

Justice - Provincial Assembly 2016

If we search the literature and consult dictionaries, we can find several contrasting theories of justice as well as several different definitions. But I think we can agree that a just act is one that accords with our sense of what is right, what is morally correct, what is the fair in a given set of circumstances. We are also Christians, and so our sense of what is right, morally correct, and fair must be shaped by our understanding of God's will for ourselves and for humanity. Is it just that I prosper if my prosperity is built on the diminishment of others? We might well argue no. But we all want to do what is right, even if we may at times disagree as to what is right, morally correct, or fair.

We profess that God is just and we profess that God is merciful and forgives those sins for which we repent. But are justice and forgiveness compatible, and, if so, how? For God does not merely want to forgive. God wants to make things right. God does not want just to forgive us. God wants to transform us into what God has destined us to become: other Christs.

Some of you are on my listserv and get my thoughts on various spiritual matters, and for Lent I was exploring the Crucifixion. Why did Christ die, and, in particular, why did Christ die the cruel, shameful death on the cross? Certainly we will agree that Christ's execution was unjust. Did God bring about justice through an unjust act? Can a wrong make a right? No, there is a mystery here for which explanations have been offered, but which all, under close analysis, are problematic. But let us return to the easier question of the relationship between forgiveness and justice and I will return to this deeper question concerning the Crucifixion later.

What is the purpose of justice? There are two ways in which the term justice can be used. The first meaning of justice involves my acting in a just manner. I can do justice. I can do what

is right. The second meaning involves carrying out justice. I can make things right. For the Kingdom of God to come into being, justice must be done. The rough places must be made smooth, the crooked ways made straight. That which is unfair must be made fair, that which is unjust must be made just. In this talk, I will be focusing on how to carry out justice, not about acting justly.

Suppose someone, call him Alfred, steals a large sum of money from me. Alfred has not acted justly. I could simply forgive Alfred. But this would not set matters right. Justice would not yet be done. Perhaps Alfred, will be converted by the generosity of my act, as Jean Valjean was converted by the generosity of the bishop from whom he stole in *Les Miserables*, but Alfred may also think me a fool and become an even bolder thief. Barring a miracle of grace, merely forgiving Alfred is not adequate to do justice. It may make me feel good, but if the purpose of doing justice is to make right that which is wrong, to order that which is disordered, forgiveness alone is insufficient.

I point out that, as it is with my hypothetical Alfred, so it is with our sins before God. God could simply forgive us, but, at least in my own case, I want more than forgiveness. I want the disorder that sin represents to be reordered so that my will is totally in harmony with the will of God. Carrying out justice does more than forgive. It affects change, reorientation, of that which tends away from God so that it tends toward God.

I note in passing that carrying out justice for the poor requires more than simply giving the poor what they need in the way of food, shelter, and adequate medical care. This is important, but it rights only part of what is wrong. We should care for the poor, but we must also work to eradicate the causes of poverty because only in this way will justice be completely

served, will be all of the crooked ways be made straight.

There are two ways in which justice can be carried out: the penal and the rehabilitative. By stealing from me, Alfred has incurred a debt to me; and by breaking the law, Alfred has incurred a debt to society. Penal justice could be served by arresting Alfred and imposing a punishment for his crime. But by imposing a penalty or demanding payment for a debt, the wrongs that God is most interested in are not made right. We might say that Alfred incurred a debt to me and society through his crime, and that by undergoing his punishment his debt was paid, but it is likely that nothing was made right by this. Alfred might learn new ways to steal while in prison, and I might live in fear that Alfred will seek revenge against me when he is released. I might feel satisfaction that Alfred was punished, but my sentiment would be based on a desire for vengeance and not on love of God or a Christian love of Alfred.

God, I believe, is not interested in penal justice despite the belief of so many Christians to the contrary. God wants to make the crooked ways straight, not punish the contractors who mistakenly made the ways crooked to begin with. Thus, God is more interested in reorienting Alfred to honesty even more than he is interested in my getting my money back, and God is more interested in teaching me how to love those who have stolen from me than he is in my getting my money back. Penal justice rarely heals. God's justice is healing.

