The Justice of God

Sermon preached on Sunday 28th February 2010 at BHAC, North Turramurra.

The great civil-rights campaigner Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated on the day I was born: the 4th April 1968.

It's partly because of that totally irrelevant but slightly personally interesting fact, and partly because so much of what Martin Luther King said and wrote was eminently quotable, that I want to begin my sermon today on the "Justice of God" with some words that King wrote in 1963.

The words come from a document which subsequently came to be called "A Letter from Birmingham Jail". In 1963 King had taken part in a non-violent protest against the city of Birmingham's local government and retailers because of their racial segregation policy, and had been arrested and imprisoned because of that.

Some white clergymen had written a statement criticising King for coming *to their town* and protesting in *their* streets. King responded to them with a very long open letter, written from Birmingham Jail, in which (at one point) he said, and I quote:

> "Injustice *anywhere* is a threat to justice *everywhere*. […] I am in Birmingham because injustice is here."

There is, of course, no denying the fact that there were injustices in Alabama (and many other places) in the 1960s. Racial segregation; discrimination; abuse. And King clearly saw it as his duty to travel to Birmingham to engage in civil disobedience in order to highlight that truth and "fight" (so to speak) for justice.

Now, I mention that story because today we are talking about the Justice of God. And I want to affirm very clearly that one of the central planks of God's character as its portrayed in the Bible is his "justice"…his "righteousness". We'll see that in a second.

But I also want to acknowledge the undeniable tension that the existence of **injustice** in the world *creates* as we think about this issue. If it's true that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," then the question is: how is injustice in the world (whether in the 60s or now) *not* a threat to the justice of God? And perhaps even more importantly, how do we deal with even the perceived accusation that God is *not* just? For certainly, even in the Bible itself, that question has been asked.

So that's the challenge for today as we continue our sermon series entitled "Getting to Grips with God". Well, let's dive in. However we might define the word "just" or justice", we need not be in any doubt that the Bible says again and again, from beginning to end, that God **is just** and **is a god of justice**. Listen to these passages: firstly, from Deuteronomy 32. Moses declares:

> I will proclaim the name of the LORD. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

From Psalm 11 verse 7:

> For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.

From Psalm 33:5…

> The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

From Isaiah 5 verse 16:

> [T]he LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.

And from the final book of the Bible, from Revelation 15 we read:

> Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.

Now, if you were listening closely just now, you may have noticed something interesting from those passages. In almost every passage that I read, the concept of God's **justice** is linked with God's **righteousness**. Now, I realise we still haven't defined what we mean by God's justice…in fact both justice and righteousness are a bit "jargony" and need some unpacking.

But the point is, that when we talk about the **justice** of God, we are *also* talking about the **righteousness** of God. In fact, the Hebrew word that is often translated as "justice" is exactly the same Hebrew word for "righteousness". And it's the same in Greek as well. Justice and righteousness in Hebrew and Greek are virtually synonyms.

And it's instructive to know that, because if you're like me, when you *hear* or *see* the word "justice" you might instinctively think of God's "judgement" (which, true, is a form of the outworking of his justice) but therefore think somewhat "negatively" about it. We might recoil at the thought of God's justice because it implies God's judgement.

But in fact, God's **justice** is an entirely positive character trait. What is his justice? It's his rock solid commitment to his innate sense of moral "rightness". That is, it is his utter commitment to upholding what is right and true in accordance with his glorious being, and to opposing all that undermines that.

And the point is, *that* is what God's **righteousness** is as well. God's righteousness is God's unswerving commitment to act consistently with the infinite value of his glory.

So, God's justice leads him, for example, to keep the great promises that he makes. "You have kept your promise," prayed Nehemiah, "because you are *righteous*." God had graciously chosen Abraham and promised to give him descendants and a land of their own, and Nehemiah looks back and sees that God had kept his promise…why? Or how? According to his *righteousness*… according to his *justice*.

Keeping promises shows forth God's justice because it shows him acting in a way that is utterly consistent with his glory and character. It magnifies God's glory when he keeps his promises.

