St Albans WPCU 2019

Deuteronomy 16: 11-20 Romans 8 v 19-23 & Luke 4: 14-21

**Justice and only Justice**

Our theme for this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is “Justice and only Justice”.

Justice, in the sense of Law & Order, is something we take for granted. When I was coming up to retirement I was appointed Preacher to one of the Inns of Court in central London, and the years since have been a fascinating insight into the workings of judges and barristers. I knew quite a bit about prisons, and the communities which produce most of the people who go to prison, but I knew very little about the other side, the courts and those who send offenders to prison. Judges have very difficult decisions to make, most of them do everything they can not to send people to prison, sometimes they have to sit and listen to the most terrible things, and in the Family Courts they often need the wisdom of Solomon. So tonight we might begin our thinking about Justice in this more restricted sense, and remember those who administer it in this country day by day.

We heard from the Book of Deuteronomy: “render just decisions”, “do not show partiality”, “do not accept bribes”. We may take that for granted, but it’s not always the case in other parts of the world. Last year we had a number of anniversaries, not least the centenary of the end of the First world War, but one which got over-looked in the run-up to Christmas was the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Every country which has signed it promises to give justice to every citizen, including the right to a fair trial. Sometimes they do. In too many cases they do not. But at least it stands there as a beacon for legal justice, and other rights as well.

And we might note in passing that modern Human Rights are not, as some people claim, the result of Secularisation and the rejection of medieval Church-supported tyrannies. Modern Human Rights owe less to the Enlightenment and more to the Christian Faith, to the emphasis on the individual which the Protestant Reformation brought with it, and the rediscovery in Catholic Social Thought of what the Bible teaches about our belonging together.

And that already leads us to open up this concept of Justice, from its limited legal sense, to a much greater vision of how things should be. And Deuteronomy is already there: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt”. Time and time again Deuteronomy calls the people to social justice, and to work for economic justice (not least through the Jubilee), because they had known first hand great injustice as slaves in Egypt. God had saved them and brought them into a new land therefore they must deal fairly and justly not only with their own people, especially the most vulnerable, the fatherless and widows, but also the stranger who is in their midst.

So when Jesus begins his public ministry he issues what some have called the Nazareth Manifesto. He takes upon himself the role of the Servant who will establish justice in the land, and with the words of the prophet Isaiah echoing around the synagogue he proclaims his vocation to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. The congregation were amazed, then disturbed, and then deeply offended. Visiting preachers should always be more careful, and although you look a friendly bunch I have carefully noted where the Emergency Exits are!

**Rt. Rev. Michael Doe**

So we are called to work for Justice and only Justice in the world around us. And in a moment we will look at a couple of contemporary issues. But before we do, you might be asking: what has this got to do with Christian Unity? Why did the Churches in Indonesia choose this theme for the 2019 Week of Prayer? Maybe church unity is not so important to them given the issues they have to face day by day? Or maybe they believe that a more united Church will be more effective in confronting injustice: there’s strength, or at least safety, in numbers. And it’s certainly true that a divided Church has a weaker voice, particularly when we are advocating unity and community to those outside.

Whatever the Indonesian motives, I want to suggest that here in the West there is a very clear connection between what’s happened to the Ecumenical Movement and what’s going on in the wider world, where creation is groaning. The connection is all to do with how we see ourselves in relation to others, and in particular a loss of faith in institutions. So while we may regret that the number of people coming to Church these days is often in decline, our loss is nothing compared with other organised activity, for example, political parties.

What’s been called “identity politics” is about people choosing to be or do what they feel as individuals to be right for them, at least for the moment, usually in their own interests, and within their own comfort zone, rather than inheriting something from the past or belonging to it today. Tradition has been replaced by relevance and commitment by self-selection. Personal choice is all that matters, and at its worse Truth itself is trumped by individual preference and even just emotional attraction.

Forgive a little nostalgia but as I look back on my ministry I mourn the loss of much which gave meaning to our belonging together: the parish church, the mission agency, the Urban Priority Area, and – coming down to what brings us together this evening – so much of what we worked for in the ecumenical movement: Local Ecumenical Projects, County Ecumenical Bodies, Councils of Churches. In Swindon over half of our congregations were in some form of authorised ecumenical partnership. Around the country so much of this has now gone, and you may say, well that’s a matter of growth, moving on and not hanging on to things which no longer work, finding new ways of being and working together. But my question – and maybe this is the kernel of this sermon – is how far these new ways of seeing each other, in the Church or more widely, are the result of enjoying God-given freedom, or how far they are reflections of the self-select culture which I suggested is over-taking our society.

