

## TSSF Scottish study week (27th June - 1st July 2011)

### Can there be peace without justice?

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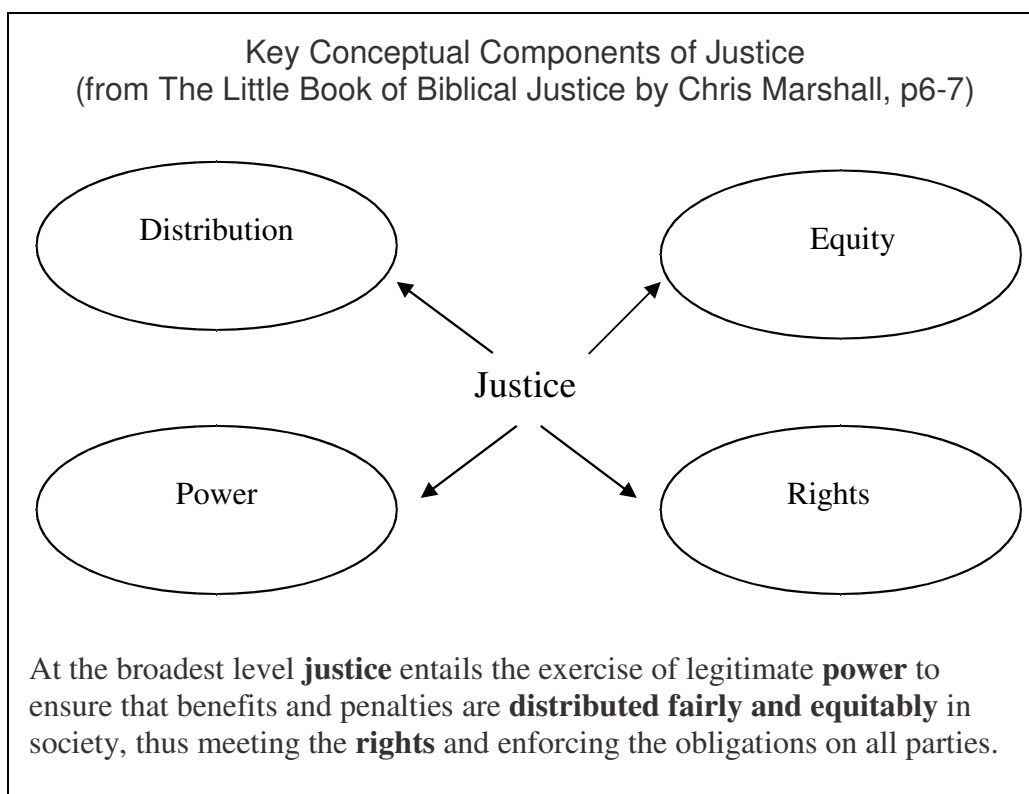
*'Without justice, peace is just a nice sounding word'* Dom Helder Camara

For five years, between 2005 and 2010, I spent time in Iraq (Baghdad and the Kurdish area in the north) and in Palestine. The organisation I worked with was not a pacifist organisation, in that not all members were pacifists, but it did require a commitment to non-violence.

My time living with people under military occupation challenged my pacifist views. I met soldiers and those who supported violent resistance – and liked many of them! I worked with people who believed in non-violent resistance and those who saw it as a tactic, appropriate for the moment, but who would also consider using violence.

I still regard myself as a pacifist – I have been punched, kicked, beaten to the ground, threatened with guns, had to run for my life from a gang of rock and stick wielding attackers, but I always chose to respond non-violently. So, I am firm in my belief that this is the correct way for me to behave. However, towards the end of my time in the Middle East and since returning home I have questioned my role as 'peacemaker'. Is it right to expect the oppressed to make peace with their oppressor? Can there be peace without justice?

When I am troubled like this I offer my problem up to God. This involves prayer, reading and reflection. This paper is my reflection on justice from a Christian perspective. I hope to show that believing in and working for justice is central to living a Christian life, and that without justice there can be a cessation of violence, but not true peace.



If we look at the root causes of violence in our world we can see:

**abuse of power** - national self interest is at the core of government policy, benefiting the richer and more powerful nations of the world;

**unequal distribution** of wealth means that, although there is enough food in the world, many die for want of basic necessities;

**basic rights are denied to many** – whether they be the right to clean water, the right to education, the right to a safe, clean living environment.

There is no justice, little wonder there is no peace!

So, what of the Bible. I believe that the Bible shows us that justice is not just something God desires, but justice is at the core of who God is and what God does.

Justice (explicitly and implicitly) occurs frequently in the Bible, the Hebrew and Greek words for justice occur over 1,000 times.<sup>1</sup> These occurrences are not always translated as 'justice', often as 'righteousness', but the 'righteousness' of the bible means doing good, and bringing about what is right. In the Hebrew Scriptures 'justice' and 'righteousness' are often paired:

*But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24)*

*See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. (Isaiah 32:1)*

*Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.*

*May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. (Psalm 72:1-2)*

What of peace? The peace of the Bible, Shalom, is more than an absence of conflict, it is about wholeness, right relationship, harmony – and so we come back to justice. Justice is inextricably linked to peace. 'Shalom' is peace and justice together, it is the *'peace of God, which transcends all understanding'* (Philippians 4:7). Walter Wink, US theologian tells us that *'Peace is not the highest good; it is rather the outcome of a just social order'*.<sup>2</sup>

So, how do we balance Shalom and God's call for justice with passages in the Hebrew Scriptures such as:

*'in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you.'* Deuteronomy 20:16-18 (Joshua)

*'The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.'* Judges 15:14-15 (Samson)

*'Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.'* 1 Kings 18:40

In Palestine I came across many ideological Jews who felt that such passages not only justified their violence towards people, their taking of land and livestock, but these words commanded them to behave so. They believed that they were doing God's will.

