

THE QUALITY OF MERCY IN SOCIAL JUSTICE

St-Martin-in-the-Fields

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I'm tempted to begin by saying that in a socially just world there's no need for mercy, for if all the relationships are just and harmonious and there has been no destabilizing of this equilibrium the giving and receiving of mercy is redundant. Mercy is the moral consequence of an **un**just world. Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Portia a plea for mercy from Shylock. It's thought that the inspiration for the speech comes from Deuteronomy 32 when Moses says 'May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew: like gentle rain on grass.' If this is true then the rest of the chapter explains exactly why when it comes to injustice we cannot ignore the need for mercy:

'A faithful God without deceit
Just and upright is he;
Yet his degenerate children have
Dealt falsely with him,
A perverse and crooked generation' (32^{4,5})

Shakespeare develops the theme of 'a crooked generation' needing mercy from a just God so Portia says:

'.. though justice be thy plea, consider this;
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy ...'

It is the reality of our injustice that begs for mercy – from God, from one another, from society.

One of the popular objections to belief in a good and loving God is the existence of sin and injustice in the world. It's often expressed in the question, 'If there is a God, why doesn't he do something about the state of the world - the rampant selfishness, the ruthless oppression, the unjust structures?' The question rightly calls for the God of justice to act against injustice.

The gentle answer to turn away this understandable wrath is, 'If you want God to rid the earth of all the causes of human misery who do you think would be left? Not I!'

We are all utterly dependent on the mercy of God for not one of us is without some contribution to the injustices of this world.

As Shakespeare later explains again through Portia:

‘We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.’

We who are such debtors to mercy are called to be the agents of mercy in a manifestly unfair world.

The injustice of the world became manifest to me in four episodes.

Firstly, Easter 1995. I was in my first year as bishop of Hull. On Easter Sunday afternoon I was asked to take a service on a tough estate where the church had been shut down after the priest had been sent to prison for child abuse. We stood in a circle in the church hall, some 25 adults and 25 children. The Community Worker, Marianne, asked if Stacey, an 8 year old child, who’d come with her grandmother, could say some prayers she’d written. ‘Of course’. I began by saying sorry for the church’s transgression and later shared the sacrament with everybody including the children, but then forgot to call Stacey forward to lead our prayers.

Rebuked and reminded by Marianne I asked Stacey to pray just before the Blessing. It was as if the Risen Lord was saying to us all 'To children such as this child belongs the Kingdom of God'.

Six weeks later Stacey was murdered by a firebomb through the letterbox. I will spare you the details. Of all the children in Hull Stacey was the one child I knew apart from my own children. I was asked to take her funeral. I shall not forget the scene that met me when I went to her grandmother's home to plan the funeral.

What I can tell you is that at the age of 46 I found that much of what I had learned about ministry and mission turned to dust in my hands. What confronted me was the inequality between Stacey and my own three daughters, Harriet, Jemima and Tabitha. At her funeral her Head Teacher called Stacey 'an angel on loan from Heaven' and they played Michael Jackson's 'Heal the World. Make it a better place'.

From that moment on I threw myself into the renewal of the City.

Later I commissioned a sculpture based on the words of Jesus as he wept over the City of Jerusalem, "If only you knew the things that make for peace". The making of peace involves naming injustice and in the name of both justice and mercy changing the structures of society. In both Hull and then Liverpool as I became involved in urban regeneration by concentrating on education, the environment and the economy, I noticed the different language used. Those who lived in communities used organic language - seeds, planting, branching out, renewal. But those who controlled the money used mechanical language - levers, triggers, buttons and outputs. It struck me that you could not prescribe mechanical solutions to organic problems. You had to understand how and why a community dies before you can see how it might live again. Too often those who used mechanical language lacked the merciful imagination to put themselves in the shoes of the disadvantaged.

Whenever you encounter social injustice a Christian not only would support but would also initiate social interventions to correct the imbalance of opportunity and power.

In Hull and Liverpool the churches were active in programmes of social mercy in both the state and independent sectors. Through the State we took initiatives in education and the care of the elderly; in the voluntary sector we engaged in Credit Unions, Food Banks and purposeful activities with alienated young people. Whereas social justice requires reform of the structures, social mercy is often more immediately responsive as expressed by the initiatives in the independent, voluntary and charitable sectors.

When I arrived in Liverpool I learned from the people of colour how excluded they felt not just from society but also from the church. This point had in fact resonated with me when a curate in Bristol. A pastor of a black-led church said how when he came to this country from the Caribbean his mother had told him to do 3 things. First, find a post office so you can write home and tell me you arrived safely. Second, find a church to thank God. Third, find a friend. He paused and added wistfully, 'I eventually found the Post Office'. Both society and the church were hostile places.

Liverpool like Bristol was a slave-trading city. The people of colour were not recent migrants but had a history going back several centuries. When we marked the bicentennial of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 2004 their stories came to the fore.

Researching my sermon for the commemoration made me physically sick as I read of the brutality of how the slaves were treated in the ships and on the plantations. If only we could console ourselves by saying that this brutality was a thing of the past.

This brings me to the second episode of injustice. The following year in 2005 Anthony Walker, an immensely talented black teenager, was murdered in Liverpool with an axe to his head in a brutal racist attack. As with Stacey I was asked to take his funeral in our Cathedral. It was the largest mixed-race gathering I'd ever seen in the city. Just six months ago I interviewed his mother Gee on BBC Radio 4's Good Friday Meditation. Her testimony was compelling. I asked her what Anthony's murder did to her faith.

She surprised me. “It strengthened it”. In her distress she had only God left to turn to. Then pointing to Christ on the Cross she spoke of forgiving Anthony’s murderers. Here is mercy. And through such mercy the victim becomes victor over hatred and death.

