

The pursuit of justice

4 August 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Today we're talking about **justice**.

I've got a packet of TimTams here. I think that there are 9 biscuits in the packet. Now I **really like** TimTams, so I want to eat most of them myself, because they're so yummy!

But how about I let you have one each and I eat all the rest?

Would that be **fair**? And a good way to share? One each for you and six for me?

No, that wouldn't be fair. It would be better to have two each, which leaves one left over, maybe for Mum or Dad.

Justice is a fancy grown-up word for **being fair** ... not just with biscuits but with every part of life.

Jesus cares about making sure everyone has a fair share and a fair go at life. It's how God wants us to act.

BIBLE READING

We listen for the word of God.

Our ears and our hearts are open.

[Amos 5:10-24 \(selected verses\)](#)

There are those among you who hate the one who upholds justice in court
and detest the one who tells the truth.

You levy a straw tax on the poor
and impose a tax on their grain. ...

There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes
and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times,
for the times are evil.

Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.

Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.

Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts. ...

I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

[Matthew 12:15-21](#)

Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. He warned them not to tell others about him. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

‘Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he has brought justice to victory.
In his name the nations will put their hope.’

For the word of God in Scripture,
for the word of God among us,
for the word of God within us,
thanks be to God.

MESSAGE The pursuit of justice

The task of preaching is often to comfort the afflicted.

Today my message is more about afflicting the comfortable.

So strap in. You have been warned!

Our first challenge is to try and get a grip on what we mean by justice.

Is it mostly to do with courts and judges and whether someone is innocent or guilty? If so, then justice is about calling people who break the laws of the land to account.



Another view is that there a moral and ethical dimension to justice. If so, then justice applies to everyone and every situation we face. But then, who gets to decide what is just?

We all have a strong inbuilt sense of what is just and right.

A few examples from the trivial to the more serious.

It's nearly Christmas and the carpark at the shops is busy. You drive around for 10 minutes looking for a park. You spot someone leaving but before you can get there, another driver who has just driven into the carpark pulls in right in front of you.



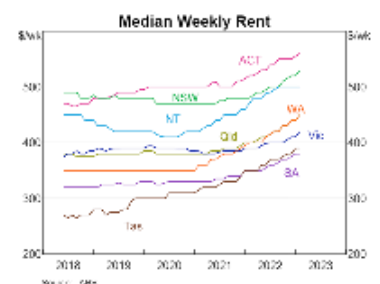
Is that fair and just or just bad luck?



At the shops you need to buy milk. It's \$1.80 a litre and you moan that just a few years ago it was only \$1 a litre – much cheaper. But at \$1 /litre, dairy farmers were losing money on every litre of milk they produced. Was it just for the supermarkets to use

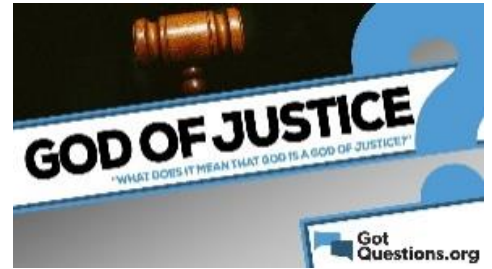
their buying power to rip off farmers?

You get home and receive a phone call from your daughter who informs you that their landlord is raising their rent by more than 10% for the third year in a row. Meanwhile the investor who owns the house sits down to prepare their tax return and quickly deducts the full amount of the rent collected and their mortgage repayments from their own taxable income. This is one of the tax perks they get as



an investor that is known as negative gearing. Is it just that a tenant must keep paying higher rent while the owner gets a tax benefit?

As Christians, we are emboldened to think that justice does not ultimately depend on human laws, but rather on the character, actions and demands of God. In several verses we see that God loves justice so when we talk about seeking justice we are actually trying to act in ways that reflect God's character.



But try telling this to the judge if you are a climate activist who has been arrested for causing traffic disruption.

Your honour, I was only pursuing justice in my God given role as a steward of God's good creation, as revealed in Genesis chapter 2.

Justice and the closely related word righteousness are a big deal in the OT.

In a famous passage on justice from the prophet Micah, God brings a legal case against Israel:

*Hear, O mountains ... the Lord has a case against his people.
My people, how have I burdened you? Answer me!
I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you. ...
God has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.
(Micah 6:2-8)*

In this passage we see the call to practice justice alongside the call to pursue love. Both matter, both are important. Both reflect the character of God.

Notice as well that justice – like love – is not some abstract or philosophical good. We are to **do** justice, **seek** justice, **actively live out** justice.

In the passage we read from Amos earlier, our worship of God – the praise and offerings we bring – cannot be separated from how we treat the poor and conduct our business on the other six days of the week.

