



Building a just and compassionate society: Merely an option for Christians?

An address by Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society
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I would like to begin by acknowledging and paying my respects to the elders and traditional custodians of this land, the Ngambri People. I wish to pay tribute to their sense of story and their spirit of collective hope. In preparing for tonight I was reminded of a time recently when I travelled through Wiradjuri Country on the way to Ryleston. The land there was beautiful but the hills were crying. I could feel an incredible sense of sadness in the landscape, a feeling that something was not right. This is, of course, the place where countless Wiradjuri women, men and children fled and were mercilessly slaughtered. This is exactly where we encounter that primeval call to social justice in the scriptures: “*Listen to the sound of your brother’s blood crying out to me from the ground!*” (Genesis 4:10). This is the first biblical attempt to historicize the fact of injustice and the belief in God’s intervention on the side of those who have suffered injustice.

I will divide this presentation into three sections: (1) Sacredness and liberation; (2) Justice v. cultus; and (3) The politics of hope.

Sacredness and liberation

I recently heard a story about a very openly drug-addicted mother bringing her children to a Vinnies Homework Help Programme. She spent the first afternoon leaning against the wall, swaying constantly. In explaining why she had brought her children along she said very simply that she didn’t want them to end up like her. She wanted them to have a better chance.

There are two motifs in this little story: *sacredness* and *liberation*. Together they form the heart of the social justice imperative that permeates the scriptures. *Sacredness* screams out at us, for instance, in the passage from *Exodus* where God says to Moses: “*Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*” In the same passage *liberation* looms large in that incredible prototype of all of God’s promises: “*I have witnessed the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors. I know what they are suffering and have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians...*”

The drug-addicted mother, like most of those who have been left out or pushed out in Australia today, is amongst the most despised in our society. She is regularly and roundly blamed and condemned for her choices and for her ongoing dependence on others. She is characterized by many as being nothing short of barbaric because of her unseemly behaviour in a seemingly civilized country. Little, or no analysis, is ever performed on the social and economic structures that have slammed shut the doors of opportunity and inclusion in her face. Little attention is given to the likelihood that she will be subjected to some of the harshest features of recent Welfare Legislation combined with coercion at the low end of the labour market.

The place where this mother is standing, even if she is swaying against a wall; the place where she is standing, is sacred ground. Her story is sacred. Her love for her children, the fact that she wants for them an education she did not have, is sacred. Her life is sacred. This sacredness is a sign of something absolutely revolutionary: that God is on her side.

Yes. The God of the Bible takes sides. Not with those of one religion as against another, even though the Bible has often been domesticated to make it appear thus. No. The God of the Bible is on the side of the poor, on the side of the oppressed.

In taking their side, the liberation that is envisaged is of the kind that surgically strikes at the heart of that which causes or exacerbates their suffering, their oppression, their exclusion. We are all charged with this inescapably hard but joyful mission. The seeds of liberation are right here. We stand on sacred ground; ground on which suffering has been known and hope inflamed. When we commit to stand in solidarity with the despised we join them in becoming “new forces and new passions” springing up in the bosom of society.

In taking the side of the oppressed, however, we are also called to take a stance against the structures that makes them poor, keeps them poor and blames them for their poverty. We are called by the God of the Bible to take part in a liberating critique of the causes of their oppression.

It was the 17th Century in which an anonymous English wit penned the following piece of doggerel:

*The Law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the Common,
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the Common from under the goose.*

Indeed, then as now, the common wealth and common good are systematically purloined. Then, as now, however, it is far easier to construct a method of individual punishment in place of a vision of social justice. In the past decade in Australia we have witnessed a 50% increase in the number of people imprisoned. Can we ignore the fact that during roughly the same period we have seen a 28% reduction in real terms in the level of Commonwealth funding for Indigenous, Community and Public housing?