Why is that important? Well I could talk about what the Bible teaches us about Church, that we are family not friends (and you can choose your friends but you’re given your family), that we are God’s gift to each other, that our denominational and ecumenical histories are a cupboard out of which many good things can be brought, that we do not choose our identity but God gives it to us through our common baptism, that in the words of the old Prayer Book we are “very members incorporate of the mystical Body of Christ”.

All of these things are important, and in this Week of Prayer we should be praying that we do not lose them, or the ecumenical institutions which enshrine them. We should be asking how far our life together as Christians is offering an alternative to what we see happening all around us - this loss of inherited belonging and corporate commitment. I won’t talk about the obvious example – Brexit – because some of you have probably only come out to Church tonight to get away from that! But I will mention Trump, the distortion of truth, (internationally) the American withdrawal from multi-lateral Agreements and international organisations, and the underlying assumption that the stronger you are the more right you have to push people around.

It is to challenge this belief in the rights of the powerful to exercise their own choice, whatever the consequence for others, that we must stand together in the name of Jesus Christ. Belief in the individual may have borne fruit in the emergence of Human Rights, but it becomes totally distorted when it blocks the way of others, the less powerful people in the world, the people who need their rights even more. The ecumenical movement has always stood for Justice, and only Justice, not only on its agendas, but in the way that it seeks to engender belonging together, listening to the voices of the unheard, confronting injustice, and always seeing the goal of Unity, in the Church and in the World, as God’s work and promise.

Let me finish – and you’ve already been very patient so I won’t go on too long – with two contemporary issues around Justice and Only Justice, two almost forgotten situations but which need to be brought out in this new year. The first is international, and concerns the plight of the Palestinian people. I was last in this Church in November, for the Invest in Peace evening. That was a remarkable experience, and in my experience a rare example of Christians, Muslims and Jews actually speaking openly about Israel and Palestine.

Over a hundred years ago we British signed the Balfour Declaration, which made way for the creation of Israel. And after centuries of persecution, culminating in the Holocaust (which we will rightly commemorate next Sunday), the Jewish people have achieved a fair measure of justice through the creation of the State of Israel. The Declaration also gave assurances to the people already living in that area, but we, the Brits, deserted them.

So today, despite the Fourth Geneva Convention, the resolutions of the United Nations, and the legal opinions of the International Court of Justice, there is no justice for the Palestinians. The administration of the law in the military occupied territories is selective and discriminatory, and the growth of illegal settlements continues without challenge.

That’s my first example, an international one, of the need for Justice and only Justice today. There are many in Israel and in Palestine, there are many Jews, Christians and Muslims, who long for equal rights for all, for a Palestinian State alongside the Israeli one, and we need to stand with them.

My second, more domestic issue, concerns Prisons. I talked at the beginning about Justice in its legal sense. We need courts, we need prisons, we need places where those who threaten the common good of society will face the consequences, but we also need to keep remembering those who get sent to prison. Did you know that the UK sends more people to prison than anywhere in Europe apart from Poland? Last night there were over 86 thousand men and women being detained, a thousand more than at this time last year.

But there are fewer staff looking after them. Lock-up time is getting longer, drug-fuelled violence is growing, and education and rehabilitation are in decline. It’s hardly surprising that assaults on staff are increasing, as is self-harming and the number of prisoner deaths. Last year the[Chief Inspector of Prisons](http://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime) said that not one young offender institution in this country is safe. What impresses me on my visits to prisons is the remarkable commitment of prison officers and prison chaplains. But a quarter of new staff don’t last beyond two years.

It was Fyodor Dostoevsky who said "The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” If we are committed to Justice we need prisons. But a Christian commitment to Justice must also recognize that prisoners also have rights, and a responsible prison system should be dealing with deep-set problems, working for rehabilitation, being committed to a restorative justice which helps prisoners turn their life around. Without that both the prisoner and society as a whole suffers.

My friends, forgive me for wandering around too many issues this evening. But what I have tried to say is this. Justice in a legal sense is essential for society to survive, and a commitment to individual human rights has properly arisen from what we Christians believe about God’s (equal) love for each one of us. But that is not enough. We are also called to live together in this world for the sake of the common good. I asked whether our increasing individualism, our obsession with self-selection and self-promotion, is becoming destructive, and there I did a little detour to lament the loss of what the ecumenical movement had taught us about the need to live together in the same house – that’s what “oikoumene” actually means. In particular, there is the call for Justice and only Justice in the Middle East, and for prisoners perhaps Justice but more than Justice. The ecumenical movement has always drawn and animated that wider vision of how we live together in the Church and in the World. Whatever shape it takes in the future, may it continue to do just that. Amen.