

Social Justice in the Scriptures

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I would like to begin by acknowledging and paying my respects to the elders and traditional custodians of this land, the Cadigal People of the Eora Clan. I wish to pay tribute to their sense of story and their spirit of collective hope. In preparing for tonight I was reminded of a time recently when I travelled through Wiradjuri Country on the way to Ryleston. The land there was beautiful but the hills were crying. I could feel an incredible sense of sadness in the landscape, a feeling that something was not right. This is, of course, the place where countless Wiradjuri women, men and children fled and were mercilessly slaughtered. This is exactly where we encounter that primeval call to social justice in the scriptures:

Listen to the sound of your brother's blood crying out to me from the ground!
(Genesis 4:10)

This is the first biblical attempt to historicize the fact of injustice and the belief in God's intervention on the side of those who have suffered injustice.

If we take seriously the imperative to do justice in the scriptures and the claim of the church to be truly catholic (universal), then we cannot continue to simply leave the reality of marginalisation to the many organisations that focus on this work. The church needs to reassess the use of its massive physical and human resources.

This is not simply a social problem. It is also a theological problem.

The church's biggest problem is that it doesn't know that it has a problem.

We give the wrong answers because we don't know the right questions.

We fail to search for our God where God is to be found: in the marginalised people of society.

You will recall the story in the gospel in which Christ responds to his followers when they berate the woman for pouring expensive perfumes on him instead of giving the money to the poor. This story is often wheeled out to argue that to lavish love on our God, the church is justified in sparing no expense on rituals and the accoutrements of triumphalism.

I have always found it strange that this is presented as being the first and most obvious place in which to encounter Christ.

I would like to dedicate this presentation to the memory of Fr Ted Kennedy, pastor to the people of Redfern until 2002. Ted was a prophetic presence in the Australian community. He opened his home and the church to the Aboriginal people of Redfern and those experiencing homelessness and social pain, living the gospel of inclusion and welcome.

Sadly this is no longer the case in that parish. Scrawled on the wall outside the church are the words of judgement:

*"Crucified on every city sidewalk
the aboriginal Christ
should be free*

*to live in his own church
among his own people
in Redfern.”*

I'd like to share the following reflections from Ted. He said:

“Within the Catholic community in Australia there has been a deep, dark hole for a long time now, which amounts to a lack of genuine spirituality. By 'spiritual' I do not mean something ethereal, incapable of being translated into the common coinage of human experience. I mean the opposite: something that can live at the very centre of the human dilemma.

Religion can become the possession of an elitist group, whose power reinforces the power of all the other institutional forces in society. Its language then becomes spiritually hollow, incapable of criticising or challenging any of those forces. In so becoming, religion moves inevitably away from where people –especially the poor – live, move and have their being.

I want to confess that the Australian Catholic Church has built up a momentum that it heading away from the poor, and to the extent that it has done so, it has become unfaithful to the Gospel.”

My own organisation was not spared from his criticism at times, a criticism focussed on racism against Indigenous people and a failure to connect with people at that sacramental level. The marginalised are the sacramental presence of Christ. We are called not only to minister to them and to stand in solidarity with them in the struggle against structural and historical injustice; we are also called to receive from them, to treasure their sacred stories' to learn from them, to listen, to look.

Let's listen to the words of Ted again:

“In many Australian towns, the Catholic Church is securely planted near the local police station, courthouse, town hall or council chambers. Drawing from one ecclesiology – still the increasingly accepted one here – it would be said that the centre of the local church is there.

But go to the outskirts of the town: past the dilapidated houses on the town fringe, past the rubbish tip, and there you'll find the Aboriginal community. Drawing from the opposite ecclesiology, I would want to say that the centre of the local church is there.

Such divergent theologies of the meaning of church stem from two equally divergent interpretations of the figure of Christ, and of the nature of sin. The first places little or no consequence on the social context in which Christ lived. The kind of God he is made out to be leaves him as one with no real choices in life. The figures of power in a Jewish elitist nation, and a Roman colonised state, are all accidental. They are like quaint drawings on a cardboard stage set, which is no longer needed now, and so discarded. What is then important is not when, or how, Christ came to be killed; it is only the fact – in churchy billboard language – that Christ died, and for us all. Private morality is the only morality that counts. Human oppression cannot easily be brought into focus as a question of morality, let alone kept in permanent view.