It is a dangerous thing to denounce the causes of oppression. It is also dangerously counter-cultural to announce the Good News that another kind of world is possible in our midst. But, as the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero put it so beautifully:

*Even when they call us mad,
when they call us subversives and communists
and all the other epithets they put on us,
we know we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes,
which have turned everything upside down.*

The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth urged us to pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. One, he argued, reveals who is on the heart of God: the poor, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the marginal; the other where to seek them.

We are called by our common humanity to struggle for a just society, for a “turning upside down” to use the revolutionary principle of the Beatitudes. The sacredness of those on the margins, their liberation from the structures that exclude them; this was what we are called to live for. This is where we encounter our God: incarnate in the flesh, the blood, the stories of the poor. There is nothing more beautiful or more human than this struggle.

As Teilhard de Chardin put it: “*We have the right and the duty to be passionate about the things of the earth.*”

Especially when the earth cries out because of the blood that has been shed upon it.

Justice v. cultus

In taking the revolutionary stand on the side of the oppressed, the God of the Bible expresses an equally shocking rejection of *cultus*; a rejection of cultic worship inasmuch as it displaces real worship of the God who is present in the cry of the poor:

When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (Isaiah 1: 15-16).

*I hate and despise your feasts,
I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals.
When you offer me holocausts,
I reject your oblations,
And refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle.
Let me have no more of the din of your chanting,
No more of your strumming on harps.
But let right flow like a river
And justice like an unfailing stream.
(Amos 5: 21-24)*

The God of the Bible, the God who is defined in liberating act of the Exodus, is speaking loudly and clearly: I do not want cultus, but rather inter-human justice.

The prohibition of images is intrinsically linked to this uncompromising stance. An image or idol can be approached directly and worshipped. It does not answer back. The moral imperative to do justice and right, however, is a word made flesh in our sisters and brothers. The fundamental rejection or domestication of this biblical message results in a world where those who pursued and massacred the Wiradjuri women, men and children were at the same time able to offer worship to “God” in a Christian context.

The God of the Bible, on the contrary, is expressly identified by a historical intervention that is two-fold: on the side of the oppressed and against the oppressor:

*Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless.
(Isaiah 10: 1-3)*

*Woe to those who hoard up house on house,
And link field to field
Till they occupy the whole place,
And there they are alone in the middle of the land!
(Isaiah 5:8)*

*Confide not in exploitation
And make no illusions about spoliation;
Place not your heart in the wealth that grows great.
(Psalm 62:10)*

*Because he oppressed the poor, and left them in the lurch,
Therefore he stole houses instead of building them.
(Job 20:19)*

*Fat and sleek they have grown;
They went beyond words of evil:
They did no justice, they trod upon the rights of orphans,
They respected not the justice of the poor.*
(Jeremiah 5:28)

Even the city of Sodom, not usually associated with social justice discourse, is cited by the prophet Ezekiel as an example of social injustice against the oppressed: “*The crime of your sister Sodom was luxury, opulence, complacency; such were the sins of Sodom and her daughters. They never helped the poor and needy*” (Ezekiel 16:49).

These condemnations of oppression are not merely the cry of the conscious-stricken armchair critic. Rather, they are uncompromising demands on those who wish to know God:

*He defended the cause of the poor and the needy;
This is good.
Is not this what it means to know me? It is Yahweh who speaks.*
(Jeremiah 22:16)

The directive here is clear: to defend the cause of the poor and the needy is to know God. This, rather than cultic worship, is to know God. God self-identifies as the One who liberates: “*I am Yahweh your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*” (Exodus 20:2).

The politics of hope

The Brazilian educational theorist, Paulo Freire, issued the challenge to us to prophetically denounce the bad news so as to prophetically announce the good news. This is a hope that not only promises justice but is rooted in the here-and-now.