We are to let justice roll down like an everflowing river.

It's not just for a season or just for some people.

It's for all of us ... because it reflects the heartbeat of God.

Two further observations. The prophets highlight that the people who miss out on justice, the ones who get exploited, are usually the **poor** and **powerless** – especially widows, orphans and foreigners. These are the sorts of people that Jesus is drawn to – the poor, women, children and foreigners – people that everyone else tends to ignore.



If we fast forward to today, it's the same types of people who suffer injustice – it was the poor who were targeted by the Robodebt debacle in 2015–17 – thousands of people reliant on Centrelink payments, who generally obeyed all the rules, who were then unjustly targeted to repay debts they

didn't owe.

In the workplace it's often women, children and foreign workers who are still treated unfairly by being paid less for doing the same work as others.

Other groups who suffer from ongoing injustice and prejudice today are people with a disability, asylum seekers and indigenous people.

A second observation ... calling out injustice and calling powerful people to change their ways is hard work. It will annoy lots of privileged people who like how things are, since they profit from the current unjust system.



It takes courage and a prophetic voice to work for justice.

It often requires political action, whether protest or some other form of advocacy. Take it from the prophets – if you pursue justice you may well be berated, howled down, called crazy or worse.



In the time of William Wilberforce, most well-to-do people thought slavery was okay. It was mostly out-of-sight and out-of-mind, but it was the basis of many people's wealth – whether in the shipping industry, the sugar industry or in the actual capture and trading of slaves.

When Wilberforce challenged the status quo, he was ridiculed and criticised. It took a lifetime (30 years) of political work from Wilberforce to eventually repeal the slave trade. The passion for this work came from Wilberforce's strong Methodist faith, one of the streams that fed into our own Uniting Church, that provides part of our church's passion to pursue justice.

Unfortunately the slave trade never fully disappeared and is still in full swing in many parts of the world, even though we may not be aware of it. The Living Faith group have been researching a project to install a substantial solar system on the roof of the church as part of the building redevelopment to reduce our CO₂ emissions and also reduce our electricity bills.

We've been made aware that nearly all solar panels available on the market are made in China using the slave labour of Muslim Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of western China.

Solar industry supply chains tainted by Uyghur slave labour, new study shows

Wednesday 2 August 2023
By Dylan Carter



We have been working closely with the Synod's Justice and International Mission unit to source alternative solar panels made without slave labour. The selection is much smaller and ethically sourced products tend to be more expensive. So there is a definite cost to pursuing justice in this case. The product we are recommending the church to use is made in Germany.

Let's try and turn this to a more positive perspective.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus has just healed a person on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are outraged and plot how to destroy Jesus. So Jesus moves away from this danger but continues to heal people, bringing wholeness and hope. Matthew interprets Jesus' actions as bringing justice to these people, where bringing life and doing good – even



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— MATTHEW 12:18

on the Sabbath – overrides human rules of what can and can't be done on that day. Matthew suggests that Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah about the servant figure who will gently but persistently bring justice not only to Israel but also to the nations.

For Jesus this was obviously very personal as he had deep compassion on those suffering but at the same time anger towards those who tried to prevent him doing what was good and just.

Our challenge is to make the seeking of justice similarly personal. If seeking justice remains just a good but abstract thought, it's too easy to leave seeking justice to others, whether the few zealous folk in the Living Faith group or the Synod's JIM unit. It's not an optional extra for our faith but part of what it means to follow Jesus.

For a long time I knew – intellectually – that our government's policies towards asylum seekers were cruel and unjust.

But it was only when I took the step of becoming personally involved in the issue by visiting asylum seekers at the Detention Centre



that I got to know these people as people rather than as statistics, people with often harrowing stories of where they had fled from and why, but also people with resilience and hopes.

Pursuing justice is also a communal activity ... where we can encourage one another and sometimes have a greater impact. The easy path is to think that these issues are all too big and complex and there's nothing we can do. Alternatively we can find the courage to challenge the status quo, even if this involves a political dimension like contacting our local MPs.

My suggestion is that we need to start small. We can each find one area of justice or an issue that grates on our conscience and go for it.

We can then do some research and find out what others are doing in the space and learn from them or join them.

Speak to myself or Kathryn about joining the Living Faith group.

Like the TV ads for AIA featuring Ash Barty, you can at least do something and seek justice in one area.



I want to close with a Benedictine blessing. I've changed the pronouns to plural, so I'm praying this for myself as much as for all of us.

May God bless us with **discomfort**

at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships
so that we may seek truth boldly and love deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with **holy anger**

at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
so that we may work tirelessly for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with **tears**

to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless us with enough **foolishness**

to believe that we really can make a difference in this world,
so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.