But, of course, perhaps the most well known and ubiquitous way in which God manifests his justice in the Bible is in his condemnation of human sin and rebellion.

So you get passages like Amos 2 verse 4 and following, written in the 8th century BC at a time of great national apostasy:

> This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed, I will send fire upon Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem."

You don't have to have the word "justice" in the passage to see that that's *precisely* what underlies God's warning of the fire to come. God's people in Judah were bound by a covenant to **love** and **obey** and **cherish** God…but they just turned their backs on him, again and again. And so he warns of the judgement to come.

Now, the reason that God must act in response to that…the reason he must punish sin, goes again to the heart of the justice of God. Every act of disobedience against God (at heart) dishonours God and robs him of his glory. Every time the people of Judah turned to idols they committed the primal sin: to exchange the glory of the living God for something less glorious. It was a slap in God's face. And let, me say, every time **we** value **things** or **people** or our **possessions** more than God, we do the same: we disgrace his holy name. But God's name *is* holy, and God *is* glorious.

And God would therefore be *unjust* and *unrighteous* if he did nothing about that. It would imply that the disgracing of his holy name was a matter of indifference to him.

That is why God condemns sin and must judge the sinner. It is to preserve the honour of his own glory (which he is utterly committed to preserve and display) that he condemns sin. It is to uphold the glory of his name that he judges according to his innate justice and righteousness.

It's why God says in the psalms:

> "Whoever slanders his neighbour in secret, him I will put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure." (101:5) And,
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> "Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land; I will cut off every evildoer from the city of the Lord." (101:8) And,
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> "[The Lord] frustrates the ways of the wicked." (146:9b)

Indeed, again and again, the Bible tells us that God watches *in real time* the sins committed people and that in his justice he enacts his judgement upon them.

But friends, here's the problem…and surely you've anticipated this problem already. The problem is that, so often in life, the very opposite of what we expect to happen (from God's word) in terms of justice *actually happens*. As I said in my introduction, there are so many injustices in the world that God does *not* fix straight away.

We **don't** see the ways of the wicked being *cut off* or *silenced* or *frustrated*. We **don't** see sinners overwhelmed in the here-and-now with any consistency. Indeed, more often than not, sinners seem to get away with doing just whatever they please. The righteous, on the other hand, are often overtaken by disaster. (The singer Billy Joel celebrated that thought years ago when he wrote his famous song: "Only the good die young.") God's protection of the godly seems (so often) to be absent; prayers seem to go unanswered. God seems, quite on the contrary to what the Bible says, to be *unjust*.

Now, to be fair, the Bible *itself* acknowledges that this is the case. The Bible is not blind to the seeming injustice of God's providence. It voices this tension. So you get passages in the Bible like in Psalm 73, where the psalmist writes about the "arrogant" and the "wicked":

> They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace, they clothe themselves with violence. […] They scoff and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. […] This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth.

His point is: Evil people prosper. They are healthy and wealthy. In spite of their violence, and their arrogance, and their defiance of God, they get away with it. No thunderbolt strikes them down. And so the psalmist writes, almost in despair:

> Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

You can understand the sentiment, can't you? What's the point in seeking to live a just life when injustice seems to go unchecked? You look around this world, and you see **exploitation** and **discrimination** and **organised crime** and **slavery** and **idolatry** and **materialism** and **innumerable other injustices** and offences against God, and perpetrators getting away with it, and you're tempted to think: "What's the point?" Where is justice? Where is *God's* justice?

And that's not an isolated passage, by the way. Right through the Old Testament there is this tension between what is known "intellectually" about God and his justice on the one hand, and what is experienced on the other. Remember right near the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 18, when God told Abraham he intended to utterly destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? Abraham was shocked that God intended to destroy the righteous along with the wicked in those cities and he uttered the anguished cry:

> "Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

There's the tension, and many have felt it. Wherever sinners flourish and sin is allowed to go unchecked, or whenever "the good die young", there is a challenge to the notion of God's justice.

