

A Generous Justice

Ezekiel 14:12-16, 18:1-20
Romans 5:1-11

Imagine you lived in a world where when something was done that was wrong, appropriate recompense had to be paid. Oops! We do live in that kind of world. Increasingly we live in a world where people look for justice in the courts and expect to fine it in the payment of fines and compensation. It is a system which has its merits and its disadvantages.

The merits are that increasingly those who are genuinely wronged, can find some form of official notice and recompense. This can be helpful to them in coming to terms with what has happened and moving on. If you are really and truly sacked from your job because you have become pregnant, then it is right that your employer should face up to the wrong that has been done you and right that you should be able to move on.

The disadvantages are two-fold however. First there is the matter of human greed, with people suing others and taking them to court on trumped-up charges, in the hope of gaining financially. And then there is the matter of risk-assessment and liability. We see it in the medical profession, where sometimes a doctor declines to carry out a risky procedure - which might yet work - because it might not, and the family of the patient might decide to sue. We see it in the various things which a school cannot do, in case any of the little children do something stupid and an angry parent decides that instead of blaming the child, they will blame the school. And so there is a certain timidity when dealing with others, especially in a professional context.

We live in a world where appropriate recompense is expected when something is done wrong which harms us. So did Ezekiel. But in Ezekiel's time it was an even more pervasive system. If, unlikely as it might seem, my mother went on a shoplifting spree, and before she was caught she had managed to steal and dispose of so much loot that she could not give it back, and could not pay the fine imposed on her, I might be surprised, and saddened. I might decide that I wanted to help her pay the fine, but I would not be legally obliged to do so. If she couldn't pay her fine she would have to take the consequences in bankruptcy or in a prison term. The law says that it is her responsibility, not mine. Likewise, if you were driving down the A7 at 90 MPH, and hit two children, killing or injuring them, you would have to face the consequences, but the law would not demand that two of your own children were likewise harmed to make all things fair. It wasn't your children's fault, and they are not expected to pay.

But in Ezekiel's day that is just what was expected. Recompense and retribution were the all-important factors in justice, and they must be satisfied, even if in the end they were met by the parent or the child of the offender. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," said Moses, and that was sometimes carried to extremes. The payments must be met, though the family go on paying to the third and fourth generation. And so when Ezekiel came to the exiles, who were wondering whose fault their exile was, and told them that this is not how God works at all, it must have been a breath of fresh air and good news indeed.

The people knew, the prophets had warned them, that exile would be the result of their neglect of God, or of only paying lip-service to living in ways which

honoured him. And exile had come. But there were good people, godly people still in the nation. Did they count for nothing? And Ezekiel says not for nothing, but you can't lean on the goodness of others. He cites Noah, Daniel and Job (this is not the Daniel that we know from the book of that name - he is still a young man at the time of the exile. This is a legendary patriarch, found in Phoenician texts, the story of whose righteousness was obviously widely known). The three patriarchs Ezekiel mentions were all known for being godly, being righteous, but even their presence cannot save a whole land, says Ezekiel. They can save only themselves. Each person has a personal responsibility and there are no short-cuts.

This is the word of warning that every nation, every church must hear. We can't slide into God's favour on the coat-tails of others. Each person is responsible for their own righteousness before God. As someone once said, God has no grandchildren.

But now the years of exile were dragging on. Were the children to pay for the sins of the fathers? And Ezekiel says "No." Whatever might have been the custom of the past, in legal terms, in God's terms, just as every person has a personal responsibility, and the fate of a nation or a church is dependant on each one taking up their responsibility, and following God's ways for themselves, so no one will be blamed for the fault of another, and no one will be asked to pay for the fault of another. Up until now the prophets, while often addressing specific leading individuals, have tended to speak to the nation as a whole. But now Ezekiel comes in God's name and speaks to each individual - not just to the kings and priests. God, he says, is concerned about how each one relates to him, and God wants to be fair to each person individually.

The spiritual health of nation or church is promoted when each person puts effort into living in right relationship with God - which, of course, includes living in right relationship with each other.

This is more like the sort of justice that we know, where I do not have to pay for the putative crimes of my mother, and your parents do not have to pay for your misdemeanours.

But when Jesus came the whole concept of divine justice was taken a step further. It did not become unfair, but it became more than fair. God's justice is now seen to be generous. God had said that each must bear the price of their own sins. But Jesus came and took that price for us. I might choose to pay for my mother's shoplifting (she doesn't really!), even though I wouldn't have to. In the same way Jesus took the penalty for us, not because the law said that he must, but because his Father said that he might. It is not our fault that he died, not cause and effect. And yet it was for our faults that he chose, in his love, to die and pay the penalty.

St. Paul puts it very starkly when he talks of us as God's enemies. Maybe that is not how you have ever pictured yourself, as an enemy of God. But Paul says that while we carry our sin on our own shoulders, that is what we are. Just as when we live thoughtlessly, going along with the accepted norms of our culture, our actions can harm others, without our even knowing about it; just as our shopping habits can reinforce poverty on people on the other side of the world, without our meaning to do so, or even being aware that we are doing this; in the same way when we have to carry the burden of our own wrongdoing we are cut off from God, opposed to him, whether we mean to be or not.

But Jesus came to take the penalty, the pay the fine which he did not owe, to suffer the punishment which he had not earned, and across the account of all our debts, all our fines, all the penalties we incur from God's justice is written, "Paid in

full.”

And so, says Paul, the difference to us complete. Previously we were God’s enemies, but now we can boast about God - we can celebrate our relationship with him. That is what being church is about. It is about us coming together to join with each other in celebrating the relationship we have with God, who is and has again become our Father.

When we come to the communion table this morning this is what we are doing, we are celebrating Jesus’ death for us, and celebrating our consequent union with God, and through him with each other. No wonder that we talk about the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. It is indeed the most joyful of all feasts. It is a reminder to us of God’s most generous justice, which does not demand an eye for an eye, but offers us his whole self, to bear our penalty and set us free from the burden of our guilt.

Ezekiel was concerned for the spiritual well-being of his nation, scattered in exile. We are concerned for the well-being of nation and of our church, especially as the two seem sometimes to be growing ever further apart. And God comes to us with his generous justice, encouraging each one of us to allow Christ to take our deserved penalties, and to help us grow in our relationship with our creator. As each of us does this, so God’s people will grow, and his church will become strong and healthy, able to celebrate and witness to his presence in all things.