I hope you are following my argument thus far. Perhaps you are raising silent amens to affirm what I am saying. However, there are conclusions I will share with you now that flow logically from what I have said that you may find disconcerting.

First, if God's justice is penal, one might argue logically for the existence of a hell of eternal torment for the worst sinners, even if some believe that eternal torment is inconsistent

with a merciful God. On the other hand, if God's justice is intended to rehabilitate rather than punish, then this concept of hell must be rejected. Eternal punishment allows for no rehabilitation. It is punishment pure and simple. But if hell is a state in which rehabilitation can take place, then hell may be only temporary for those who are rehabilitated. And, indeed, C. S. Lewis describes such a hell in his brilliant story *THE GREAT DIVORCE*. The Orthodox also teach that the gates of hell are locked from the inside.

Let us review the idea that Christ paid the debt for our sins by his death on the cross. I state without hesitation that I believe in the power of the cross and its importance in the fulfillment of God's desires for us. But if we believe that God wants to rehabilitate rather than punish then the idea of substitutionary atonement, like an eternal hell, is also problematic.

Substitutionary atonement states that our sin against God deserves an infinite punishment because it is an offense against an infinite God. No one is free from sin, not even newborn infants, because, as Augustine and the Reformers such as Luther taught, all humanity inherited the guilt of the first sin of Adam and Eve. All humans deserve only damnation. Knowing that humans could not pay the penalty for their sin, God paid the penalty for us by dying on the cross, an infinite sacrifice to pay an infinite debt. The substitutionary atonement is based on a penal theory of justice. It enables sinners to be forgiven, but not necessarily rehabilitated. If the purpose of justice is rehabilitate, then there are only lessons to be learned, not debts to be paid.

True, the argument may be made that there are both lessons to be learned and debts to be paid. The thief Alfred I introduced in my previous hypothetical needs to learn not to steal, but he also needs to repay what he stole. But I can forgive him repayment if he truly repents and turns away from crime and justice will still be done. In any event, God, I suspect, desires more that

sinner turn from their sin and learn how to love than for a debt to be repaid, and so should I. And God has all that God needs and is not diminished by our sin. We are diminished by our sin and God wants to build us up, rehabilitate us, teach us what we need to know to realize our full potential as daughters and sons of God and sisters and brothers of Christ.

But there is a more serious problem with stating that the justice of God is just rehabilitative, that there is no need to repay a debt when a sinner truly repents and now loves as God intended her to love. That more serious problem is the question of evil.

I think most of us will agree that if Alfred sincerely repents and turns from a life that is not in accord with the will of God to live a life in God, and if I am willing to forgive Alfred his debt to me in accordance with Christ's injunction to forgive those who sin against us, that justice has been done. All has been restored to rightness. Rehabilitation has been achieved.

But there seem to be acts in which rehabilitation is impossible, where the act is so monstrous, so unspeakable, so utterly demonic, that forgiveness seems unthinkable, even if there is someone to forgive.

Evil is more than a mere absence of love. One wishes that the problem with Hitler was that he did not love sufficiently. What the power of evil seeks is to overcome the power of God, to negate the will of God for creation. If God desires to draw creation into the fullness of his Light, evil seeks to draw creation more fully into darkness. God raises up. Evil pulls down. God brings life. Evil brings death. God desires creation to be ordered toward harmony and peace. Evil finds satisfaction in chaos and war.

Evil involves more than theft, even more than a simple murder. Evil is a power than can possess human beings and turn them into creatures straight from the depths of hell. Evil often

possesses whole populations, such as when neighbor slaughtered neighbor in Rwanda, where seemingly normal men and women could know about the wholesale extermination of millions of Jews in the Holocaust and do nothing, where babies are bashed against rocks, when people are burned alive in churches where they have sought refuge, where millions are allowed to starve to death in the name of social progress, and on and on in an obscene litany of unimaginable horrors.

So great does the power of evil seem that some, e.g. Mani and most Gnostics, have taught that the universe is the creation of an evil god and humans must somehow escape this universe so they can dwell in a pure spiritual realm. This is contrary to Scripture which declares creation good. Moreover, if the material universe were evil, then the Incarnation in which the Word enters this universe in a material body would make no sense. And so we are faced with a good, or at least an amoral, universe that is inhabited, some would say controlled by, a hostile power that tries to frustrate God's intentions. God created the universe good, but, with free will, choices could be misdirected away from God's desires.