I’ve learned so much through the community of colour. It has shaped my understanding of injustice and of the Gospels. In fact, I now believe that the cleansing of the Temple was not a statement against commercialism but a challenge by Jesus to racism.

Let me explain. The market stalls had been set up in the Court of the Gentiles. This gave those not of the Jewish race a sacred space to show their faith in the God of Abraham and Moses. A sign, a sacrament in stone, of a God without frontiers. However, by filling the Court of Gentiles, the Court of the Nations, with commercial stalls, the Temple authorities were denying the non-Jewish peoples their sacred space to draw near to God.

Jesus not only overturned the stalls but then prohibited anybody else from carrying things through that part of the Temple. Why? Jesus gave the answer by quoting the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”. (Mark 11 ¹⁷).

Jesus was railing against the injustice of depriving other races of their right to worship God in His Temple. In cleansing the Temple Jesus was expressing the justice of God in favour of those who had been denied their rights. It is a challenge for those of us who belong to the Church of England that claims to be a church for England as to whether or not our membership and our mission measures up to this yardstick of being a 'House of Prayer for all ethnicities'. The glory of the Anglican Communion is that it is more of a rainbow than the Church of England.

If it is in the denial of rights and justice that the opportunity for mercy is to be found then we come to the third episode and my deepest experience of justice denied which was the Hillsborough tragedy when 96 Liverpool football fans were 'unlawfully killed'.

Shortly after becoming Bishop of Liverpool I presided at Anfield at the 10th Anniversary of the disaster and could see that the tragedy was an open wound in the city. Through getting to know the families and survivors I could also see that there was no prospect of healing until the families and survivors could learn the full truth of what happened and hold those responsible accountable.

I am constrained by what I can say because the trials are ongoing. However, immediately they are over ITV will be broadcasting a drama in 4 one hour episodes which I urge you to watch. Nevertheless, this I can say. In 2010 the Government asked me to chair the Hillsborough Independent Panel which in turn led to fresh inquests and a new determination of 'unlawful killing'. Every day for 3 months before the Panel produced its report I read Luke 18 1 – 8.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent'. For a while he refused: but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones why cry to Him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

It's as if our Lord had told it for the Hillsborough Families and for all those who in different ways have been and are denied justice. I used to think it was a parable about prayer. I now believe it's also a parable about justice denied and the merciful attitude of God to those who feel tempted to give up hope of ever living in a just world.

For 27 years there was a memorial service at Anfield on April 15th. At the last one in 2016 I was asked to give the address. I spoke about my daily reading of the allegory of the widow pleading with the judge for justice. When I got to that part in the story of saying "But she would not give up" the crowd of over 20,000 people began applauding and standing. On the way home on the train I mused in my thoughts to God that 2000 years after he first told that story 20,000 stood to cheer. It made me think that this thirst for justice is universal, and it's there at the heart of the Gospel. The calling of Christ's followers is to help people trace back from their moral instinct for justice to the source of all goodness who has revealed God's character in the just and merciful figure of Jesus.

That's why I love Jesus. For millennia the human family has cried out through poets and philosophers, through sages and songwriters, through artists and teachers seeking the truth of our existence. The Source of all truth heard our prayer and gave us a true human being. The great irony of the Gospel of St John is when Pontius Pilate is asking Jesus 'What is Truth' and the answer is standing in front of him staring into his searching eyes. In his insistence on fairness and forgiveness in human relationships Jesus reveals Justice and Mercy as the pillars of the Kingdom and the character of God.

This brings me to my fourth episode. In the Millennium year 2000 I met with thousands of young people in and around Liverpool to listen to their dreams and dreads about the future and to share with them why I thought that the faith of Jesus was still relevant 2000 years on. After showing a video clip of what might happen to the planet I asked them on a scale of 0 to 10 how worried were they about the future of the earth. 'Put up your hands' I said 'if you've placed yourself between 5 and 10.' 100% of all the hands went up. 'To what extent should we do something about it?' I went on. Those placing themselves between 5 and ten? 98%.

Those young people challenged me to think again about my own values and to ask what Jesus said about the earth. Two things emerged. First, the one title that Jesus uses and takes to himself is 'Son of Man'. Meaning? 'The child from the earth'. Second, the central petition of the Lord's Prayer for 'The earthing of Heaven". There's a unique collection of sayings in the New Testament when Jesus calls himself "The Child from the earth" and in the same breath speaks about 'the earth'. Here's just one:

'Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale 3 days and 3 nights so the Child from the Earth will be laid in the heart of the earth". What happens when they do? The earth quakes. And when he's raised from the earth, the earth quakes again. The very earth that according to Genesis has fallen under a curse because of humanity's sin now according to Paul's letter to the Romans groans and cries out to be set free from the bondage of humanity's exploitation. It has fallen to our generation to respond to the environmental crisis that is overwhelming us. Crisis means judgement. And this is the judgement that we are reaping what we've been sowing. In the face of this injustice we both need mercy and need to be merciful. In fact, the future of our social existence on this earth depends utterly upon the quality of mercy.

At the outset I said that the injustice of the world became manifest to me in four episodes – the murder of Stacey in a socially unequal city, the murder of Anthony through racial hatred, the search for truth and accountability about the Hillsborough tragedy and the desecration of creation which has a disproportionate impact on the poor and those least able to counter the crisis.

We are all complicit in the crises of the world as the apostle John tells us, 'If we say we are without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'

So, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us or as Shakespeare said,

"We do pray for Mercy

And that same prayer doth teach us all to render

The deeds of mercy.'

Kyrie Eleison.

Amen.

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