So your civic activities are confined to the politics of morality, rather than the morality of politics as such. It was this – the morality of politics – that Christ was concerned about.

In the radically revised theology of the meaning of Christ, social sin comes up clearly as the first reading of sin. It was social sin, not private sin, that brought death to Christ. The sin of injustice is the primal sin, that which constitutes the very meaning of sin – the sin of the world.”

I will divide this presentation into three sections:

- 1 Sacredness and Liberation
- 2 Justice v. Cultus
- 3 The Politics of Hope

1 Sacredness and Liberation

I recently heard a story about a very openly drug-addicted mother bringing her children to a Vinnies Homework Help Programme. She spent the first afternoon leaning against the wall, swaying constantly. In explaining why she had brought her children along she said very simply that she didn't want them to end up like her. She wanted them to have a better chance.

There are two motifs in this little story: *sacredness* and *liberation*. Together they form the heart of the social justice imperative that permeates the scriptures.

Sacredness screams out at us, for instance, in the passage from *Exodus* where God says to Moses: “*Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*” In the same passage *liberation* looms large in that incredible prototype of all of God's promises: “*I have witnessed the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors. I know what they are suffering and have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians...*”

The drug-addicted mother, like most of those who have been left out or pushed out in Australia today, is amongst the most despised in our society. She is regularly and roundly blamed and condemned for her choices and for her ongoing dependence on others. She is characterized by many as being nothing short of barbaric because of her unseemly behaviour in a seemingly civilized country. Little, or no analysis, is ever performed on the social and economic structures that have slammed shut the doors of opportunity and inclusion in her face.

The place where this mother is standing, even if she is swaying against a wall; the place where she is standing, is sacred ground. Her story is sacred. Her love for her children; the fact that she wants for them an education she did not have, is sacred. Her life is sacred.

This sacredness is a sign of something absolutely revolutionary: that God is on her side.

The God of the Bible takes sides. Not with those of one religion as against another, even though the Bible has often been domesticated to make it appear thus.

No. The God of the Bible is on the side of the poor, on the side of the oppressed.

In taking their side, the liberation that is envisaged is of the kind that surgically strikes at the heart of that which causes or exacerbates their suffering, their oppression, their exclusion. We are all charged with this inescapably hard but joyful mission. The seeds of liberation are right here. We stand on sacred ground; ground on which suffering has been known and hope inflamed. When we commit to stand in solidarity with the despised we join them in becoming “new forces and new passions” springing up in the bosom of society.

In taking the side of the oppressed, however, we are also called to take a stance against the structures that makes them poor, keeps them poor and blames them for their poverty. We are called by the God of the Bible to take part in a liberating critique of the causes of their oppression.

It was the 17th Century in which an anonymous English wit penned the following piece of doggerel:

*“The Law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the Common,
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the Common from under the goose.”*

Indeed, then as now, the common wealth and common good are systematically purloined. Then, as now, however, it is far easier to construct a method of individual punishment in place of a vision of social justice.

During the 90s in Australia witnessed a 50% increase in the number of people imprisoned. Can we ignore the fact that during roughly the same period we have seen a 30% reduction in real terms in the level of Commonwealth funding for Indigenous, Community and Public housing?

It is a dangerous thing to denounce the causes of oppression. It is also dangerously counter-cultural to announce the Good News that another kind of world is possible in our midst.

But, as the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero put it so beautifully:

*“Even when they call us mad,
when they call us subversives and communists
and all the other epithets they put on us,
we know we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes,
which have turned everything upside down.”*

The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth urged us to pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. One, he argued, reveals who is on the heart of God: the poor, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the marginal; the other where to seek them.

We are called by our common humanity to struggle for a just society, for a “turning upside down” to use the revolutionary principle of the Beatitudes. The sacredness of those on the margins, their liberation from the structures that exclude them; this was what we are called to live for. This is where we encounter our God: incarnate in the flesh, the blood, the stories of the poor. There is nothing more beautiful or more human than this struggle.

As Teilhard de Chardin put it:

“We have the right and the duty to be passionate about the things of the earth.”

Especially when the earth cries out because of the blood that has been shed upon it.