When people talk about a war between Evil and God, they sometimes seem to imply that the forces are evenly matched. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. Jesus proved his power over evil again and again. God could simply annihilate Evil with a single word, so to speak, so why doesn't God do so? Even more mysteriously, why did Jesus seem to allow himself to be subject to the power of evil, refusing to call on the Father to send angels to rescue him, refusing to allow his disciples to prevent his arrest, refusing to come down from the cross, even telling those who had come to arrest him:

"Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? 53 Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour —

when darkness reigns." Luke 22:52-53

Jesus allowed himself to be subject to the powers of evil, even to allow evil (darkness) to reign for a time. But why? There is little doubt in my mind that if one of his disciples had had the power the Jesus had, he would have used it to strike Jesus's enemies dead. But Jesus did not resist. His followers ran away, understandably terrified when faced with possible arrest, but no doubt confused that the man they had seen calm the wind and waves, feed five thousand from a handful of food, and cast out the demons of hell, stood seemingly helpless, unable or unwilling to protect himself.

Here, I believe, we find the fundamental tension between justice and mercy. Alfred, the thief can be converted, forgiven, and restored to grace. Although there is a need for the Incarnation if Alfred is to be able to come to knowledge of God, there seems no need for Christ's cruel death on the cross if Alfred is to be rehabilitated, made right with God. But evil is another matter entirely. Although evil is expressed through the actions of Nazi prison guards and machete-wielding killers in Rwanda, it is more than an act. It is a power that threatens God's desire to restore all creation to God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. God is the only power than can overcome the power of evil.

We are all subject to the power of evil, whether we want to admit or not. First, there is a unity among all human beings. I cannot isolate myself from the Nazi prison guard, the slave trader, Hitler or Saddam Hussein. I cannot allow myself to become like the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not like the tax collector, that he was righteous among so many whom he implicitly condemned as unrighteous. I am not fully saved until all are saved. As John Donne phrased it: No man or woman is an island. Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

If God desires that all things be restored in the coming Kingdom, then I must desire that all things, all human beings, all that is, all that has being, be restored as well. Evil has no place in this Kingdom. If evil cannot be transformed into good, then it must literally be annihilated.

I also realize that if God did not protect me, that evil could overcome me as evil has so many others. Had I been raised in Nazi Germany or Rwanda, I would have been subject to the same terrible pressures to which others like me succumbed. I cannot say I am better than they are, perhaps only luckier. Indeed, God gave me the gift of showing me the evil of which I was capable, yet in his mercy he protected me from doing it. Only the power of God can carry out justice by saving us from the power of evil, by converting those unfortunates who have yielded to its power, by enabling those who have been the victims of evil to forgive those who persecuted them.

But how is God to effect this without destroying our free will? For if we are to love, we must freely love. If we are to repent, we must freely repent. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of love and so those who enter it must become love. But how?

One way that many Christians believe order can be restored and evil to be conquered is through a hell of eternal torment. The evil will be cast into hell. The demons who personify evil will be thrown down into hell as well. Hell will be the garbage dump into all that would pollute heaven will be discarded and those in heaven can live happily on forever.

But a human being who takes part in evil acts can be separated from the evil itself. For all the evil that Hitler caused, Hitler as a human being can still be converted to love. No, we cannot say that the devil made Hitler do what he did, nor can we say that if Hitler were converted that it would undo all his evil acts. Only God can somehow make right what evil has made

wrong, but again we must ask how even God can carry out such justice. Who is to forgive Hitler? The millions of Jews murdered under his obscene regime? And who is to be forgiven? Those who murdered? Those who stood idly by knowing what was happening? Those who could have prevented Hitler from coming to power in the first place? If I am right about the unity of all humanity, we all stand in need of forgiveness. We all need to be converted and made right. But evil itself cannot be made right. Evil cannot enter the Kingdom. Evil must be destroyed if justice is to be carried out. But a means for those who have done evil deeds to be rehabilitated must also be provided. The evil doer is not the evil. Evil cannot be transformed into Light, but the evil doer can be brought into Light.

