had access to land, to the productivity of the land, and to the benefits of community.

## **The rights of the poor**

This conviction is so strong that the Bible speaks of the “rights” of these groups (e.g. Proverbs 29:7; 31:5,8,9; Isaiah 5:23; Jeremiah 5:28). This is not the full-blown language of human rights that we have today, but it is the recognition that there were certain things every human being was owed, and it was iniquitous to remove or deny these rights.<sup>3</sup>

### **The rights of widows, orphans and resident foreigners**

The widow, orphan, and resident foreigner might never own farmland, but they were to be included in the corporate harvest. Every harvest season, landholders were to make only one pass of their field and to leave the edges unharvested. The landless were then free to move in and harvest what remained in the field (Deuteronomy 24:19-21). In addition to this, every third year the tithe that the Israelites collected was to be distributed to the widow, orphan, resident foreigner and the Levites (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-13).

A group of laws around finance, debt and harvest were designed to help people keep their land during times of difficulty; to gain it back in the event they did have to sell; and to thrive in the meantime.

1. An Israelite who fell into hardship was to be offered an interest-free loan (Deuteronomy 23:19). This would allow them to meet their daily needs and set aside grains for the next planting.
2. Every seventh year was a Sabbath year. During this year all debts were to be forgiven and any Israelite who had sold themselves into tenured servitude was to be set free, and sent on

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3. Nicholas Wolterstorff provides a rigorous philosophical, theological and biblical case for adopting “rights” language. For a more academic treatment see his *Justice. Rights and Wrongs*, University Press, Princeton, 2010. For a more popular treatment see his book *Journey Toward Justice*, Baker Academic, Michigan, 2013. Many Christians shy away from “rights” talk, concerned that it encourages a culture in which people insist on what is due to them and neglect the biblical call to lay down our lives for each other. The danger in this is that we end up with the opposite situation, in which those who are exploited and oppressed are taught not to complain or protest, but to rely instead upon the benevolence of people with power. While there are occasions in which this is the advice of Scripture, these are, arguably, situations that people were powerless to change. To limit our understanding of justice to these texts neglects the witness of the Bible to decisive acts in which injustice is directly confronted (eg the exodus, Jesus' confrontations with the rich and the demonic).

their way with sufficient to start over (Deuteronomy 15:1-15; Leviticus 25:2-7).

3. Every 50th year was proclaimed a 'jubilee' (Leviticus 25), the hallmark of which was the return of all land to the original families to which that land had been assigned. Any family that was forced to sell their land knew they would receive it back within a generation or two.
4. In the meantime those who had been forced to sell their land and were unable to buy it back, were free to enter any field and eat as much as they needed (Deuteronomy 23:24-25). They were invited to participate in every harvest and enjoy the fruit of the earth and their labour (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24: 19-22).

Underlying these provisions was the assumption that the land belonged to God and was a gift for the benefit of everyone (Leviticus 25:23-25). This meant every Israelite was due access to their land and to the harvests. The provisions around debt, Jubilee and harvest were not optional extras for those who were kind and generous, but were required of all Israelites.

### **The right to be treated with dignity**

It wasn't only land and the harvest to which the poor had a right. They also had a right to dignified treatment. Take, for example, this collection of laws found in Deuteronomy 24:10-22 (NRSV),

When you make your neighbour a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. You shall wait outside, while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbour may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the Lord your God.

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death.

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

These laws not only provide for the physical sustenance of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, but also for their dignity. The creditor must not enter the home of the poor person, for that would shame him; the wages of day labourers must not be withheld for they need these to meet their daily need; the orphan, the widow and the foreigner were not to have charity doled out after the harvest was completed, but they were to participate in the harvest itself.

## **The right to fair treatment in the courts**

The Old Testament Law repeatedly calls judges to judge fairly (e.g. Deuteronomy 16:18-20), to ensure the rich and powerful were not able to corrupt the court's decision.

## **Doing justice today**

The fundamental concept of justice found in the Old Testament Law, Writings and Prophets is that people should be treated as they deserve, not only when they do wrong, but at all times. Human beings are created in God's image, are the object of God's great love, and are the beneficiaries of God's great gift of the earth and its resources. Justice demands that we treat each other in a manner befitting this.

This gives justice a very practical, everyday focus. Justice doesn't come into play only when we step into a law court, or when we are dealing with an unjust social system. Justice comes into play in every relationship. It is to treat our family members, our colleagues at work or school, and our neighbours in ways that respect their dignity and worth.

Justice demands that we lift our sight beyond ourselves and our own relational networks, to see the widows, orphans and the poor of our age. In the centuries since the biblical authors pleaded with the powerful to defend the rights of the poor and to do justice to the widow, humanity has made some extraordinary gains. We possess advanced medical technologies, extraordinary levels of wealth, and knowledge of our world that is growing exponentially. Yet for all that, we remain a world that continues to tolerate grave injustices. Our technologies may have improved, but our hearts have not. The lust for power, for wealth, and for prestige continues to drive people to take what is not theirs, and withhold that which should be shared.

As followers of Jesus it is incumbent upon us to ask who the widows, orphans, foreigners and the poor of today might be. Who are the ones today who are excluded from the good gifts of God and whose dignity and worth is most challenged? How will we stand with them to obtain justice? For only when our attention and actions are focused in those situations and with those people can we claim to be fulfilling God's call to do justice and love mercy.

## Chapter 2:

# The Justice of Jesus

On November 25, 1960 three sisters - Patria, Minerva and Maria Mirabel – went to a prison in their homeland, the Dominican Republic, to visit Patria and Minerva’s husbands. The sisters were from a well-known family, and along with their husbands, they were part of the opposition to the dictator Rafael Trujillo. Patria and Minerva’s husbands were currently in prison for that resistance. The sisters visited the men, but never made it home. As they were crossing an isolated mountain road their car was intercepted by Trujillo’s henchmen. The women were dragged from the vehicle and clubbed to death. Their bodies were placed back in the car and the car was pushed over a cliff to make it appear that they had been in a vehicle accident.<sup>4</sup>

Forty years later, the United Nations General Assembly accepted a motion from the Dominican Republic that the anniversary of the deaths of the Minerva sisters be designated the ‘International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women’. Their story is a reminder not only of violence against women but that for many people injustice is not an occasional experience in an otherwise well lived life. Rather it is a systemic reality under which they must live and function every day.