Paul, reflecting on the faith of Abraham, described him thus: “*Against all hope he believed in hope*” (Romans 4:18). The social justice imperative of the Bible is steeped in hope. In today’s context this is the hope that another world is possible against the pronouncement that “There Is No Alternative” to the Neo-liberal trajectory. This hope is a profound mystery in the face of the *status quo* and the assumption of the limits of the possible. As John Berger wrote, in *Pig Earth*, “*Mystery is not what can be hidden deliberately, but rather ... the fact that the gamut of the possible can always surprise us.*”

My hope against hope is that those who are oppressed and marginalised are beginning to collectively ask these crucial questions:

*What is it that has excluded me?
What is it that has isolated me?*

As the Indigenous Brazilian proverb reminds us:

*When we dream alone it is only a dream
But when we dream together it is the beginning of reality.*

The reality announced in the Gospel is unequivocally bound up with the historical self-liberation of the oppressed by the oppressed, supported by those who stand in real solidarity with them. This is expressed concisely in the revolutionary declaration known as the Beatitudes:

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*Blessed are you who weep now,
 for you will laugh.
 Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame
 you on account of the Son of Man.
 Rejoice in that Day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven;
 for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.
 But woe to you who are rich,
 for you have received your consolation.
 Woe to you who are full now,
 for you will be hungry.
 Woe to you who are laughing now,
 for you will mourn and weep.
 Woe to you when all speak well of you,
 for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*
 (Luke 6: 17-26)

This prophetic hope in a revolutionary re-ordering of values and social relations is contrary to the received logic which dictates that such change is not only impossible but undesirable. This hope against hope, however is re-affirmed time and time again throughout the scriptures:

And the lowly shall become the lords of the earth.
 (Psalm 37: 11)

The just shall inherit the earth.
 Psalm 37: 29

He shall lift you up to take possession of the earth.
 (Psalm 37: 34)

*He has pulled down the mighty from their thrones
 and lifted up those who are downtrodden.
 He has filled the hungry with good things
 and sent the rich away empty.*
 (Luke 1: 52-53)

*And now you rich people, listen to me! Weep and wail over the miseries that are coming
 upon you!
 Your riches have rotted away, and your clothes have been eaten by moths.
 Your gold and silver are covered with rust, and this rust will be a witness against you and
 will eat up your flesh like fire.
 You have not paid any wages to the men who work for you in your fields.
 Listen to their complaints!
 The cries of those who gather in your crops have reached the ears of God the Almighty.
 Your life here on earth has been full of luxury and pleasure.
 You have made yourselves fat for the day of slaughter.
 You have condemned and murdered innocent people, and they do not resist you.*
 (James 5: 1-6)

This hope against hope is also made incarnate in the historical suffering and the historical emergence of new forces and new passions for social justice and social change. These testimonials to the creativity of the oppressed emerge from deep within the heart of social structures that enslave and exploit. These structures, however, remain unable to kill hope.

So closely did Jesus align himself with this hope that he defined his “Mission Statement” wholly in terms of this liberating project:

He opened the scroll and found the passage which says:

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me
Because he has anointed me;
He has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
To proclaim liberty for captives,
Recovery of sight for the blind,
To let the broken victims go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.
(Luke 4: 17-19, quoting Isaiah 61:12)*

He accordingly sets down the same criteria for his teaching on the achievement of final justice:

*I was hungry and you gave me to eat.
I was thirsty and you gave me to drink.
I was a stranger and you took me in;
Sick and you visited me;
Imprisoned and you came to see me.
(Matthew 25: 35 -36)*

This solidarity with the most despised and devalued is central to the scriptures. It is also central to the most progressive movements in human history, the greatest expressions of tenderness and compassion. The ancient Roman poet, Terence, proclaimed:

I am human; nothing that is human is alien to me.

This gives us comfort inasmuch as it galvanises us in our resolve to prophetically denounce that which excludes and announce that which can liberate. In a country where 2 out of 3 children who need support from a homelessness service are turned away, it should not be too hard to know the problems nor to identify the solutions. St Augustine wrote:

Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.

When we commit ourselves to the side of those who are structural excluded and oppressed, we have the amazing promise that things will *not* remain the way they are:

*I have seen the oppressor mighty, towering like a cedar of Lebanon.
But when I passed by gain, he was no longer there.
I looked for him but could not find him. (!)
(Psalm 37: 35-36)*

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