

Sermon - loving justice

Based on the readings: Amos 5.6–7, 10–15; Hebrews 4.12–16; Mark 10.17–31

Justice in the gate

- Before we engage with today's Gospel reading, I'm going to talk briefly about three references in the reading from the prophecy of Amos.
- The first occurs in verse 10:

*They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. (Amos 5.10)*
- The second in verse 12:

*For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate. (Amos 5.12)*
- And the third in verse 15:

*Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5.15)*
- You might wonder about these references to a gate, or 'in the gate'.
- There are many such references in the Old Testament, and we tend to pass these by - usually without much thought.
- In Old Testament times in the middle east, the villages and small towns would tend to have some kind of protection around them - whether it was a fence, or a wall, or just the outer perimeter of house walls.
- For many of them there might only be one entry point, which would have gates that could be closed, to protect from wild animals or thieves might try to gain entry under cover of darkness.
- Over time these gateways effectively became what we might think of as the village square - but instead of being in the middle, it was at the point of intersection between the live of the village and the outside world.
- The elderly might sit there and gossip, or discuss the affairs of the community, and it would have been a convenient point to keep an eye on what was going on in the village, and on all the comings and goings.
- So the gateway, or the gate of the town, became recognised as the place one went to in order for the elders to hear of any injustice, and to confer and pass judgement.
- It became the court of the people who would ensure that justice might prevail.
- But, of course, if enough of the elders were corrupt, or could be bribed, then the court of the people would instead uphold injustice, and push aside the needy.
- And it was at such a time that the prophet Amos spoke God's word into that situation, warning those who sat in judgement in the gate, and who made themselves rich by '*trampling on the poor and taking from them levies of grain.*' (Amos 5.11)
- And Amos encourages them instead to:

*Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you (Amos 5.14)*

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The injustice of covetousness

- This comparison of either being part of systemic injustice, or instead prioritising sacrificial love, is explored in the Gospel encounter between a man and Jesus.
- The man - who we later are told '*had many possessions*' - comes to Jesus, because he recognises that, in spite of all his material wealth, he is still somehow missing out.
- Now when he asks: "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" (Mark 10.17), he is not asking about life after he has physically died, or about life that goes on for eternity.
- Rather, what is translated into '*eternal life*' might be better understood as '*life in all its fullness*', or, as we encountered last Sunday's in the 1 Timothy reading, '*the life that really is life*'. (1 Timothy 6.19)
- Usually the phrase '*eternal life*' in the New Testament means life in the kingdom of God, or life as heaven on earth.
- Now this man acknowledges Jesus as being a teacher of wisdom and with authority: he kneels before Jesus and acclaims him as '*Good Teacher*'.
- Jesus responds by listing all of the ten commandments that have to do with our relationships with each other, except leaving out the one about coveting.
- The rich man's response enables Jesus to put his finger very clearly on that aspect of this man's life that is fundamentally out of alignment with God's righteousness: he coveted his wealth, even though it was far in excess of his own needs.
- Such covetousness - the need to possess what others have, or what others who are in need may benefit from - is exactly the kind of wealth injustice that the prophet Amos was speaking to.
- The rich man, even though he recognised the poverty of his life, could not follow the way of Jesus, and turned away, grieving.
- His possessions ended up possessing him, and he couldn't bring himself to choose '*the life that really is life*' over wealth.

Accountable to Love

- What the man experiences at the hands of Jesus is well-described in today's passage from the letter to the Hebrews:
the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. (Hebrews 4.12-13)
- Nevertheless, Mark points out a small but very important detail as Jesus effectively holds the man to account for his covetousness:
Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' (Mark 10.21)
- Even as Jesus searches the man's heart and holds him to account, he continues to love him.
- He loves him by honouring his search for a meaningful life; he loves him by being honest and truthful with him; and he loves him by respecting his choice to not follow the way of Jesus.
- When people are held to account for their behaviour or attitudes or choices, it does not necessarily mean that this is being done disrespectfully, or unkindly, or unlovingly.
- Jesus demonstrates this very clearly by holding him to account - with love.
- As it says further in the reading from Hebrews:
For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4.15)

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Prioritising the way of love

- Now this story about Jesus is as good as a parable.
- And Jesus adds to this with the kind of hyperbole that he often makes - an over the top idiomatic expression:
It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. (Mark 10.25)
- The meaning is simply that it is often impossible for the rich to let go of their wealth.
- His disciples are astounded, because wealth was understood to be a sign of God's blessing.
- But Jesus turns their common understanding of how God blesses people upside down, when he says that riches are not a sign of God's blessing, but are rather an obstacle to receiving God's blessing.
- And after Peter points out that the disciples "*have left everything and followed you*", Jesus points out the riches they will receive as a consequence -
- not in terms of material wealth, but in terms of a community that values and supports them.
- And this includes having access to houses and fields, that is, a place to live and an opportunity for work.
- When Jesus talks about leaving house, family, and employment, he's not necessarily meaning that literally.
- It can be applied literally at times, however Jesus is talking about how we prioritise following his way of sacrificial love.
- Take the example of the rich man: if he had decided to prioritise the way of Jesus, he would then have sold most of his possessions, and shared his wealth with the poor.
- If he had done that, he might very well have found that his family had thought he had gone mad, and they might very well have left him.
- This is what Jesus means: it's about what we give priority to.

Life in the Kingdom

- Jesus' description is also about the life of the kingdom of God, as can often be found in the community of the church.
- And I can give a personal example of this, from when I was living in England.
- I had moved there from South Africa, to take up another position in my IT career, and my family and I settled in a village and joined the local church community.
- After six months we found ourselves in a challenging position where we were suddenly homeless for a couple of months.
- We weren't destitute, but we would have had to leave the village and find a cheap temporary place out of the way, and it would have made our children's schooling situation very difficult.
- But some members of the church community, who hardly knew us, opened their homes to us and enabled us to continue to be part of that community until our housing situation was resolved.
- These two families were enacting that sacrificial love, and providing for us as immigrants who were thousands of miles from our families in South Africa.
- As Jesus said: *we received "a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children" (Mark 10.30)*, and these families became good friends to us.
- You might note a subtle detail, that helps to convey the sense that what the followers of Jesus are rewarded with is a description of the kingdom community, that is, the church.
- When Jesus says: "*Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news*" (Mark 10.29), he has included father in the list.

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- But when he continues: “*who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields*” (Mark 10.30) he leaves out *father*, because no one is a substitute for our heavenly Father.
- At the same time he also acknowledges that his way of sacrificial love is costly, because he adds “*with persecutions.*”
- When we prioritise Jesus’ way of sacrificial love, then it means we are not supporting injustice or the systems that perpetrate or perpetuate injustice - and because that disturbs the status quo, others will actively oppose us for doing so.
- Nevertheless, Jesus assures us that his way of sacrificial love is worth it, because we will then have life in all its fullness - that is, eternal life, or life that really is life.

So may you

Seek good and not evil,

that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you. (Amos 5.14)