### **Vulnerability, exploitation and injustice in first century Israel<sup>5</sup>**

It can be difficult for those of us who live in affluent, middle class, democratic societies to understand such exploitation and injustice because we seldom experience it in our own lives. Yet for some people injustice, exploitation and oppression are an ongoing reality. For example a child who experiences abuse, or an Aboriginal person who experiences racism at multiple levels.

For the majority of people at the time of Jesus, injustice was an ongoing, draining and damaging reality that punctuated their lives on a daily basis.

#### **Political oppression**

Rome conquered Judea and Galilee in the half century before Jesus was born. Richard Horsley comments that:

In their initial conquest, and particularly in subsequent reconquests the Romans treated the inhabitants brutally in order to induce the people to submit. Repeatedly, the Roman armies burnt and completely destroyed towns and either slaughtered, crucified, or enslaved their entire populations. For example, when Cassius conquered Tarik here in Galilee, "he made slaves of some 30,000 men," says Josephus, and he later (43 BCE) enslaved the people of important regional towns such as Gophna, Emmaus, Lydda, and Thamna (Ant 14.120, 272-75). In one case, such destruction was wrought merely for the failure to raise, or tardiness in raising, an extraordinary levy of taxes (JW 1.180, 219-20). The threat of violence was real. When unrest broke out after the death of Herod the Great, Roman legions razed the countryside, destroyed Sepphoris, crucified 2,000 “rebels” and carried large numbers into slavery. Episodes like these lingered in the collective memory.<sup>iv</sup>

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4. This story is recounted in Elaine Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity. Understanding & Overcoming Violence Against Women*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 2015.

5. Although evangelicals will not share Marcus Borg’s “low” Christology, he provides a helpful overview of justice in first century Israel in chapter 5, “Jesus and politics in contemporary scholarship” of his book *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, T & T Clark, London, 1994.

In the case of Israel, Herod the Great was installed as a puppet king. His reign was marked by a massive building program, funded by huge taxes, and a ruthless and brutal determination to stamp out any rivals or threats to his throne. A network of spies reported on those who expressed dissent and no one was beyond execution. Herod had two of his own sons killed in order to eliminate them as political rivals. Josephus reports that when Herod was near his death he gave orders to have leading people in Israel executed on the day he died, to ensure that news of his death would be met with mourning rather than celebration! While there are no official records of the execution of children under the age of two in Bethlehem in an effort to extinguish the life of a possible rival, i.e. Jesus, it is in keeping with the way Herod reigned.

A struggle for power after Herod's death saw three of his sons take control, each assigned a different region over which to rule. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and Perea, and Archelaus over Judaea and Samaria. Archelaus was replaced after nine years of unpopular rule with a Roman governor. Horsley writes,

The whole period of direct Roman rule from 6 to 66 CE was marked by widespread discontent and periodic turbulence in Palestinian Jewish society... The aspects of the colonial situation of Roman imperial rule in Jewish Palestine that most concerned the people with effective rate of taxation and the relative freedom from outside interference in pursuing a traditional socio-religious way of life. The Romans took considerable care to be sensitive to Jewish religious scruples in the handling of Palestinian Jewish affairs. Nevertheless, as was virtually inevitable in a situation of imperial domination (occupying troops, into cultural misunderstandings, etcetera), they blundered into occasional provocations that further inflamed the situation.<sup>v</sup>

In addition to this, the people lived with the personal abuses of power that came from soldiers occupying the lands. For example, when asked by soldiers what repentance would mean for them, John the Baptist called upon them to stop extorting money and bringing false claims against people (Luke 3:14). In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to the practice of soldiers conscripting people to carry their equipment for them (Matthew 5:41).

### **Economic oppression**

Israel during Bible times was a premodern agrarian society in which wealth was generated almost exclusively through farming. Increases in wealth did not come through improving the productivity of land, as much as acquiring land of other people. In other words, the acquisition of wealth was perceived in terms of redistributing a fixed amount of wealth, rather than increasing the total wealth of a community. This meant that for one person to have greater wealth they need to take land off someone else.

One of the features of such societies is that they typically involve the accumulation of large estates by absentee landlords who reside in the cities and towns. These people extract the vast bulk of the product of the land in the form of rents they charged the peasantry to farm the land and in the form of taxes. A typical premodern agrarian society could find 10 percent of the population enjoying two thirds of the wealth produced on the farms, with the peasantry left with just one third of what they produced, an amount insufficient to sustain 90 percent of the population above the poverty line.

The Old Testament Law contained regulations designed to prevent this trajectory. People were not to be charged interest on their loans; debts were to be forgiven every seventh year; land was

to be returned to its ancestral owners every 50th year; and those groups without land were to be included in the harvests. Yet as far back as the eighth century prophets, we discover that these provisions were routinely ignored. For example, Isaiah condemned those who added house to house and field to field, gobbling up the inheritance and birthrights of their fellow Israelites.