2 Justice v. Cultus

In taking a stand on the side of the oppressed, the God of the Bible expresses an equally shocking rejection of *cultus*; a rejection of cultic worship inasmuch as it displaces real worship of the God who is present in the cry of the poor:

“When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

(Isaiah 1: 15-16)

*“I hate and despise your feasts,
I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals.
When you offer me holocausts,
I reject your oblations,
And refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle.
Let me have no more of the din of your chanting,
No more of your strumming on harps.
But let right flow like a river
And justice like an unfailing stream.”*

(Amos 5: 21-24)

The God of the Bible, the God who is known in the liberating act of the Exodus, is speaking loudly and clearly: I do not want cultus, but rather inter-human justice.

God self-identifies as the One who liberates:

*"I am Yahweh your God
Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"
(Exodus 20:2)*

The prohibition of images is intrinsically linked to this uncompromising stance. An image or idol can be approached directly and worshipped. It does not answer back. The moral imperative to do justice and right, however, is a word made flesh in our sisters and brothers. The fundamental rejection or domestication of this biblical message results in a world where those who pursued and massacred the Wiradjuri women, men and children were at the same time able to offer worship to "God" in a Christian context.

The God of the Bible, on the contrary, is expressly identified by a historical intervention that is two-fold: on the side of the oppressed and against the oppressor:

*"Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless."
(Isaiah 10: 1-3)*

*"Woe to those who hoard up house on house,
And link field to field
Till they occupy the whole place,
And there they are alone in the middle of the land!"
(Isaiah 5:8)*

*"Because he oppressed the poor, and left them in the lurch,
Therefore he stole houses instead of building them."
(Job 20:19)*

Even the city of Sodom, not usually associated with social justice discourse, is cited by the prophet Ezekiel as an example of social injustice against the oppressed:

*"The crime of your sister Sodom was luxury, opulence, complacency; such were the sins of Sodom and her daughters. They never helped the poor and needy."
(Ezekiel 16:49)*

These condemnations of oppression are not merely the cry of the conscience-stricken armchair critic. Rather, they are uncompromising demands on those who wish to know God:

*"He defended the cause of the poor and the needy;
This is good.
Is not this what it means to know me? It is Yahweh who speaks."
(Jeremiah 22:16)*

The directive here is clear: to defend the cause of the poor and the needy is to know God. This, rather than cultic worship, is to know God.

3 The Politics of Hope

The Brazilian educational theorist, Paulo Freire, issued the challenge to us to prophetically denounce the bad news so as to prophetically announce the good news. This is a hope that not only promises justice but is rooted in the here-and-now.

Paul, reflecting on the faith of Abraham, described him thus:

“Against all hope he believed in hope.”
(Romans 4:18)

The social justice imperative of the Bible is steeped in hope. In today’s context this is the hope that another world is possible against the pronouncement that “There Is No Alternative” to the Neo-liberal trajectory.

This hope is a profound mystery in the face of the *status quo* and the assumption of the limits of the possible. As John Berger wrote, in *Pig Earth*,

“Mystery is not what can be hidden deliberately, but rather ... the fact that the gamut of the possible can always surprise us.”

My hope against hope is that those who are oppressed and marginalised are beginning to collectively ask these crucial questions:

What is it that has excluded me?
What is it that has isolated me?

As the Indigenous Brazilian proverb reminds us:

“When we dream alone it is only a dream
But when we dream together it is the beginning of reality.”

The reality announced in the Gospel is unequivocally bound up with the historical self-liberation of the oppressed by the oppressed, supported by those who stand in real solidarity with them. This is expressed concisely in the revolutionary declaration known as the Beatitudes:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

*Rejoice in that Day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.
But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”*
(Luke 6: 17-26)

This prophetic hope in a revolutionary re-ordering of values and social relations is contrary to the received logic which dictates that such change is not only impossible but undesirable. This hope against hope, however is re-affirmed time and time again throughout the scriptures:

“And the lowly shall become the lords of the earth.”
(Psalm 37: 11)

“The just shall inherit the earth.”
Psalm 37: 29

“He shall lift you up to take possession of the earth.”
(Psalm 37: 34)

*“He has pulled down the mighty from their thrones
and lifted up those who are downtrodden.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.”*
(Luke 1: 52-53)

