



Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber

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Justice and Jesus in the New Testament

Reading Isaiah 1:13-17

Introduction

This morning we continue our series - **God's Justice in a Hurting World**; with justice issues before us in the news – the recent referendum on an indigenous voice to parliament, the war in the Middle East, and even in this past week: what to do with those refugees on indefinite detention following the High Court decision. And so I'm sure I don't need to remind you, that it's a big topic we're looking at over these seven weeks. And with all the different emphases, various angles, loads of nuance and difficult application, we are certainly not going to do justice to justice.

Even with the parallel Bible Studies, coming out week by week (available on the Website and hardcopies are available in the foyer); even with sermons, studies, and group discussions, we won't get to the end of justice and be able to move on to something else as though we have 'done justice' and can tick it off our list. In fact, I trust that this series develops an ongoing desire within us to increasingly 'do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before God' (Micah 6:8).

Last Sunday we looked at Justice before Jesus in the OT and the teaching and emphasis of God's command to his people with regard to justice is really summed up in today's Old Testament reading. As we heard, though Isaiah the prophet, God says that his people's religious ritual is worthless, and calls on them (Isaiah 1:17) to 'Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.' (As an aside, the verse referred to in the Bulletin, in this week's *Insight*, immediately follows that call.)

Clearly justice, in the sense of care for, and a fair go, for those on the fringe; the marginalised, the poor, the oppressed, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, the immigrant; clearly that sort of justice comes up repeatedly in the Old Testament as what God's people are to do. And as we flagged last week, that concern flows on in to the New Testament and with echoes of Isaiah 1, we read in James (1:27) 'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.'

And it's to the New Testament we turn our focus today as we consider **Justice and Jesus in the New Testament**. So let's hear Jesus' words from Matthew 25.

Reading Matthew 25:31-46

Prayer

1. The Example of Jesus

As we think about **Justice and Jesus in the New Testament**, as we open to the NT, as we begin to read it, as we read the gospels, the accounts of Jesus with even half an eye out for justice, it's impossible to miss **the Example of Jesus**.

He truly did justice, he cared for the least, for the oppressed, he gave a fair-go to poor and downtrodden. I'm sure you can think of examples...

- He touched the lepers who were outcasts and he healed them.
- He ate with the ostracised – the tax collectors / sinners. (Note that the tax collectors were the opposite of the 'marginalised poor.' They were the 'marginalised rich' – marginalised because they worked for the Romans and because they frequently took more than was fair.)
- The way Jesus treated sinners with dignity. He did not condone their conduct and yet he was full of grace toward them.
 - Think of his dealings with the woman at the well.
 - His words to the woman caught in adultery.
 - The way he treats, with human dignity, a prostitute whose behaviour was totally inappropriate.
- His care for the frequently pushed away Samaritans and Gentiles (whilst clearly commanded in the Old Testament) was unusual in his time.
- In times when there was not social security in the way we have it today, when widows were particularly vulnerable, and more so if they had no other family, no sons to care for them, Jesus raises a widow's son back to life. Of course, such a miracle shows Jesus' power over death, but it was a practical and just solution for a woman, who could have been driven further to edge.
- In so many ways he ignored the barriers and sought fairness and justice for the all on the edge.

And Jesus challenged one Pharisee, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' (Luke 14:12-14)

It's extreme language. Of course you can invite your friends and family, but the Semitic idiom challenges us to invite those on the edge, it challenges us to spend more money on 'the poor', more time with those who on the margins.

2. The Extent of Justice

The example of Jesus shows us something of the Extent of Justice and so does our reading from Matthew 25 of 'the sheep and the goats.' One group, the sheep, have cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. And the other group, the goats, haven't.

It's a fairly comprehensive list, though not exhaustive. It is at least a representative list of those on the margins, those on the fringe, those whom justice easily evades.

And Jesus says we are to do these things for the 'least of these my brothers and sisters.' Who are these 'brethren' (in the older translations) that Jesus refers to? In the rest of Matthew's gospel, that term normally applies to those who are in the inner group. The equivalent for us would be to say that it refers to Christians, to those 'least of these' who are in the church family.

And that care for those within the church is clear very early in the life of the church. In Acts 4:32-35 we read, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them. For from time to

time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."

That's an amazing description of the new church, the new Spirit-filled community of God's New Covenant people: God's grace at work among them and there were no needy people among them! And that's profound when we think back to last week when we read in Deuteronomy 15 that 'There need be no poor people among you. (v4). That was rolled back a bit and in v7, the real possibility was noted, 'If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites...' and by v11 it was clear that, 'There will always be poor people in the land.'