In the time of Jesus, the burden of taxation and tribute demanded by the Romans added another layer of stress to Israel's peasant farmers and increased the reluctance of creditors to provide loans to them, knowing it was unlikely that they would be able to repay before the Sabbath year. Tradition has it that it was at this time the Rabbi Hillel created a system by which loans could be made without invoking the requirement that they be forgiven in the sabbath year. Land was becoming such a sensitive issue that when the Jewish revolt broke out in 66 CE, one of the first acts of the rebellion was to burn the land records held in the Temple. Certainly the Gospels portray rich landowners who seemed oblivious of their obligations to their neighbours; destitute and landless peasants who desperately sought work as day labourers; beggars dotting the streets of villages and towns; and rich landlords aggressively oppressing and exploiting their workers. The Book of James provides a shocking example from close to the time of Jesus. The rich routinely dishonoured the poor; dragged them off to court when they were unable to repay their debt (James 2:5-9); denied them their wages; and were not beyond murdering those who stood in their way as they sought to acquire land (James 5:1-5).

Horsley describes the circumstances like this,

If a peasant family, after rendering up 40 percent or more of its harvest, then had two little left to survive until the next harvest, it would have to borrow grain for food, or seed for the next sowing. Family members may already have tried to hire themselves out as wage labour to a large landholder. However, as Jesus' parable in Matthew 20 indicates, there were many more people looking for work than could be hired (one of the effects of overpopulation already noted). Under such economic pressures, with too little produced to meet the demands both for subsistence and for surpluses, the peasants were forced to borrow. Continued borrowing would increase the family's debt significantly, the great risk of complete loss of land. One would then sink into the ranks of the rural proletariat, the landless day labourers, one could become a sharecropping tenant, perhaps on one's own former parcel of land.

Judging from the parables of Jesus, (e.g. Mark 12:1-9; Matthew 20:1-16) this was exactly what had been happening to the peasantry. The dominant pattern of land tenure in his time was probably still independent family holdings, with varying degrees of indebtedness, of course. But other patterns had become prominent, so much so that they could be used as vivid illustrations from which listeners could easily draw the intended analogy. Large landed estates administered by stewards and filed by tenants have become familiar.<sup>vi</sup>

## **Spiritual oppression**

The Gospels picture first century Israel as a place of spiritual oppression, at the hands of the demonic and the religious authorities.

Before Jesus embarked on his public ministry he was tested by the devil in the wilderness, setting a course for a decisive battle at the cross. Throughout the Gospels we witness the ongoing struggle between Christ and the Satan. Satan is said to be the father of the religious authorities; to be behind the attempt of Peter to convince Jesus not to go the way of the cross; and to have entered Judas when he betrayed Christ. And throughout the Gospels we learn of quasi-personal spiritual powers

that could possess people, with impacts that ranged from violent insanity, to outbursts of antisocial and self-destructive behaviours.

Alongside the power of Satan and the shadowy powers of evil, the Gospels identify spiritual oppression at the hands of religious authorities. On the one hand, the high priesthood had long been politicised. The Temple remained a powerful symbol of God's presence, but the religious figures at its head were part of the powerful elites who, contrary to the Law's requirement that they possess no land, held large landholdings.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, not only sought to apply the Old Testament's purity laws to the whole of society, but to make purity the central criterion around which communal life operated. This resulted in a highly stratified social order, in which those deemed "unclean" were pushed to the margins, excluded from the life of the community, and those deemed "sinners" were seen as undeserving and excluded from the grace and love of God.

To these various forms of oppression and exploitation we could add other dimensions – patriarchy, slavery, racism, to name but a few. The examples offered should hopefully make it clear that for large parts of the first century Israelite population their life experience was one of ongoing and systemic injustice.

## **Jesus the justice bringer**

It was an extraordinary day in Nazareth. Jesus was visiting his hometown and was expected to speak in the synagogue. He had burst onto the public life of Galilee, blazing like a torch against the night sky, moving from town to town teaching, exorcising demons, healing the sick, and declaring that God's reign was imminent. And now he was returning to Nazareth, the village in which he had grown up. Everyone wanted to hear him.

The synagogue service began. Jesus was invited to read the Scripture. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah which he opened up and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV)

He finished the reading, rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant, sat down, and said "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing". (Luke 4:21)

It was an audacious claim. The prophet Isaiah had long ago castigated the Israelites for their idolatry and injustice. He spoke of a Servant who would rise up and be used by God to bring justice and peace to Israel and then through Israel to the world. Jesus identified himself as that Servant. Jesus is the justice-bringer.

Jesus declared that God was coming to liberate the poor, the widow, the orphan, the maimed and disabled, the diseased, and the demon possessed from the things that bound and oppressed them. A time was coming when the first would be last and the last would be first; when those who were hungry would be filled; those who mourned would laugh (Luke 6:20-22); and those who were oppressed would find justice (Luke 18:1-8).

Jesus's vision of the salvation God was bringing was much broader than the notion that our souls might go to heaven when we die. He taught that in him God was coming to set everything right. Human beings would be set right with God, with each other and with the creation. God was intent on creating a world that enjoyed shalom, that flourishing in all dimensions of existence that we described in chapter 1. While this will not arrive in full until his return, the process of creating shalom, of people coming into the reign of God, has begun.

Jesus brought the justice essential to shalom in a variety of ways.

### **Standing with 'the lowly'<sup>6</sup>**

One of the noticeable dimensions of Jesus's ministry was his association with people on the margins, those who are 'lowly' and 'downtrodden'. This continued the Old Testament focus on the widow, the orphan, the foreigner and the poor, but expanded it to include other groups who in Jesus' day were also marginalised, such as the leper, the demon-possessed, the blind, the lame, those pushed down and out of access to God via the spiritually oppressive approaches of the Pharisees.

### **Releasing the lowly from the things that bind them**

Not only did Jesus associate with the lowly, he treated people in ways that respected their dignity and brought liberation from the powers that bound them.

His exorcisms represented an assault upon the shadowy, dark spiritual powers that drove people into debilitating and anti-social behaviours (Matthew 12:22-37). Similarly, his healing miracles delivered people from their economic, social and spiritual isolation. Lepers, who were excluded from the community, not only found their bodies healed, but were now able to rejoin their community. The lame and the blind were unable to work the land and so became financially destitute. When Jesus healed their bodies he restored their capacity to build their livelihoods.