It is very likely that the passage from Exodus 21:24 *'an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot'* was an attempt to limit retribution, but what of Joshua, Samson and Elijah? For me the balance is in the message of the prophets, the message from God. I believe the message in the Hebrew Scriptures is that you have a right to be angry, you have a right to

demand that person is punished if s/he has done wrong, you have a right to seek justice. However, there is also a call to think first and foremost about what is just, what will lead to shalom (wholeness, good relationship).

*'I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live'* Deuteronomy 30:19

*'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'*

Micah 6:8

God, like any good parent, has taught us right and wrong, and guides us (when we bother to pay attention!!), but has also allowed us to fly the nest, to make our own way in the world. Like many children, we have gone astray or not understood clearly the guidance we were given.

Through Jesus, His way of life, His teaching, God tried to clarify what had been taught through the prophets. *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.'* (Matthew 5:17). However, Jesus did challenge the way in which the law was being taught and interpreted *'For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.'* (Matthew 5:20) I believe that Jesus' message was one of peace and justice – in the broadest sense of these words.

Jesus addressed many of these issues through parables.

In the parable of the rich fool, Luke 12:16-21, Jesus shows that *'life does not consist in an abundance of possessions'* (v.15) The parable tells of the man who, on gathering a rich and plentiful harvest, decides to knock down his existing barns and build bigger ones to store his grain. He wants to *'have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'* (v.19).

He is under the illusion that gathering possessions gives a power that leads to freedom and the good life. But that very night he was to lose his life. It was too late for him to learn that his possessions were of little value to him. True human liberation lies not in gathering power and material possessions, but in using what we have been given or have earned for the good of others.

Similarly, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31, we hear of a rich man who 'dressed in purple and fine linen' and feasted 'magnificently' every day. Possibly, like many today, he viewed his good fortune as a reward from God. However, he failed to see and respond to the poverty and need at his own doorstep. The poor man who languished there, 'who longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table', was invisible to him.

Jesus also commanded us to *'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven'* (Matthew 5, 44-45)

Biblical justice is about creating sustainable, healthy, fair and life giving relationships (shalom) between parties. Forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation are required if we are to restore shalom in our world.

*'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift'*

(Matthew 5:23-24)

There is a desperate need in our world for reconciliation, the healing of broken relationships, the restoration to the oppressed, to the occupied, of what was taken from them, respect for the place of everyone and everything. Jesus took the side of the outcast, the marginalised, the poor. He unmasked their oppressors, but recognised the humanity of both.

My experience of living and working with people suffering daily oppression taught me that we cannot demand of others that they forgive.

*"I know what it is like to be powerless to forgive. That is why I would never say to someone, 'You must forgive.' I can only say: however much we have been wronged, however justified our hatred, if we cherish it, it will poison us. We must pray for the power to forgive, for it is in forgiving our enemies that we are healed." (Dr. Sheila Cassidy who was tortured in Chile, during the Pinochet regime.)*

However, like Sheila Cassidy, I believe in the restoring power of forgiveness and mercy. A wonderful example of restorative justice was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa.

*'In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget. On the contrary, it is **important** to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again. Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what has happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. .... Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss which liberates the victim'<sup>3</sup>*

Tutu recognizes that people have the right to demand retribution, but urges them (as the prophet Micah urged) 'to act justly and to love mercy' Restorative justice attempts to restore 'shalom' back into the broken lives of the oppressed and oppressor alike.

Restorative justice is a public process of truth-telling and healing. It brings together not only victims, perpetrators and their families, but also representatives of the local community. Victims tell what was done to them, what they have suffered, and their outrage and loss. Those who oppressed them have the opportunity to take responsibility, show remorse, and say what led them to this offence. Gradually, as people have their say, they move to a new place in their relationship as a community.

If we want to heal our broken world, if we do indeed want to be the 'peacemakers', then we need, as individuals, communities and nations, to put aside self-interest. We must, as Jesus did, stand with the oppressed, the marginalised, the poor and weak. Challenging injustice, acting with righteousness means challenging the powerful. It means acknowledging and giving up the relative privilege and wealth we in the west so often take for granted. The cost may be high, but for me that is the meaning of 'Jesus died for us' – Jesus died to show us the way.

*'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness' (1 Peter 2:24)*

Quotes from the Bible come from New International Version

<sup>1</sup> The Little Book of Biblical Justice, by Chris Marshall

<sup>2</sup> Jesus and Nonviolence, A Third Way, by Walter Wink

<sup>3</sup> No Future Without Forgiveness, by Desmond Tutu

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