

Justice : Retribution or Restoration?

A sermon by the Revd Dick Wolff, Temple Cowley United Reformed Church, 22nd June 2008

In a rather strange medical consultation with my doctor (a conservative evangelical Christian) he suggested to me that the Church in Britain is lazy about evangelism because it no longer believes in eternal punishment for those who have not given their lives to Christ. Has Christianity here gone 'wet' as a result, and lost its cutting edge? Does it need to start taking the threat of eternal punishment a bit more seriously again?

There's nothing wrong with helping people deal with their fears and anxieties. Pointing people who are afraid of eternal punishment to the atoning power of Christ's sacrifice is quite in order.

There's nothing wrong with heightening people's fear and anxiety if there is a genuine danger they are not aware of. Risk assessments are part of life nowadays. If, on the other hand, you're *creating* fears and anxieties when they are *not* justified you are an agent of Satan.

Is eternal punishment in life after death a genuine danger or not? No one can know.

John Calvin, great 16th century theologian of our Reformed tradition, wanted to rule out any idea that you can appease God's anger with our sin with religious rituals.

Faith, however is a different matter : it is Christ's once-for-all atoning sacrifice that appeases God's wrath, and faith in that sacrifice replaces the religion of sacrifice. "Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling."

But Calvin even hedges that round with qualifiers. God is God, and knows his own – his own 'elect'. We can never be sure who those elect are. Is this Calvin's way of making sure that people don't think it's enough to recite a faith statement, go to church, to win God's favour? To have the baby baptised – inoculated against the wrath of God so that it doesn't have to worry about religion again?

Again, there's good scriptural warrant for saying that God's not desperately impressed by religious fervour. In Matthew, we're told he's not even terribly impressed by prophetic preaching and healing miracles done in Jesus's name.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my heavenly Father. When the day comes, many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Out of my sight; your deeds are evil!"

Matthew 7 : 21 - 23

So is it (1) a matter of winning God's favour by doing God's will – working for justice with compassion – or (2) putting faith in the atoning power of the cross; or is it neither of these, because essentially (3) it's a lottery – God will choose those whom he will choose, the rest go on the dustcart, and there's nothing anyone can do about it? All of these strands, and others, find their place in Scripture. There's no single

message, although of course extremists of all types like to think theirs is the only interpretation.

My GP clearly stands in the narrow part of the tradition that says that unless you put your trust in the atoning power of Christ's blood you're going to hell, and therefore if you find someone in your surgery who you're having to tell that they have a life-threatening illness, the kindest advice you can give them is to put their faith in Jesus's atoning sacrifice. Even if you can't prolong their life on earth, at least then you can improve their prospects after death. I don't know whether my GP actually does this, but if he did, would it be good pastoral care, or an abuse of power?

I, like many people – it's been a characteristic of English philosophy for centuries, actually – find speculation about things we cannot know about (i.e. life after death) unhelpful. No one living can speak with authority about it. The only one who could have was Jesus, and the interesting (and largely forgotten) thing about that was that when he appeared to the disciples after his death – the disciples who had failed and deserted him – there is no judgement or condemnation on his lips. Instead, there is forgiveness and encouragement. He doesn't say "well, you really blew it, didn't you? You see now I was right all along. You'd better grovel because otherwise you're going to hell – I've visited hell and it's not nice." Instead, he says "Peace be with you" and gives them authority over the nations.

What matters is what we can know of God in this life, because I see no reason why God should view us differently after death than before (the parable of the 'wheat and the weeds' in Matt 13 : 24 - 30 addresses a different issue – the weeds can be perfectly aware that they are under judgment before the harvest). Some of course don't believe in a God that has any reality for them outside this life, and don't believe in life after death. That lack of belief in life after death, pretty much, is typical of the entire Old Testament. For most Old Testament writers our life after death is the legacy we leave on earth. The importance of that legacy is undeniable, whether we believe there's life for us on the other side or not – so all humans, religious or not, have common ground there.

But what if our legacy is suffering and disaster? If Robert Mugabe dies peacefully and with a clean conscience in his bed, does it mean that he's got away with his crimes, because there's no afterlife in which he will get his just deserts? If his suffering people could tell themselves that he is experiencing the pain of eternal torment on the other side, would it make their suffering any less, or their prospects of peace any greater? Or suppose you believe that 'on the other side' he will meet with a forgiving God – a forgiving God, bearing the scars of a beating by Zanu-PF's War Veterans henchmen. He would still be faced with the painful truth of his life, perhaps for the first time since he would no longer be surrounded by henchmen who for years have only told him what he wanted to hear (to preserve their own power).

Actually, these speculations about life after death play out in the world as it is, and how we deal with questions of justice.