Or consider the description of a woman with a continual menstrual bleed (Mark 5:24-34). In Israel's religious system menstrual bleeding rendered a woman "unclean" for the duration of her period. During that time a woman must avoid contact with things that were holy and must avoid making "clean" things "unclean" by touching them. For the woman in the Gospel story this meant ongoing isolation. She had spent everything she had on finding a cure, to no avail. So in a desperate bid for healing she ventured out to see Jesus and touched his cloak in the hope she might be healed. When she touched him she should have rendered him ritually "unclean" but instead he made her clean and liberated her not only from her physical condition but from the social isolation her condition had brought.

Perhaps less obvious but equally powerful, was the liberation Jesus offered from the oppressive culture of the patriarchal family. In Jesus' time women were subject to neglect, physical abuse, had many limitations placed on their participation in social life, and were expected to centre their existence on the honour of their husband. On frequent occasions and in numerous ways, Jesus subverted this patriarchal system. He included women among his itinerant followers (Luke 8:1-3) and redefined the nature of obligation and kinship. Kinship was broadened to include the family of faith Jesus was forming (Mark 3:31-35). In this community God alone would be recognised as patriarch (Matthew 23:9). It was in relation to Jesus and the new community of faith, that women

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6. The words 'lowly' and 'downtrodden' are a description of the position of people who are oppressed in hierarchical society. See page 18 for full explanation in 'The concepts of 'Up' and 'Down'.

(and men) were to define themselves and their life purpose.

### **Calling the oppressor to repentance**

Jesus not only stood with those who were lowly and downtrodden, he called oppressors to repentance, with a strong focus on the spiritual and economic oppression of the lowly by the shadowy spiritual powers and the elites of Israel.

In his resistance to the temptations of Satan and his casting out demons from the demon possessed, Jesus was understood to have begun the overthrow of satanic powers.

Jesus' challenge was very strong against those who spiritually oppressed others. Throughout the Gospels he goes out of his way to confront them. For example, Matthew 23 is a lengthy and caustic denunciation of the Pharisees for placing heavy burdens on others; for their lust to be honoured; their lack of humility; their distortion of Scripture to justify their sin; their failure to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God; and their hypocrisy!

Jesus' confrontations with the rich called for them to act justly. Israel was never meant to be a nation in which a small elite had vast land holdings while the majority languished in poverty. The laws of harvest, debt and Jubilee were designed to prevent this occurring. Large landholdings could only be acquired by neglecting "the rights of the poor". This is why Jesus declared woe upon the rich and the well fed (e.g. Luke 6:20-26). Their wealth and vast land holdings were witness they had ignored the biblical commands to make interest-free loans, forgive debts every Sabbath year, and to redistribute all land every 50 years. Their wealth was eloquent witness to their failure to practise justice, which meant they stood under the judgement of God and that "it is more difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle" (Matthew 19:24).

When a rich young ruler came to Jesus to discover what he must do in order to be part of the kingdom of God, he claimed that he'd kept all the commandments. Yet when Jesus tells him to sell all he has, give to the poor and follow him, the rich young ruler is exposed as one whose greed triumphs over his willingness to observe the laws of Moses and share his wealth.

Zaccheus the tax collector, by contrast, represents the appropriate response to the presence of Jesus. Tax collectors not only extorted large sums of money from the population, but were known to use violence as a means of ensuring people paid what was demanded of them. Zacchaeus was transformed by his encounter with Jesus and signified the change by announcing he would give half of his possessions to the poor and repay fourfold all whom he had cheated. This prompted Jesus to recognise that salvation had come to Zacchaeus's house.

The "cleansing of the temple" makes a lot of sense when read against this background. In casting money changers from the temple Jesus repeats the message of the Old Testament prophets, who railed against those who worshipped God with blood-stained hands. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan point out that a thieves den, which Jesus said the temple had become, was not the place in which crimes were committed, but the place of perceived safety to which robbers fled after they had committed a crime!<sup>vii</sup> Jesus then, was not pinpointing corruption and injustice in the temple, but the exploitation of the people in everyday life by a religious elite who were under the delusion that the temple was a sign of God's blessing on them. Therefore,

along with Isaiah, Malachi, Amos and Micah, Jesus insists that judgement is coming.

### **Building an alternate community**

It was not only those who were in positions of power whom Jesus called to repentance. Everyone was called into a disciple-community that embraced the values of the kingdom of God. It was to be a community whose righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees (Matthew 5:17-48). By this Jesus was not calling his followers to out-Pharisee the Pharisees in meticulous observance of the law. Rather, they were to practise a different type of righteousness, a righteousness of love. This would see them extending themselves to one another in grace, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and love in ways that took them beyond the mere requirement of the Law. It was a community that eschewed power, privilege and title in exchange for welcome, servanthood and a recognition of the fundamental equality of every person before God. It was to be a disciple community that extended itself beyond itself to every person who was in need (e.g. Matthew 25:31-45). This is the type of community it should also be today.

### **Cross, resurrection and return**

The death, resurrection and return of Jesus provide a wide canvas from which we make sense of his justice and his mission. The powers that oppress humanity are broadened out to include sin, death, decay and spiritual powers.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:22-28)

The resurrection demonstrates the defeat of the oppressive powers. They could not prevent new life coursing through Jesus’ body, nor can they prevent new life coursing through the universe. If Jesus was raised to new life, so shall we all be! As Christians reflected on the meaning of this, they came to regard the cross not simply as a prelude to the resurrection, but as the final deathblow for the forces of injustice and oppression. For example, Colossians states that, “... having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:15).

## **Seeking justice today**

The prophet Micah identified justice, mercy and faithfulness to God as the three central virtues of godliness. This is why Jesus echoed Micah’s words when he declared that the weightier matters of the law to which followers of Jesus must give attention are the core issues of justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). Without these three virtues there can be no shalom for individuals or nations.

