

## The Bible and Justice

Down through history people have come to believe the gospel, they have put their faith in Christ for two big reasons. One is that the gospel, and more widely the whole Bible, makes sense. In the book of Acts all of the Apostle Paul's sermons can be summarised in these three words "Jesus makes sense". To Jews Jesus makes sense of their history and hopes. To pagan philosophers in Athens Jesus makes sense of their philosophical deliberations. To farmers in the mountains Jesus makes sense of their experience of nature.

Down through history teachers who have explained the Bible and shown how Jesus makes sense of their lives have been absolutely vital – the good news about Jesus makes sense of our lives and of this world, like no other teaching in all of history.

But there has been a second reason why people have come to believe that gospel. People also believe the teaching of the Bible because they see "it works". In the Old Testament the purpose of the nation of Israel was that they should be a model community to display God's glory to the nations. The Old Testament hope was that people would look at Israel and say "what a wise God they must have". In the New Testament the church takes on that role.

Jesus said:

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35)

The Apostle Peter said:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:12)

Down through history Christianity has won its victories partly because people cannot deny that it works. In the first four centuries of the church's life, for instance, Christianity rose from being a persecuted minor sect to being the dominant force in the Roman Empire. The witness of one of the later Emperors of Rome tells us why. In the fourth century an Emperor called Julian decided that he wanted to take the Roman Empire back to its pagan roots, and its old gods. His problem was the "moral character" of the Christians. The pagans didn't even look after their own kind. The Christians not only looked after their own, but also cared everyone else.

He complained:

"[They] support not only their poor but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us."

That is the consistent story throughout history. In the nineteenth century, for instance, vibrant evangelical Christianity grew partly because it won such respect. William Wilberforce had led the campaign against slavery because of his evangelical convictions. The Christian peer, Lord Shaftesbury, led the movement for factory reform. And countless ordinary Christians led exemplary lives, of faithfulness, goodness and charity.

A movement of that character is unstoppable. If people are persuaded that the gospel makes sense and it works, they will put their trust in Christ.

My aim in this series on the Bible and politics has been, in a very small way, to try to show you how our nation may once again be persuaded that the truths of the Bible not only make sense, but they work. In some ways I have felt like an ancient explorer sailing on a vast ocean touching great continents and only exploring little bits of the coastline, as we have tried to think about how Biblical truth may be applied to our national life. But I hope a few things at least have caught your imagination.

We started by making the case that all Christians should be concerned about politics. If we don't care about our fellow citizens we are as loveless as the Pharisees. If we don't vote we are dishonouring our government, and that is contrary to scripture.

I then sketched out how I believe that the Bible teaches that Christians are called to live in our fallen world. Not constantly fighting our own corner, but working for the common good in a mixed society. It tends to get called "principled pluralism".

We then looked at our Biblical responsibility to the environment. We looked at money – and I hope we saw, that despite Bill Clinton's aphorism "the economy stupid" – money is not a magical solution to everything – indeed our present obsession with high finance has caused many of the problems of our society. As Jesus said if we worship money we will become its slaves.

We looked at the family – and saw that healthy families, and beyond that healthy "mediating institutions" - like churches - are vital for making society work. Central government will never be able to deliver the care, support and discipline that people need – "it takes a village to raise a child".

And I hope as we have touched on these great continents of political thought you have been, in part at least, persuaded of my great theme for this series – the Bible shows us how to make life work. It was through reading their Bibles that millions upon millions of Christians have served God in this fallen world – because Jesus said "love your neighbour as yourself" and

even “love your enemies”. It was the Bible that shaped the consciences of many of our greatest political reformers.

For the last hundred years or so Christianity in this country has been more or less in retreat. There certainly many reasons for that but one of the reasons has been the conviction that modern secularism works better. Today that conviction is not so strong. In particular as the family collapses, and local communities disintegrate, as we realise the weaknesses of our modern secular system, people are going to be hunting around for some deeper wisdom for our nation and for their lives.

The big question for us is this: will they see that wisdom in us? Will they hear it from us? Will they think “I need to reconsider the Bible, the teaching of Jesus”? Or are we so enmeshed in the falsities of our modern world and its idolatries, that they won’t see anything different?

The reputation of Christ, depends in part at least, on whether people look at Christianity and say “it works”.

Today I was going to talk about what the Bible might say to our modern justice system.

### **A system in some trouble**

Prisoner numbers at an all time high – over 84,000

Rise of 66% in the last 15 years

Only solution proposed – more prisons

But prisons seem to be most efficient way to encourage reoffending!

Reoffending rate – risen from 53% in 1993, to 65% in 2004.

Overall crime rate steady

But violent crime steadily rising since 1960

## 1. The Justice System in the Old Testament

### **Crimes were against individuals not the state**

Bible - Criminal justice system: Mediating between the offender and the victim.

Crimes against the state: 11<sup>th</sup> century – crimes “against the king’s peace”

Restorative justice

Victims and perpetrators brought together

Victims report increased empowerment and satisfaction

Criminals – reduced recidivism – esp minor crimes.

### **Crimes against property were dealt with restitution and compensation**

### Mainly twofold payment

Restore the property to the person - restitution

Pay them for the indignity of the theft – compensation

Sometimes four or fivefold because a double crime

“If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. (Exodus 22:1)

The theft and the slaughter or sale – two crimes

Fivefold – poss because oxen are a part of their security and even livelihood.

- What if criminal law was much more about restitution and compensation as civil law is?
  - A criminal does not so much have a debt to society as a debt towards a person.

### **There was no prison system**

Bible: prison only used while awaiting judgement.

Partly because of the death penalty etc – maybe we have the resources to administer justice without the need to resort to this.

Also because criminals were rehabilitated within society.

- What about extensive use of community service?
  - It costs £38,000 per year to keep someone in prison
  - It cost about £2,000 per year to administer a community service order, or curfew order.
- What about tagging?
  - Society tends to have a reflex – get these people to where they cannot harm me.

## 2. A call to be righteous

### **The meaning of righteousness – Hebrew: tzedakah**

We think of it as legal – obeying the laws of the land or of God.

But actually righteousness is relational – being in right relationship with other people and with God.

Justice – is restoring righteousness – ie. Restoring right relationships

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring **justice** to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth **justice**; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes **justice** on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.” (Isaiah 42:1–4)

NT applies this to Jesus.

How is he bringing about justice? He is restoring relationships

Having compassion on the poor

Calling people to be reconciled to God

### **Be righteous towards God**

We are naturally not in a right relationship with God – because of our sin.

Christ died to make you righteous towards God

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. (1 Peter 3:18)

- Not yet a Christian – this is the big issue for you.

### **Be righteous towards others**

Does not mean obey a legally defined set of rights and wrongs

Righteousness is about caring for others – as Jesus did.

Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*

“Compassion the meaning of tzedakah”

Tim Keller – Job 29

I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow’s heart sing. I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. (Job 29:12–17)

To be righteous we must be compassionate

“You owe generosity to others”

*Not your voluntary choice*

*It is your holy obligation*

Includes practical help for immediate contacts

“I rescued the poor” “I was a father to the needy”

Also includes working to right more institutional wrongs

“I broke the fangs of the wicked”

- All righteousness hangs together
  - Not yet a Christian – will be righteous before God?
    - Accept the death of Christ on your behalf
    - Seek his forgiveness
    - Set out to follow Jesus – in relationship with him – righteous.
  - Are a Christian – will you display God’s righteousness to others
    - Compassion towards others
    - Seeking to see injustices righted