The atheist position – that there is no life after death; what matters is the legacy you leave – doesn't really offer much justice if the legacy of the one who's died is a broken, destitute nation. All you could do is say, "Well, Mugabe's gone. He's

escaped justice. We just have to accept it and move on.” My belief is that ‘just accepting it’ is not as easy as that if it means there is no justice done. Let me read to you what a Romanian writer said to BBC journalist John Simpson shortly after Elena and Nicolai Ceausescu had been recklessly tried behind closed doors by a kangaroo court interested only in executing them, and then immediately shot and buried them in obscure graves :

We Romanians will always suffer as a result of Ceausescu. He made everyone afraid of everybody else, and he made it impossible for any of us to take our own decisions, to think or act for ourselves. Ceausescu is inside every one of us, and we haven't killed him yet. If we had given him a proper trial, we might have dealt with him. Now we can't. That is his revenge on all of us.

John Simpson, 'Despatches from the Barricades : an eyewitness account of the revolutions that shook the world 1989 - 90', Hutchinson 1990, p.253

The conservative evangelical has a bleak view of human nature based on a flawed understanding of original sin (*see notes at the end*), and believes that without God, all of us sinners leave a poor, destructive legacy. If God does not punish there is no hope for the world. But God's justice is a *retributive* justice : ‘as you sow, so shall you reap’. And if you don't ‘reap’ in this world, you'll reap it in the next, unless and until your spirit is broken and you cling for mercy to the cross of Christ (a theology based on an inadequate and partial understanding of atonement – *see notes at the end*). Usually interpreted as meaning you become a Christian. The plus side of this view is that we can leave God to settle our scores – ‘Vengeance is mine, says the Lord’ (Romans 12 : 19) – and we ourselves feel no need to take revenge ourselves.

But *is* God's justice *retributive* justice? An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? As Mahatma Gandhi famously said, in a world where it's an ‘eye for an eye’ we'll all end up blind. It's ‘eye for an eye’ retributive justice that is disabling any prospect of justice for the people of the Gaza strip.

I believe the Gospel witness is that God's justice is not retributive, punishment-based justice. The trouble with the evangelical teaching that Jesus bears the punishment that a righteous God must mete out on sin – and it's true there are one or two verses in the New Testament that give that understanding – is that it's only part of the picture. The whole picture is that God's justice isn't about settling scores and buying God off with sacrifice. It's about *restorative* justice, as the perpetrator of crimes is brought face to face with their victim – with a view to exposing the whole truth and looking for the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

To those who still believe that God's justice is achieved by punishment, restorative justice isn't justice at all. It's wet; it's letting people off the hook. Why should the police feel motivated to go out and catch criminals if all that will happen is that they are brought face to face with their victims? Well, the police *are* motivated, because research (in the few schemes that are operating) is indicating that *it works*. For many who are lost in criminal ways, being punished is the easy option. Many have been brought up with fear, neglect and exclusion, and being punished is par for the course. In some cases, a prison sentence is viewed as a certificate of criminal boldness, and a passport to further criminal learning in prison – those great universities of crime.

Only 40% of victims in the UK believe that justice by punishment works (one reason why politicians mistakenly feel they have to give the impression they're getting tougher and tougher). Of those victims who've been through a restorative justice meeting with their offender, many more (I don't know the exact figure) feel that justice has been done. For the offender, the prospect of meeting their victim is at first terrifying and painful. Afterwards, 80% felt they were less likely to reoffend.

The truth is that God's justice doesn't work by retribution but by restoration. Remorseless, tireless, persistent, ruthlessly truthful but forgiving pursuit of restoration. The point of the cross is that it is the *world's* justice that crucifies, not God's.

If to some Christians it seems liberal and wet, I would point them to the parable of the prodigal son. The Father, in the story of the prodigal son, *is* wet. He's a sucker. He's the laughing stock of the village : his son has made an idiot of him in full public view not once but twice (because there's no real suggestion in the story that the prodigal son's repentance is heartfelt or genuine), and yet still the father invites the whole village to the party to celebrate the return of this nasty selfish piece of work, this son. It's an offensive image of God – just as offensive as Jesus being tortured to death. And many conservative evangelical Christians just can't bring themselves to believe it – not really. They're sort of half way there. God is love – he welcomes you sinners back with a velvet glove. But if you don't accept the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, if you're not duly grateful – wham! a great clunking iron fist in the velvet glove comes smacking into your face.

Does this wet, liberal God create problems for evangelism? Well, if evangelism is about sniffing out people's secret fears and anxiety, their lack of confidence, secret fears of inadequacy and so on, and hyping them up in order to gain another Jesus-worshipper, then yes I guess it does. But although Jesus in the gospels certainly punctures people's false sense of confidence – most especially the false confidence of those who consider themselves saved – I don't see him working that way at all.