When we embrace the call to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8) we turn outward to face the world and focus on those who are hurting, oppressed, exploited, down-trodden, forgotten, disadvantaged, abused. We open ourselves to hear their cries of suffering and hopelessness and we seek to offer care, kindness, hope and relief. We stand in solidarity with them as we seek justice for them. We become bearers, recipients and co-creators of shalom.

We follow in the way of Jesus by doing as he did, standing with “the lowly”; working for the liberation of people from the powers that bind them; identifying the ways we might be exploiting or oppressing others and repenting of these and calling other oppressors to do the same; forming communities in which we embody the values of the reign of God; and pointing people to the deliverance of humankind and creation from the power of sin, death and spiritual powers through the death, resurrection and return of Christ.

## Chapter 3:

# Where Does the Problem Lie?

Sandra became homeless when she fled a violent partner. She left to seek refuge in an emergency accommodation centre, but discovered it was full. She has become trapped in a cycle of homelessness and despair. The Department of Human Services provided her with emergency accommodation in a hotel with the condition that she look for somewhere to live. However, she found she could not access the private rental market. Her ex-partner had destroyed the flat they had shared and because the lease was in her name, she was now blacklisted for rental. The violence she had experienced and the uncertainty of her circumstances caused her severe anxiety and depression, which contributed to her being unable to continue her employment as a chef. This moved her into unemployment with additional financial distress. In order to cope with her situation she sometimes uses prescription medications such as Valium and other drugs to relieve her pain.<sup>7</sup>

It is not uncommon for people to consider a person like Sandra to be responsible for her own situation. We may encounter her in a drug-hazed state, see her scrounging for food, and conclude that she has done something or made some bad choices to be in this place. Yet when we pause to listen to the stories of people who are disadvantaged, have become homeless, or live in poverty, it becomes clear that their situation is much more complex than we could have imagined, and we are all implicated as part of the societal problem.

People typically fall into crisis when they experience some kind of ordeal such as the loss of job, the violence of an intimate partner, the collapse of a business, and they lack the resources and support to cope. Most of us have people and systems that we can call upon to help us through such times. However, some people have no systems or networks, and if they do have them, they are often inadequate. The person quickly finds themselves in a situation that is very difficult to get through, can escalate out of control quickly and the person spirals downward.

### Personal and social responsibility in the Bible

The book of Proverbs provides a number of pithy quotes that suggest the outcomes we experience in life are the result of our actions. For example, Proverbs 10:3-5 says,

The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame. (Proverbs 10:3-5 NRSV)

Verses such as these are sometimes quoted by Christians to demonstrate that hunger, poverty and disadvantage are self-inflicted. Yet Ben Witherington III reminds us that,

What one must always bear in mind in reading Proverbs is that the assumed social context is a society that is functioning relatively well, that is, in a basically God-honouring way... How very different this is from the society observed by Qoholeth, the narrator of Ecclesiastes, who at a later time in Hebrew history bemoans, "if you see the poor oppressed in a district, injustice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things....Those who love money never have

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7. Sandra's story is told at ABC, *Surviving homelessness: realities of life on the street*, ABC, 2016, viewed 28 May 2018, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-04/how-i-survived-homelessness-abc-open/7679622>>.

enough; those who love wealth are never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless". (Ecclesiastes 5:8-10)

In other words, proverbs and aphorisms are always situation specific. They are not some sort of universal lucky charms at work in all circumstances, regardless of the social context in which one lives. They describe what happens under particular, limited conditions and only when a person is in right (or wrong) relationship with the God of the universe.<sup>viii</sup>

The social conditions normally experienced by the poor and the disadvantaged of Israel were those of inequity, exploitation and oppression at the hands of the wealthy and powerful. Throughout the Old Testament Law, the Old Testament Prophets and the Gospels, the explanation for disadvantage is normally that those at the bottom of society are victims of injustice at the hands of those who are at the top.

For example, the prophet Amos was sent to the Israelites during the reigns of King Uzziah of Judah, and King Jeroboam of Israel. The first two chapters of Amos consist of oracles against the nations around Israel, declaring that judgement is coming upon them for atrocities they committed against their enemies. The prophet then turns his gaze to Judah and Israel, declaring they too stand under the judgement of God. In the case of Israel, the indictment is this:

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals - they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. (Amos 2:6-8 NRSV)

Israel's transgressions were twofold: idolatry and injustice. Amos does not castigate the poor for failing to be industrious, but indicts the powerful and the wealthy who "turn justice into bitterness... trample on the poor and force them to give you grain... oppress the righteous and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts". (Amos 5: 7a,11a,12b)

It was not simply the case that a few rich people engaged in occasional or even repeated acts of injustice against a few poor people, but that systems of the law that were designed to prevent poverty, had been turned into systems that served the interest of the powerful. Earlier in these notes we described the Old Testament Laws around land, debt, and harvest that were designed to prevent people from being trapped in poverty. These recognised that people experienced life crises that overwhelmed their capacity to cope and they put structures around them to provide them with the support they needed to get through those difficult times. Yet those very structures stood in the way of the rich gaining greater riches, so they were undermined and ignored.

Similar sentiments to those in Amos are found throughout the Old Testament prophets. Rather than implementing provisions of the law that enabled households to remain on their land and live decent and healthy lives, the rich took advantage of those who were poor, gobbled up their land and exploited their labour.

Hundreds of years later little had changed. The book of James was most likely written to Christian communities living in first century Judaea. A group of wealthy people had acquired vast estates on which they employed day labourers and tenant farmers, and with a disdain that was breathtaking, withheld the wages of their workers and murdered those perceived to be troublemakers.

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you. (James 5:1-6)

It is instructive to remember that this was the social context to which Jesus spoke and which his teaching assumes. The poor and the downtrodden were not simply those who had fallen on hard luck, but those who were pushed to the bottom and kept there by an empire rooted in violence and a national leadership who ignored the provisions of the law for an equitable and just society in favour of systems that expanded their wealth and impoverished the vulnerable.