And let me say again, it's not *only* a challenge to his justice, but more importantly **it's a challenge to his very being as God**. For God to condone or ignore the dishonour heaped upon him by even the *impression* that he doesn't act justly… or that he doesn't punish sins… is for God to deny the infinite value of his glory…and that is the heart of unrighteousness. Therefore,

if God is to be **righteous** and **just**, then he must act in such a way as to repair the dishonour done to his name by sinners.

The question is: how does he do that? How is God *actually* just when it sometimes looks like he's not?

Well there are two ways that the Bible resolves this tension. The first way is by looking forward to a day when justice will really—finally and completely—be enacted. We see this in Psalm 73 (which is the psalm I read from a moment ago.) Remember the psalmist was saying that there seemed little point in being godly when sinners got away with wickedness scott-free. But he comes to his senses. He says:

> "As for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. […] When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; *then I understood their final destiny*. Surely you place them on slippery ground, you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.

"I see it now," it's as if the psalmist is saying. "One day, in the end, justice will come. It may not come now. It may even seem to be entirely missing now. But it will come." That's what the psalmist realises when he goes into the Temple. God *is* sometimes slow to bring judgement in his justice. But there will be a day of reckoning, a final *unhappy* destiny for those who oppose God and dishonour him.

God's justice will come *in the end*. And the New Testament repeats this truth, again and again, that a day of judgement is coming. The apostle Paul, for example, told the Athenian philosophers that God had overlooked their idolatry in the past only because "he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." (Acts 17:31).

And the apostle Peter warned his readers not to listen to the "scoffers" who ridiculed the notion of a future day of judgement. Instead he reminded them that:

> With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

(What this calls for, of course, is trust and faith. And it calls for humility and repentance, because we are all guilty of sinning before God.)

That's the first way the Bible deals with the tension of the apparent lack of God's justice. The second way is to declare that the full, righteous, God-vindicating enactment of justice that never seemed to be properly displayed in the Old Testament, was in fact displayed in the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross.

We see this so clearly in the passage that we heard read from Romans chapter 3 this morning. Let me read the relevant bit to you again:

> God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his *justice*, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his *justice* at the

> present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

You see, it's true: sins and injustices were paradoxically allowed to accumulate in Old Testament times without being properly punished (as they deserved) or pardoned ("since it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."). The reason that God *allowed* that to happen was not his moral indifference to such sins, but because of his **forbearance**.

But in his forbearance, it certainly did look like the dishonouring of his name was a matter of indifference to him. In not punishing sin he was being "unjust to himself". So how would God vindicate his justice? How would God show that he really did esteem more than anything else the honour of his holy name, and at the same time save the very people who had trampled that honour?

He did it by sending his precious son Jesus, upon whom God laid every *single* sin that has ever been, and ever will be committed…every *single* injustice…every *single* doubt about God's justice…every single sin, God laid upon Jesus when he died on the cross.

Why? Because the wages of sin…the wages of injustice really is death. So God was being "**just**" and he was demonstrating in the starkest possible way his unimpeachable justice and righteousness when he sent Christ to his death on the cross as the sin-bearer.

And *because* he did that—and only because he did that— God can therefore "justify" the sinner. The cross was God's loving, righteous way of "righteoussing" the unrighteous, as John Stott puts it.

There's an old Welsh hymn which puts it this way:

> On the mount of crucifixion,
> Fountains opened deep and wide,
> Through the floodgates of God's mercy,
> Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
> Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
> Poured incessant from above
> And Heaven's peace and perfect justice
> Kissed a guilty world in love.

What great news, that God's peace and perfect justice met for *his* glory and *our* benefit at the cross! This is the sort of news that makes the heart sing, because this is the God whom we will spend eternity with! This is the sort of news that makes our hearts long to be merciful and gracious and to enact justice *ourselves*, as we respond to the injustices around us.

For yes, of course it is true that there are still injustices in the world. The day of reckoning is still ahead. But we know, because of the extraordinary meaning behind the cross, that God is a God of justice. He *will* vindicate all those who seek to be faithful to him. He *will* make good every injustice.

So let us trust him. Let us love his justice. Let us honour him with faith and mercy and justice in our lives as we respond to the truth of his word.

Amen.