So closely did Jesus align himself with this hope that he defined his “Mission Statement” wholly in terms of this liberating project:

“He opened the scroll and found the passage which says:

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me
Because he has anointed me;
He has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
To proclaim liberation for captives,
Recovery of sight for the blind,
To let the broken victims go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*
(Luke 4: 17 – 19, quoting Isaiah 61:12)

He accordingly sets down the same criteria for his teaching on the achievement of final justice:

*"I was hungry and you gave me to eat.
I was thirsty and you gave me to drink.
I was a stranger and you took me in;
Sick and you visited me;
Imprisoned and you came to see me."
(Matthew 25: 35 -36)*

This solidarity with the most despised and devalued is central to the scriptures. It is also central to the most progressive movements in human history, the greatest expressions of tenderness and compassion.

The ancient Roman poet, Terence, proclaimed:

"I am human; nothing that is human is alien to me."

This gives us comfort inasmuch as it galvanises us in our resolve to prophetically denounce that which excludes and announce that which can liberate. In a country where 2 out of 3 children who need support from a homelessness service are turned away, it should not be too hard to know the problems nor to identify the solutions.

St Augustine wrote:

"Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

When we commit ourselves to the side of those who are structurally excluded and oppressed, we have the amazing promise that things will *not* remain the way they are.

You are all no doubt familiar with the passage in the gospel of Matthew that depicts Jesus as the good shepherd:

"...when he saw the multitudes he was moved to compassion for them, because they were distressed and scattered like sheep without a shepherd."

The phrase in ancient Greek for "being moved to compassion" is actually closer to the image of "tugging at the gut".

This should resonate strongly for us. Are we not similarly moved, indeed are our stomachs not churned at times because we feel so strongly the injustice and indignity suffered by our sisters and brothers as a result of oppressive structures?

To paraphrase, do we not tremble with indignation at the hurt and injustice suffered by others?

I often like to quote the magnificent words of the poet, Bertolt Brecht in this regard:

“the compassion of the oppressed for the oppressed is indispensable. It is the world’s one hope.”

The people in the passage from Matthew are described as being distressed and scattered. We know from our first-hand experience of the Australian face of poverty that this sense of alienation, this crushing of the spirit, is central to marginalisation. People feel, especially in times of almost universal prosperity; that they are devalued, left on the scrap-heap, and, worst of all, atomized, on their own.

We believe that another kind of society is possible. We cannot help but listen to the whispers from the edges of society, the whispers of hope that give birth to both our anger and our courage.

As the 2008 Bishops’ Social Justice Statement reminds us, citing the words of St Basil the Great:

“The bread which you hold back belongs to the hungry; the coat, which you guard in your locked storage-chests, belongs to the naked; the footwear mouldering in your closet belongs to those without shoes. The silver that you keep hidden in a safe place belongs to the one in need. Thus, however many are those whom you could have provided for, so many are those whom you wrong.”

We do not need to look far to find the people who are left out or pushed out. We do not need to go far to discover the fruits of the structures of dispossession and exploitation. The forgotten ones, the excluded ones, are here. There are right here, where it hurts.

For us, they are nothing less than the sacramental presence of Christ. They are where we seek, and find, our God.

The God we seek in them; the God we find in them; this God is unequivocally a God who does not stand on the sidelines as a neutral observer. This God, the God of the scriptures, is a God who takes sides, a God who is unequivocally on the side of the poor.

Going back again to the image of the people as sheep without a shepherd I think we often miss the point of this observation. The scriptural metaphor of the relationship between shepherd and sheep is all about tenderness and compassion. It should also be kept in mind that shepherds were amongst the most marginalised members of society. Sadly, the centuries have mangled this metaphor. For too long the charitable model of welfare has been built on the obscene notion that people should actually be treated like sheep and that all they really need is a strong and wise shepherd to tell them what to do. Our mission is completely opposed to the paternalistic and punitive practices of government towards people receiving statutory incomes. Our mission is far more radical. In the spirit of the Beatitudes which, in the words of Oscar Romero, turn everything upside down, it is the people who call us. Christ speaks to us through the marginalised. Come, follow me, he says. Come with us, they say. Be our companions. This is the way that we are commissioned to

proclaim liberation, just as in that beautiful scene in the synagogue when Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah.