### **The concepts of 'up' and 'down'**

Nicholas Wolterstorff helpfully reminds us that when speaking of injustice our tendency is to use the language of 'in' and 'out', 'margins' and 'centre', where as Jesus pushes us to think of society in terms of 'top' and 'bottom'.

Metaphors common in present-day discourse about society are those of the margin and the outside... [The biblical writers] worked instead with an image of up and down: some are at the top of the social hierarchy, some are at the bottom. Those at the bottom are usually not there because it is their fault. They are there because they are downtrodden. Those at the top "trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth" (Amos 2:7).

When center and circumference are one's basic metaphors, the undoing of injustice will be described as including the outsiders. When up and down are one's basic metaphors, the undoing of injustice will be described as lifting up those at the bottom. The poor do not have to be included within the social order; they have always been there, usually indispensable to its functioning. They have to be lifted up.

...A striking feature of the New Testament writings, and of Jesus' preaching as they report it, is the [conviction that] the rectification of injustice requires not only lifting up 'the lowly' but casting down 'the high'. The coming of justice requires social inversion...

Jesus does not mean, literally, that justice requires that beggars become kings and kings become beggars. The beggars would soon start acting like kings. The clue to the meaning of the theme of social inversion lies in his sentence, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The coming of justice requires the humbling of those who exalt themselves. The arrogant must be cured of their arrogance; the rich and powerful must be cured of their attachment to wealth and power. Only then is justice for all possible."<sup>x</sup>

### **The problem with power**

The biblical witness suggests that human beings have a problem responsibly exercising power. This was evident not only in the exploitation of widows, orphans, foreigners and the poor, but in the behaviour of kings. The Scriptures are adamant that it is the responsibility of authorities to secure justice for those at the bottom of society (e.g. Proverbs 31:1-9; Amos 1-2; Isaiah 9:1-7).

Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence. (Jeremiah 22:15-17 NRSV)

These verses address the sons of King Josiah, who unfortunately, was one of the very few kings of Israel to be active in securing justice for his subjects. When the Israelites demanded the institution of kingship they were warned that a king would take the best of the land, second their children into his service, and reorient the structures of society around his interests (1 Samuel 8-10). This is precisely what occurred. God called kings to act with justice, mercy and faithfulness, yet they repeatedly failed to do so. The worst among them oppressed the people and led the nation into idolatry. Isaiah, for example, speaks of those

who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! (Isaiah 10:1-2)

Even Israel's greatest kings, David and Solomon, acted in ways that destroyed shalom. David's violence against his own people was of such an order that God deemed it inappropriate for David to build the temple. Solomon enslaved the non-Hebrew population and imposed a tax burden on his people that created poverty and bitter resentment.

It is only when we come to Christ, the true King and Lord of Israel and of all the nations, that the inevitable slide of power towards greed and self-interest is finally overcome. Jesus alone proved capable of wielding power in a truly just and graceful way.

To counteract the tendency of kings to abuse power, God raised up prophets who not only called the people back to the ways of God, but had a particular responsibility to remind those in positions of power that they were to secure justice for all, rather than enrichment for themselves.

## **Building a just community**

For centuries many have read the Gospels through the lens of individualism and spirit/matter dualism. Spirit/matter dualism divides reality into two parts – the material and the spiritual – and sees salvation as concerned with the “spiritual”. Coupled with the individualist focus of today many have imagined salvation as God forgiving our sins so that our souls (the spiritual part of us) can go to heaven when we die. Yet the biblical vision is much broader. It is of God putting the world right – individuals, communities, and all creation.<sup>8</sup>

The salvation Jesus proclaims includes a reordering of the world so that those who have been denied the good things of God's earth will one day enjoy them, and those who have oppressed them will be brought low. Another way of looking at the Beatitudes found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12) which are often taken as a list of virtues, is the glue that binds them. They all can represent states of people for whom Jesus's message is good news. They are blessed not because there is something good about their condition, but because the arrival of the kingdom of

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8. Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* provides a wonderful elaboration of this. T Wright, *Surprised by hope*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 2007

God will mean a reversal of their situation.

The Beatitudes can speak to people who are downtrodden with the promise that change is both possible and coming. The poor in spirit, that is those who have felt the crushing weight of injustice and violence and are drained of hope, will receive the kingdom of heaven. Those who mourn, that is who have felt the loss of livelihood, loved ones, house and home under the weight of the greedy rich and the oppressive Empire of Rome, will be comforted. The meek, who in the Old Testament tradition were those who were dispossessed of their land, will inherit the earth. Those who hunger for justice, whether due to their own experiences of injustice, or their solidarity with those who have experienced injustice, will be filled. Those who have responded with grace and generosity to the suffering and violence around them – the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers – will likewise find the blessing of God's kingdom, even if their courageous allegiance to its values has cost them in the present.

Over against exploitation and oppression, Jesus calls his followers to build a community of grace, generosity and love, in which people will not fall between the cracks, but they will find the resources, support and encouragement they need to get through life's crises.

### **Living justice today**

The Law, the Prophets, and the Gospels do not provide a social-economic-political analysis that can be blindly applied to every culture and every time. They spoke to people living in premodern societies that were grounded in small-scale agriculture and political systems that privileged absolute power. The time, cultures and systems in which we live are very different. We cannot assume that the dynamics that produced inequality and disadvantage in society today are the same as those of the biblical era.

Nevertheless, the biblical analysis of power and how it was exercised in biblical times, alerts us to consider the ways power is used in our society, and to resist simplistic assumptions that those who are at the bottom of our society are there as a result of their own failings. To adequately deal with injustice we need to be aware that people's outcomes in life are not simply the result of their own choices, but they are powerfully shaped by the social, economic and political systems in which they live. As we identify this reality, we realise that overcoming poverty, oppression, exploitation and disadvantage is rarely a matter of the people at the bottom just 'pulling their socks up'. It is more about people with privilege and power determining what sort of community they will build that provides support and services to people that enable them to get them through difficult times and empower them to shape their future life.