But now in Acts 4, God's grace was so powerfully at work that there was no needy person among them.

In the Old Testament the recognition of the fact there would always be the poor went hand in hand with the command, 'to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.' There will always be the poor, always be the marginalised, But then Acts 4 - There was no needy person among them. That's a profound thing! It certainly wasn't always perfect in that and so the call remains to be generous and open handed in caring for those who are on the edge and when we get that right, there should be no needy amongst us.

What does that look like for us in our church family? We are generally an upper-middle church, so who are the needy? Perhaps it is the older among us who need a fair go, and at the risk of being simplistic that may be as simple as practical help in changing a lightbulb or assistance with setting up their new smart TV or mobile phone so they can remain connected. We need to look out for those in our church family who may fall through the cracks and be pushed to the margins.

And it's not just the church family. Paul writes (Galatians 6:9-10), 'Let us not become weary in doing good. ... As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.'

There's something special about the family, but here the church family becomes a subset of the 'all people' we are to care for.

And of course church family extends beyond KAC and in recent weeks we have spoken of the opportunity we have to good to both the church family and those who are not part of the church through things like...

- Our connection with Berkeley
 - Op shop
 - Giving tree
 - Hampers
- Madagascar - Water

3. The Eternal Consequences

Another thing that stands out in this passage apart from the need to be caring for all people and those on the edge, is that all of chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew are tied up with Jesus talking about the end of the age - about his return, the consummation of the kingdom, and the final judgement. And it's there in what we read of the sheep and the goats - there are **Eternal Consequences** for our doing of justice or our failure to do justice.

Matthew 25:34-35 'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,..."' A simple act of caring for those on the edge.

Matthew 25:41-42, 46 'Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, ..." ... 'Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'

And if that was all we read, we might come away thinking salvation is by works and not by grace; we might think we are saved by the things we do and not by what Jesus has done. There is a big challenge there, but in the context of the Bible, in the context of the New Testament, we know doing these things are not the means of gaining salvation, but a clear sign that saving faith is present when we increasingly live out justice, growing in righteousness and a lived out holiness, not as the way we gain salvation, but because we have salvation. Because, as we read in Matthew 25:34, we have been 'blessed by the Father' as he has called us into a relationship with himself through our faith in Jesus and what he has done in his death in our place.

Jesus died paying the price for our sin because, in terms of justice, we have left undone the things we ought to have done. A holy God could not ignore our sin, so he acted justly in rightly punishing sin, but in grace he himself bore the punishment himself, in his Son on the cross, that we might be forgiven as we respond in repentance and faith. As that verse in the Insight says, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.' (Isaiah 1:18)

Because of that we seek to live as he would have us live and we pray, 'Your Kingdom come' in the ultimate sense when Jesus returns and we pray that it grows here on earth in the meantime - 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' We want to see those things happen and we will work towards that as a result of having been saved by faith.

Conclusion

There is a big challenge in the words of Jesus we have read, a big challenge to care for the poor and the marginalised, to do justice, yet how easy is it to be like those in this re-write of Jesus' words...

- I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and you discussed my hunger.
 - I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar to pray for my release. [I was in prison but you complained about the crime rate.]
 - I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.
 - I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
 - I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.
 - I was lonely and you left me alone to go off and pray for me.
 - You seem so holy; so close to God, but I'm still very hungry and lonely and cold.
- (Quoted in John Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today)

There's a challenge when to hear the words of Jesus put that way. It was Martin Luther King who said, 'We need to recapture the gospel glow of the early Christians, who were non-conformists in the truest sense of the word and refused to shape their witness according to the mundane patterns of the world. Willingly they sacrificed fame, fortune, and life itself, on behalf

of a cause they knew to be right. Quantitatively small, they were qualitatively giants.'
(Martin Luther King, Strength to Love)

And the question for us is, how can we recapture that glow so that we are those who truly do justice. There are so many big issues of justice confronting us today - the recent referendum on an indigenous voice to parliament, the war in the Middle East, and what do with those refugees on indefinite detention following the High Court decision.

These are big and complex issues, but as Christians we must be those who individually and collectively are involved where we can be and support the work of those involved where we can't be and pray for justice in this world.

'The Word of the Lord and the cries of the people,' said Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'join in calling us to do more than count our blessings, more than shape our inwardness, more than reform our thoughts. They call us to struggle for a new society in the hope and expectation that the goal of our struggle will ultimately be granted us.'

Let's pray.

Prayer