In our excellent Bible study last Wednesday – pity you missed it! – we studied Mark's account of Palm Sunday in chapter 11. Fascinating – I learned a lot. Jesus challenges the whole Temple system. That religious system based on retributive (not restorative) justice, based on protection from God's anger by offering sacrifice, buying God off with sacrifice. There's a story of a fig tree – that Temple system – that looks fine but doesn't bear fruit. It doesn't deliver what it promises; Jesus curses it and it withers. He tells his disciples that by faith they can move mountains – the mountain in question, clearly, the Temple Mount. If you dare to believe it, he tells his disciples, the mountain is already dumped in the sea. Don't be hoodwinked by its glory and its threats – they're empty. Once, by faith, you realise that it has no eternal credibility, it no longer needs to influence your life (although to be sure it still has the power to inflict punishment on your *body* in this world – and probably will). And then there's this verse which seems not to fit :

And when you stand praying, if you have a grievance against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you the wrongs you have done.

Mark 11 : 25

But actually it's not out of place at all. Forgiveness and being put right with God is what the Temple was supposed to be all about. But, says Jesus, you don't need that Temple system – you don't need a great religious system – to be put right with God. In fact (by implication) you don't even need *me*. By faith, you can dump it in the sea – forget it. What you need to do instead is to *forgive others*. You don't need to say creeds, go to church. The way you say sorry to God is by saying sorry to the people you have wronged, and by forgiving those who have wronged you. *That's* how you let God's forgiveness into your lives and into the world. When you learn what it's like to be forgiven for things you regret – how humbling it is – you'll begin to get a sniff of what salvation feels like.

Don't ever think this is easy (either forgiving others or accepting forgiveness). The path to salvation is a narrow one, and many try but can't find it in themselves to forgive, or admit their need of forgiveness. Some don't even try. How people discover that power is a mystery and each story is unique. No slogan can do it justice. The idea that giving and receiving forgiveness is a cushy path, a soft route, for wet liberals is rubbish. It is the toughest of paths in this world, demanding great humility and great courage. Its rewards – so I believe (for I have hardly tasted them) – are eternally great. (Have a look at 'The Forgiveness Project' website – reference at the end).

There are many in this world who don't want to hear this message. They want to continue living in a sort of East Enders world of bitterness and recrimination, grudges and scores to settle, of envy of others' joy and success, of needing to protect yourself against those who bear you a grudge – a sort of eternal East Enders (where you can never avoid the people you hate and who hate you because somehow you always end up in the 'Queen Vic'). To me, it's a vision of hell. If people want to live eternally in that sort of world and won't be persuaded there's a better way, well I'll defend their right to go to hell if they choose.

But – and this is the challenge – it is incumbent on us to proclaim and live out a better way. The way of restorative, not retributive, justice pioneered by Jesus.

The reason why many churches in Britain are so poor at evangelism is not that they've gone wet on God's harsh justice. It's that following a century of the most thorough Biblical study in Christian history, they've realised that Jesus was more radical than we thought. He actually put an end to justice based on retribution once for all, and replaced it with justice based on restoration. And God's justice based on restoration – which is immensely 'Good News' – is unfortunately not what the world wants to hear. Redemption through violence sells papers, blockbuster movies, and fills churches (those churches that still believe in it). People forgiving each other doesn't.

Worse, we're beginning to realise that evangelism isn't about individuals preaching theories of atonement – it's about church communities demonstrating in their own lives the immense courage, humility, sheer hard work and costly joy involved in forgiveness and reconciliation amongst themselves. And tragically, that is the one thing that Christians seem to be finding very very hard. Until Christians can demonstrate a gracefulness and the ability (as the Caryl Micklem hymn has it) to 'clash and forgive' our evangelism will inevitably be disabled. Those who insist on

God being a slave to his own wrath, for all that they believe it is evangelism they are engaged in, are profoundly mistaken. They are engaging in something rather more worldly, for all its apparent success.

Follow up notes

See www.theforgivenessproject.com & www.restorativejustice.org.uk

Penal substitutionary atonement is thoroughly critiqued in 'On Being Liked' by Catholic theologian James Alison, who has also written a seminal work on Original Sin – 'The Joy of Being Wrong : Original Sin through Easter Eyes'.

Margaret Barker's book 'Temple Theology' and 'Temple Themes in Christian Worship' indicate how it is that substitutionary atonement is only part of the story. Jesus seems to have knowingly substituted himself not only for the sacrificial goat (in the atonement liturgy) but also for the high priest who 'becomes Yahweh for the people', for the veil that separates the Holy of Holies and indeed for the temple building itself. His pronouncing of forgiveness and restoration, then (which *preceded* his crucifixion) was in God's name by virtue of his effectively claiming the high priesthood. God was a forgiving, restoring God *before* Jesus himself became a sacrifice, and the crucifixion demonstrates that it is the world's altar, not God's altar on which that sacrifice took place.