## **Chapter 4:**

# **How Can We Do Justice?**

Desmond Tutu was the Anglican Archbishop of South Africa during the years of apartheid. He played a very important role in the overthrow of that discriminatory system. During an interview with the BBC he was asked to describe a turning point in his life. Desmond Tutu spoke of a time when he was a small boy. He was walking with his mother along the footpath of their home town when a tall, white man dressed in black came toward them. The apartheid system expected that when a white person and a black person met in this manner, the black person would step down into the gutter and let the white person pass, and tip their hat as a gesture of respect. It was just one of the many ways black and coloured South Africans were humiliated and reminded of their inferior status.

On this day, before his mother could step off the sidewalk, the tall, white man stepped down into the gutter to allow Desmond and his mother to pass on the footpath. As they passed by the tall, white man he tipped his hat as a gesture of respect to them. Desmond was astonished! He asked his mother who that man was and why he had stepped off the sidewalk for them.

His mother replied that the man was an Anglican priest and he stepped off the sidewalk because he was a man of God. The young Desmond Tutu said it was at that point that he knew he wanted to be an Anglican priest and a man of God.

When we think about 'doing justice' we commonly call to mind the great heroes of justice such as Martin Luther King, William Wilberforce, and Nelson Mandela and their heroic exploits in pursuit of justice. Yet for most of us doing justice will mean much simpler acts such as stepping off the sidewalk.

### **Seeking justice in a post-Christian society**

Over the course of the last few decades Australia has transitioned from a nation that identified itself strongly with the Christian tradition, to one that is genuinely pluralist. Although Australia's constitution has defined us as a secular society as far back as 1901, the social reality was that Christianity dominated public discourse regarding values and identity in a way that no other religion, not even secularism, did. In 1950 almost half the population were regular church attenders and Christianity was an integral part of the story Australians told about themselves. For many years after colonisation it was assumed by vast numbers of Australians that the law of the land should reflect the Christian and British heritage.

This is no longer the case. Churchgoing remains important to a substantial minority, but the Christian story is no longer tied to what it means to be Australian. Now Australians more commonly define themselves as a multi-faith, multicultural society united around a core commitment to each other's freedom and the common good. Attempts to legislate Christian morality may be considered coercive and inappropriate.

James Davidson Hunter identifies three ways Christians have responded.<sup>x</sup> First, there are those whose stance is to be in “opposition to” the decline of Christian morality in society and legislation. They continue to operate as though they live in a Christian society, and on those grounds they seek to align the law of the land with the commands in Scripture. Second, there are those who “withdraw from” society, and seek to build robust communities of disciples who live out their values as a sign and witness to the world, but they do not seek to politically engage. Third, Davison speaks of those who seek “relevance to” the new cultural context, looking for points of connection rather than points of difference to the world.

Rather, Davison suggests a fourth way, that is to pursue “faithful presence” in which we faithfully live our lives, seeking to contribute to the wellbeing of our society wherever we can. I suggest we extend Davison’s approach and have the goal that the church should be a graceful presence in its community, and do so in three ways:<sup>9</sup>

1. We seek to model life as God intended it to be. We focus on building communities of faith that are true to the biblical call to love, grace, kindness, generosity and goodness.
2. We seek to be a graceful presence in our local communities, national community and world. We give to each other and to our neighbours that which every person is due as a human being. This will see us get involved with people who are at the bottom of society in practical acts of loving kindness.
3. We exercise a prophetic voice in the public arena. We engage at the political level, not to demand the legislation of Christian morality, but rather to call governments to act in ways that are just and that bring deliverance to people who are exploited, oppressed, and harmed by the systems and people who are powerful within our society.

## **Being a graceful presence**

### **1. Change the world by inviting people to follow Jesus**

One of the primary ways we are a graceful presence is by inviting people to follow Jesus. This is not simply so that they can receive eternal life after they die, but that they can recover their humanity. We were created to worship our Creator, love our fellow human being, and to steward the earth. As humankind has turned away from the worship of God we have placed something other than God at the centre of our hope, aspiration and work, and our lives, our values and our priorities become distorted. This is articulated by Paul in Romans 1:18-32, where he argues that turning away from the worship of the Creator to worship of the created has cascaded through life so that we exchange that which is good for that which is not. It is communicated in narrative by Genesis 2-11, where human beings seek to usurp the place and prerogatives of God, with devastating results: Adam and Eve turn on each other (Genesis 3), Cain murders his brother (Genesis 4), the earth is filled with violence (Genesis 6) and arrogant self-assertion (Genesis 11).

When people embrace Christ there is then a fundamental realignment of the purpose, direction and shape of their lives, and they start the journey of being transformed into the people they were created to be.

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9. Further reading: JD Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, and M Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, Brazos Press, Michigan, 2013

## **2. Change the world by being a community of grace**

As we have noted already in this series, followers of Jesus are called to form communities of grace and love in which people find welcome, support, hope and healing. (Matthew 5:13-15). Our churches are to be communities in which old hatreds and prejudices are laid aside and we get on with the business of loving each other. We show that life is about loving God and others, and demonstrate that love can triumph over hate; good over evil; hope over despair; and forgiveness over bitterness.

## **3. Change the world through simple acts of kindness**

The white Anglican priest who stepped off the sidewalk for Desmond Tutu and his mother was named Trevor Huddleston. His action reminds us that we can change our world through simple acts of kindness. All suffering is painful, but injustice adds indignity which increases the distress. The person who suffers is treated as though they are of no value, which erodes a person's sense of their own worth and dignity. Likewise, situations of injustice often leave the victim feeling powerless. In these contexts simple acts of kindness and empathy serve to reinforce a person's dignity and value. It could be stepping off a sidewalk, a kind word, a thoughtful note, or an invitation to dinner.

