

## Wells Cathedral Sermon - 4 March 2024

### Inspired by the Justice of God:

It sounds weighty on the ears and the tongue. What do we mean when we talk of **the justice of God**? The everyday use of the word justice is most often twofold. In most people's minds, justice consists of **fair** treatment of people. Added to that, justice also has to do with **consequences** – people get what they deserve for their actions, whether good or bad. These concepts of fairness and consequential treatment align with the Biblical principles of justice and judgment.

But the Biblical concept of justice goes beyond fairness and consequential treatment, for the Bible teaches that **justice begins and ends in and with God**. When God – who is just in himself – brought the universe into being, he made it to be a place of justice – **it was GOOD as it tells us in Genesis 1!**

Human beings were made to live justly, in relation to God, to each other, and to creation. Why – because they were uniquely created in the image of God. Thus, justice is beyond

the individual for as we are like the Creator, who is Trinity, we are created to live in relationship to others, and it is relationships which are at the heart of justice. When something damages or ruptures those relationships, **doing justice involves setting things right.**

An Old Testament Example of God's justice, of setting right is that which we heard read from the Old Testament, **Exodus 20:**

*“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”*

The Israelites were brought out of an iniquitous, unjust situation and redeemed by the love of God. This introductory line about redemption — which is not often printed with what we call the Ten Commandments, is recognized in Judaism **as the first words.**

I cannot say for sure, but brothers and sisters in Christ, I pretty much know that those words were removed from the slave bible. How could slaves have been allowed to read or

hear words that spoke of redemption and liberation? Those words would have been both subversive and disruptive. Not only would they have heard words that exemplified the justice of God, but words which could also hold meaning for their own oppressed lives. **Would their hearts not have been burning to have their chains of oppression broken, and to be set free?** This Exodus address from God also exhorted the Israelites *to not misuse the name of the Lord, to not murder, commit adultery, steal lie or covet.* Enslavers broke every single one of these commandments.

My friends as I reread these words, my mind is cast back to those infamous dungeons underneath Cape Coast Castle, stinking caves, floors red from the blood of sisters and brothers ripped from their birthright, to die and live for sugar, molasses and rum, where slaves cried out for their freedom, while the enslavers worshipped the 'god of mammon' in the church above. *These people had surely not heard Jesus' impassioned cry as he overturned tables in the temple - to stop turning his house into a marketplace.* Jesus' desire was not only to set right the actions that take place in the house

of the Lord but also the unjust actions that take place in the hearts of the people, the dwelling place of God (Ephesians 3:14-19).

You may say that in many places the bible does not condemn slavery. What it does condemn however is treating people as less than human, whatever the context of their lives. At every turn, Jesus demonstrated this. Sadly, too many Christians used an impaired reading of scripture to engage and collude in African chattel enslavement, which not only oppressed but also used the colour of people's skin to deny them their human rights. This was the first time in history that racism was used on an industrial scale.

Gregory Isaacs sang,

*"I saw you with your cargo, In the midst of the Atlantic,  
with my brothers and my sisters, Heading towards the  
western slave market"*

Indeed, marketplaces were where Africans were traded as chattels, ripped away for their lands and their religions,

including traditional beliefs, Christianity, and Islam, and forced to believe in a Western god who denied their humanity. A Christianization which justified racial discrimination and ethnic superiority was used to subjugate Africans and to support chattel slavery, which goes against God's very nature:

*“God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right”  
(Acts 10:34–35).*

The words of God, that we hear in the Decalogue, are given to a redeemed, believing, and worshipping community as commandments for right behaviour and right relationships. These are the same words that are given to followers of Christ, and they speak to our relationship with the God who created and redeemed us. These are words of love in relationship and in action. No wonder slaves were not given access to these words. The words they would have received would have the ones which say, slaves obey your masters and wait for your liberation in the next life.

Bob Marley sang;

*But my hand was made strong, By the hand of the  
Almighty, we forward in this generation, Triumphantly*

He followed a line of descendants of African chattel slavery, sons of Africa, Equiano and Cugoano, crying out for justice, crying out the lament of their foreparents. Their line extends to the now. To remember our history is to lament, to wail, to cry out for justice. That cry for justice is louder and louder, and the plaintive singing of the Lord's song on harps in foreign lands has become a clarion call.

God's justice is not simply a matter of formal fairness or equality and "just deserts." God's justice is more compassionate than simply a set of rules and punishments. God does not deal with us as our wrongdoing deserves. Instead, God pursues justice with mercy and grace for those who are wronged and for those who are **wrongdoers**, *for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5: ESV).*

British institutions, including the Church of England and the Church Commissioners, are increasingly recognising that the origins of the wealth they enjoy today come from historical injustice and wrongdoing, through their endeavours based on slavery. As these institutions deepen the understanding of their roles in slavery, they will need to acknowledge how these past actions have created long-lasting harm, years of torment and trauma for descendants because institutions and systems still demand black people justify their place in every space. More than this these institutions will have to enjoin in work that will bring about repair, reconciliation, and transformation. **Rebuilding trust will take time**, commitment, humility, and resources. Restorative justice offers a way to get the process of repairing and renegotiating right relationships started.

Jesus' consuming zeal was to put people back into the right relationship with God, in their temples and in their hearts. This caused him to take radical action, that he hoped would demonstrate and bring about a positive reparative impact on the layers of multi-generational and multiethnic harms that

have been caused by people's sinfulness and separation from God through their actions towards God, and towards their neighbours. The call for justice is from God, realized in Jesus, and expected to be acted out by us.

For some people, slavery like biblical times, may seem like history, something that happened a long while ago. For those who do not believe in God's redeeming love, other things may clamour for their interest. However, brothers and sisters in Christ, the twin evils of slavery and racism are breaches that have scarred all of humanity and continue until today. This is not simply history, but a gaping wound of pain inflicted on the beloved body of Christ. This is not another people's history and story, but our story, and our responsibility to repair the breach, to heal the wounds and to work for God's justice. God calls us to do justice as He does justice. So, let us join in this work.

Brothers and sisters,

*“won't you help to sing these songs of freedom? Cause all we ever have, are redemption songs”. Amen.*