This is the way we are moved to “suffer with”, which is, of course, the meaning of the word, compassion.

It is completely unconscionable for anyone to suggest that people who are on the margins of society, are to blame for their own exclusion; that somehow their choices, or the so-called hand of God, sets them apart. Patronising and paternalistic attitudes are completely contrary to the spirit of the scriptures.

The truth of the matter is that their choices, in effect, are massively constrained. There’s not a lot of freedom in being able to choose between a rock and a hard place.

Freire also wrote:

“The oppressor cannot find in their power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves.

Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.”

I believe with all my heart that it is the oppressed of the world who have the most to teach us. When we assist our brothers and sisters; when we stand in solidarity with them, they entrust to us their collective pain, their dreams, their sacred stories, their collective yearnings that another kind of world is possible.

The church has, I am sad to say, been guilty of sometimes assuring them that the only other world that is possible is the one that comes after death, thereby discouraging any kind of struggle for social justice.

The church is also capable, however, of learning from those who are excluded. An excellent example was the Australian Catholic Bishops' 1996 Social Justice Statement, which affirmed this learning in insights such as the following:

In the main, people are poor not because they are lazy or lacking in ability or because they are unlucky. They are poor because of the way society, including its economic system, is organised.

It feels like yesterday when, after a great deal of lobbying from my own organisation and others, Australia held the 2004 Senate Inquiry into poverty and financial hardship. This process provided Australia with evidence that another kind of world is not only possible but absolutely essential. It provided a space in which people experiencing exclusion could tell their stories, eg:

‘Like millions of other low-income Australians, I am one of the hidden poor, just keeping afloat. We are flat out treading water out here. We are making very little headway towards

our aspirations, and we are one crisis or catastrophe away from the poor box. We are living on the edge.

*'We live in the shadows of the dismal statistics. We are not mad, bad, sad or totally dysfunctionally overwhelmed by our life circumstances. Many of us are highly skilled and well educated. We are all doing what we can to contribute to society with the resources we have. Our poverty is poverty of resources, services, opportunities... it is getting too hard to make ends meet, let alone work towards our dreams.'*ⁱ

Going back even further, the 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Povertyⁱⁱ noted that:

'If poverty is seen as a result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must seek to change those conditions which produce it.'

I remember some years ago learning a difficult but beautiful lesson about life. I was working as a researcher with an NGO here in Sydney. There I was invited to attend a meeting of recovering drug addicts who were parents. We met together in an old pub that had been taken over by an order of nuns and turned into a community centre. They were working on a book together. This was a way of telling their stories. I am a firm believer in the healing power of stories, the transformative power of stories. Well, their stories certainly transformed me. They described the ways in which they had taken drugs in front of their young children, the pain they felt they had inflicted on their children and themselves, their stories of making enough money to survive, feeding their children and supporting their habits. Some of the women described the difficulties of balancing work and family while working in the sex industry. The words that have remained with me in the strongest way, however, are the words of a young Aboriginal woman, describing her experiences of incarceration. She told me, quietly but firmly:

"The cells are a sad place, brother. You don't get to sleep in the cells."

The lesson I learned was contained in the one word in the middle of this woman's deeply poetic utterance. It was the word, "brother".

She bestowed this title on me through no merit of my own. I did nothing to prove any real kinship with her. Nor could I possibly claim to know what her experiences were like. When she did this she did something very powerful. She took me into the cells with her. She showed me how sad they were.

She could no longer be someone whose life is alien to mine.
She belonged to the same world as me.

I belonged to her world, the world of the jail cells, the world where her sadness was the sadness of the world.

The world that cries out to be changed; the world that demands that we struggle to bring about that change because justice matters to us, because liberation is our daily bread.

And because, in the end, this all that matters.

As Samuel Ruiz Garcia, former bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas in Mexico, was fond of repeating:

“The only question we will have to answer at the end of time is how we treated the poor.”

I will end with the words I love to quote because I, for one, need to hear them over and over again. They are the words of Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland in the 1970s:

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

ⁱ M. Clarke in Community Affairs References Committee, *A hand up not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty, Report on poverty and financial hardship*, 2004, p.9.

ⁱⁱ Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, *First Main Report: Poverty in Australia*, AGPS, Canberra, 1975, p.viii.