Jesus regularly used this approach. The Gospels are full of examples of Jesus making time for people that others considered unimportant. For example, Jesus was heading to Jerusalem for a showdown with the authorities that would lead to his death. As he passed through Jericho a blind man cried out for Christ to have mercy on him. The crowd attempts to silence the blind man, but that only encourages him to yell louder. He may have annoyed the crowd, but he did not annoy Jesus. Christ heard his call, broke away from what he was doing, and gave the blind man his undivided attention (Luke 18: 35-41).

## **4. Change the world by speaking up**

As we noted in the previous study, the concentration of power in Israel led to widespread exploitation of the poor. The prophets of Israel served as a counterpoint, calling both kings and the rich to stop using their power to oppress and exploit, and instead to start sharing their wealth and building social systems that were inclusive.

Jesus continued in this tradition. For example, he called on the wealthy to share their wealth with the poor and act justly; challenged the Pharisaic exclusion of people from the community of faith; and drove people out of the temple as a sign that God would bring judgement on those who had turned the temple into a 'den of thieves'.

There are two ways you can raise a prophetic voice and speak up. The first is to start with groups who are at the bottom of your community, such as people living in domestic violence or experiencing homelessness. As you get involved you will likely become aware of ways in which the people you serve are unfairly disadvantaged. This can become the basis for speaking to representatives in your local, State or Federal governments about the changes they can make that will produce better outcomes for these people.

A second way to advocate for justice is to participate in a campaign that is seeking long term, sustainable change in an area that impacts the lives of those who are being harmed. For example, in the first decade of this millennium many people across the world became aware that Uzbekistan, one of the world's major cotton exporters, was using forced child labour to pick its cotton.

A global campaign was launched, calling on clothing companies to cease using Uzbeki cotton until the Government of Uzbekistan stopped enslaving children to harvest it. Australians joined other countries in sending postcards and writing letters to their favourite fashion brands demanding action. This global campaign proved very effective, and the Uzbeki government eventually began to implement change. In February 2018, the International Labour Organisation, which had been contracted to provide independent third party reviews of the Uzbeki effort, released a review which stated that systemic child labour had been eliminated from the Uzbeki cotton industry, and that adult forced labour was rapidly declining.<sup>xi</sup>

## **5. Change the world by consuming justly**

In 2001 a documentary was released that reported on the existence of slavery around the world. One of the most shocking stories focused on a group of young men from Mali who travelled to the Ivory Coast in the belief they would be given jobs working on farms. Instead they found themselves in an extraordinarily remote part of the country working as slaves on cocoa plantations. They were beaten, whipped, and denied their freedom. It turned out that the use of slavery and child labour was systemic in the Ivory Coast.

That documentary shocked many Australians. It was gut-wrenching to realise that the cocoa in the chocolate we ate may well have been farmed by slaves and children. A number of us joined campaigns calling on the major chocolate companies to work with their farmers, paying them a fair price for their product and ensuring that they were not using slave or child labour. One of the first companies to respond was Cadbury, who in Easter 2010 announced that the cocoa in their dairy milk chocolate would be fair trade certified. This meant farmers were part of cooperatives that were always paid a price for the cocoa that covered the costs of production (including their wages) and who pledged not to use child slave labour. For the next couple of years many of us preferenced Cadbury dairy milk chocolate, knowing that in buying Cadbury dairy milk we were supporting justice for the farmers across Ghana who supplied cocoa to Cadbury. Over the course of the next few years all the major chocolate manufacturers in Australia agreed to source cocoa produced under 'fair trade', 'rainforest alliance', or 'UTZ' certified systems.

One of the most profound ways we shape our world is through our consumption patterns. While there is a need to consider the level of our consumption, we still need to consume food. Choosing to consume products that have been produced ethically is one way to act justly. You can download apps and guides from organisations such as [www.ethical.org.au](http://www.ethical.org.au) to help you identify products that are ethically produced.

## **6. Change the world by partnering with others**

Many churches are discovering that when faced with issues that demonstrate significant and systemic disadvantage, such as homelessness, refugees, domestic violence, mental illness, and the like, they have a desire to serve but they may lack the knowledge or specialist skills required to coordinate or operate those services. In these instances, strategic partnerships can be formed with specialist organisations, in which the local church provides volunteers and perhaps resources such as a finances, property, and a welcoming church community. The specialist agency provides the professional wrap-around services that the church cannot provide but the church provides the welcoming and supportive community that the services cannot provide. For example, an organisation such as Baptist Care SA provides specialist services for refugees; people experiencing homelessness; people living with mental illness; children, youth and families who are leaving violent and unsafe situations. By supporting their work, or partnering on new initiatives in

your local area your church can maximise its capacity to be effective in serving people who are experiencing oppression and struggle.

### **Doing justice 'on earth as it is in heaven'**

One of the greatest challenges for churches and individuals as they seek to become more involved in doing justice is that the issues are just so big and so many that we feel overwhelmed. It is critical to remember that we cannot do everything we want but we can do some of things we desire. Start with something that is achievable for your church. Find one way to build justice into your church and life, learn and grow, celebrate the changes that are effected, and then consider taking another step. Step-by-step allow your church be transformed into a community of believers who honour God by imitating God's love, kindness,generosity, compassion, and justice.

# Endnotes

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- iii. N Wolterstorff, *Justice. Rights and Wrongs*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2010, pp. 79-80.
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- viii. B Witherington III, *Jesus and Money. A Guide for Times of Financial Crisis*, Brazos Press, Michigan, 2010, p. 30.
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- xi. International Labour Organisation (ILO), "Third-party monitoring of measures against child labour and forced labour during the 2017 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan", ILO, 2018, viewed 4 June 2018, <[http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/Informationresources/WCMS\\_617830/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/Informationresources/WCMS_617830/lang--en/index.htm)>





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