Many will argue that we came to this sorry state in which evil seems to have such a prominent role in human activity because of some original sin such as that described in the story of the Fall. I do not think that humanity shares some collective guilt inherited from the disobedience of our first ancestors. Indeed, evolution suggests that modern humans came to be by a rather convoluted route. God may have created the universe and it evolved to where it is today. But where it is today involves sin and evil. And humanity does not have the ability to save itself from the power of sin and evil no matter how sin and evil may have come about. We need to be rescued. And we need someone to rescue us, and there needs to be a means by which we can be rescued.

The universe was created but evolved freely. The universe was created in a manner that the universe could come to know both itself and its Creator. In the universe's coming to know itself, intelligent beings evolved, beings which fell into what came to be recognized as sin and evil, but which came in large part from traits inherited from evolution, the lack of knowledge of

God, and, quite possibly, the influence of hostile spiritual beings. This universe was allowed to evolve freely because freedom is essential to the ability to love. If the universe were completely deterministic, love would be impossible as would moral responsibility. However, intelligent beings have an instinctual desire to know God, but cannot know God through their natural powers. God himself had to intervene both to enable humanity to know God and to rescue humanity from the power of sin and evil into which it had fallen. But this intervention was not because humanity had incurred a debt that had to be paid, though it could be said that humanity had to be saved. And humanity did not have to be ransomed from the power of sin and evil, but it did have to be freed from that power. Through the Incarnation humanity received the means to know God. Through the Crucifixion humanity received the means to be saved, to be freed from the power of evil. But how?

God could not simply destroy sin and evil by willing it out of existence. In the first place, sin and especially evil are more a negation of being rather than having an existence of their own. Second, destroying all sin and evil would require such a complete intervention of God in human activity and freedom that the cure might be worse than the disease. That is, we might lose the ability to love in losing the ability to sin. So how does the Crucifixion effect our salvation?

In Philippians 2, Paul writes, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead." In John 12:32 Jesus tells us that when he is lifted up he will draw all humanity to himself. That is, all humanity will be drawn to him through his death on the cross. How might we interpret these and other passages in Scripture to explain the saving power of Christ and the cross?

First, the Incarnation provides the means to be incorporated into the life of God through membership in his Body. But although we now share in the divine life in Christ, we are still bound by the power of sin and evil in at least two ways. The first is that we are still quite capable of sin and evil even after we have been incorporated into Christ. Second, God's goal for us is to come to know him as he knows us. For this to happen we must be drawn deeper and deeper into the Life of God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is, we must be drawn toward union, or what the Orthodox call deification in Christ. Instead of defining sin as disobedience to God's will, I define sin as any obstacle between us and union, any barrier to the Spirit's transforming us into other Christs. Forgiveness of sin in a rehabilitative sense means removing the obstacles that stand between us and union.

Some will jump in and say that our sins are forgiven once we have become are joined to Christ. We are ready to enter heaven. But my argument has not concerned forgiveness as much as learning how to love. God's justice is rehabilitative, not penal. And even after being joined to Christ, we still have a lot to learn about how God wants us to love. Moreover, if sin consists of obstacles between us and union, then forgiveness is the removal of those obstacles, not magically wishing them away. And the removal of those obstacles can be compared to crucifixion.

The view that I will state can be summarized as follows: The Incarnation provides a solution to a problem we cannot solve ourselves, namely, being able to know God. Being joined to Christ starts us on the path to union. The Crucifixion is the doorway through which we must pass to enter union.

When intelligent life came on the scene, the universe began to know itself. When Christ came on the scene, we gained the means by which we might come to God, as opposed to

knowing whatever we might deduce concerning God from nature and logic. Of course, human efforts to know about God, a God they could not know, led to numerous false ideas about God.

The universe is good in the sense that it is, but, morally, it is neither good nor bad. The universe is also the arena in which we are to grow into the knowledge of God and learn how to love as we come to know Love. This life is a school to learn how to love; indeed, an arena in which we are to be transformed into Love. The universe is not evil and is not something to be scorned as the Manichaeans and certain others belief systems teach, but neither is it the ultimate goal of our longing. We seek God and the universe is both an instrument and a way station in that quest.

Union involves a form of death. It is giving up our own selves into Love, a leaving of all that is not God to be immersed fully in God. Paul tells us that Christ

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8 NIV)

It is this form of death which we ourselves must die to live fully into union. As Paul also writes:

20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:19-21 NIV)

As we are drawn into the life of God in Christ, we must be emptied of all that does not belong to God so that we stand, as were naked, before God, as Christ hung naked on the cross,

and even our nakedness must be surrendered to God for that must belong to God as well.

It is, thus, in sharing in Christ's crucifixion that we die to self, stripped of all that does not belong to God. This crucifixion, this self-emptying so that God can fill us, takes a number of forms, but in all of them we are joined to Christ in his suffering that we might rise with him to a new Life in God. If Christ had not shown us the way and provided not merely the example, but also the means, by which we can pass through the gate of death, which is the crucifixion, then we would not have the strength to undergo such a death, nor could we be sustained by the love of the One who conquered death on our behalf.

And in our crucifixion, we pass outside the power of sin and death to become new creations because we now belong wholly to God. We have surrendered all to God and the powers of the world can no longer harm us, at least so long as we remain totally in the Love to which we have given ourselves.

And through union, gained finally through dying with Christ, emptying ourselves as Christ emptied himself for our sake, sin and death suffer yet another defeat and the Kingdom comes a bit closer. Creation itself is transformed through us as we have been transformed. Sin and death lose more of their grip on humanity as we pass through the gate of Life that is the cross.

I understand that what I have developed concerning the purpose of Christ and the Crucifixion is not in accord with substitutionary atonement or the traditional view of ransom. Nevertheless, I believe my views are fully supportable in Scripture and they solve certain problems that some find obstacles to accepting Christianity as an instrument of union. What problems have I tried to address.

First, the story of the Fall in Genesis must be taken as history for certain views of original sin, e.g., Augustine's, to make sense. But many, including myself, take the story of the Fall as a parable that conveys deep theological truths about the human condition and humanity's relationship with God, but not as literal fact. Even if the Fall is taken literally, many do not see the justice in all humanity having to suffer for Adam's sin. Moreover, evolution is now an accepted scientific theory that religion cannot ignore. The notion of human evil and sin may, at least in large part, be explained through evolution rather than a particular act of disobedience by our first parents who probably never even existed. Yes, humanity has fallen into error, but this error needs to be corrected, not punished.

Second, my emphasis is on God's justice as rehabilitative, not penal. We must not only be forgiven in the sense that obstacles between us and union must be removed, but there must be a means to remove those obstacles. Mere forgiveness is not enough for rehabilitative justice. A tendency toward what is wrong must be redirected toward what is right. We must not just be forgiven. We must learn how to love as God wants us to love.

Here are some other reasons why I prefer the view of the Crucifixion that I have outlined.

We do not merely accept what Christ did. We become participants in what Christ did and is doing, passing through the gate of the Crucifixion to union. We do not merely accept Christ's saving work on the cross as spectators, as it were.

My view is more in harmony with the ultimate goal of the spiritual life being union rather than just being saved.

This takes the emphasis off of sinfulness and places it on love where I believe it belongs.

We no longer have to explain how the universe could be created good and yet we

encounter so much evil.

We no longer have to explain how a good God could allow so many bad things to happen.

I recognize that this talk was more theological in content and more tightly argued than most talks at assemblies, but it also has dealt with some of the most profound questions of our faith as well as the theme of this assembly, justice. We are now in Season of Easter with its hope of Resurrection, but we cannot, we must not, ignore the Crucifixion. And in considering the Crucifixion, we must ask ourselves why did Christ die, and why did he die this particularly cruel and shameful death. We might say that it was to show the lengths to which God would go to bring us to himself. And there is certainly truth in that. But that explanation is inadequate by itself, for it sidesteps the question of justice.

God could have simply forgiven us our sins as we could forgive Alfred for stealing. But that, too, would sidestep the question of justice. God is merciful, but God is just. We must not only be forgiven, but we must be freed from the power of sin. I have tried to address this issue, one of the most important and misunderstood in our faith. I hope I have at least given you something to think about.