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Embracing Justice

Summary of Introduction and Section 1

Introduction

From our early days we realize that even in families there are disparities – some branches of even a close family have luxury holidays, special music lessons, better clothes etc than others. As children the cry often goes up “it’s not fair.”

But what is fair? What is just? What is justice? We all long for justice and fairness, but these concepts are not fixed but formed by our background, culture, society, and for those of us who are people of faith, our theological formation and Scripture.

“The Bible is steeped in the language of justice, and the people of God, throughout Old and New Testaments, are called to do justice as a central aspect of their vocation. What justice is this, and how can it help us wrestle with doing justice for today?”

There is no one-size fits all answer, even with Scripture – and Scripture is a product of cultures and systems which shaped the writers.

“The Bible does not have one story of justice, it has many. It speaks of justice in many voices, which interweave and nuance one another. If we use only one story as a definitive statement on justice, we distort the biblical witness as a whole, and reduce justice to a monolithic concept, rather than a vocation to be worked out in every new time and place.”

The book looks at several threads: justice in creation accounts, justice as liberation, justice as building healthy communities, justice as relationship, justice as reconfiguration of power. We will consider how God works with humanity to bring justice, wholeness, and salvation to individuals and communities.

We begin with stories. “Whether with Scripture or with today’s world, everything starts with stories, rather than concepts, ideas or definitions. Scripture begins with stories, and everything it says refers to and reflects the wider arc of God’s work of creation, salvation and redemption. This is particularly important when talking about justice, because stories are about people; they do not allow us to conceptualize or abstract what we are talking about, but keep the reality of the suffering caused by injustice at the forefront of our minds.”

Stories offer no easy answers, they are filled with ambiguity, they are not tidy and can offer more questions than answers – inviting us to wrestle, and to work out how justice might be made real in our world today.

Section 1 Paradise Lost *In Search of original justice.*

Part 1 - Justice in Creation: Genesis 1-2

The image of God.

It's easy to think of justice as remedying wrongs, but this seems just a reduction of justice as a remedy for 'sin'. However, "we cannot label something a wrong, injustice, or inequality unless we have some vision of what life should be." In Christian terms, justice is not just remedial, but anchored deep in the very fabric of creation – reflecting the nature of God.

Genesis 1 and 2 are a different kind of story to the origin story told us by science and biology. 'Origin stories' – particularly those such as Nazism's 'Aryan superiority' are often used to exclude, oppress or debase. Many ancient origin stories privilege kings as those who are truly made in the image of God. Such stories seek to create definitions of 'normal'.

Genesis normalizes all being made in the image of God, and creation as good, abundant, and blessed. In a patriarchal society, for instance, even the statement that men and women are together made in the image of God is a radical statement. There is no value difference between any human beings. ALL are made in the image of God and all of creation is declared good.. Equality and justice are not aspirational, they are the baseline. "we cannot speak of justice unless it is anchored in the nature of God as revealed in creation; and we cannot speak of justice unless we engage seriously with the fact that every single human being, however objectionable, unpleasant, strange, offensive, uncomfortable or different, is made in the image of God."

Justice is therefore not about economics or meeting basic needs, it is about dignity, worth, and social goods like freedom, recognition, participation in society, decision-making, bodily and intellectual integrity. The image of God is the reason for the prohibition on murder, and the reason to treat all with honour.

How this is transformed into practice is still debated, though.

The beauty of difference

Equality and justice are not the same. Diversity and difference (as represented, metaphorically by 'male and female') are inherently part of being in the image of God. The importance isn't the image of gender, but the image of difference.

"Difference is acknowledged, yet held within the image of God, so that difference is no bar to equality and worth, but a cherished aspect of humanity. Attending to difference may mean treating different people differently..." Legal provisions, for instance, are made to recognize the vulnerability of children. Taxes in many countries relate to wealth.

Genesis sets up the dynamic tension between equality and difference right from the start/

A world of connections

Interdependence is rooted in Genesis 1 and reinforced in the parallel account in Genesis 2. The words 'man; and 'woman' appear when there are two of them, before that 'the man' is 'the adam' – ha-adama, meaning of the earth (Adamah) We are anchored to the earth from which we come, we are tethered to the natural world.

Human beings appear later in creation, they are not the centre of everything. They cannot live without the resources creation supplies. When all creation is done, God declares, in all its interdependent glory, it is 'very good'. What does that say about our responsibility as human beings? Western countries have often treated nature as if it is humanity's to use in whatever way they wish. The responsibility in the Genesis accounts, though, is to tend to the earth, to respect it, to care for it. As we move through Scripture, the

laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy stress this and give instruction of how to care for the land, and remind us how human actions affect the land.

Discovering God in creation

Humanity is not childlike – but gifted with the dignity of free will, and the responsibilities which come with that. The nature of God emerges in the creation myth – there are “more colours, more plants, more animals, more ecosystems than strictly ‘needed’.” Creation reflects the generosity at the heart of the Divine, it is not utilitarian, nor minimalist, but abundant.

Creation gives to humanity, and God confers the dignity of responsibility for creation upon humanity. The invitation is for us to demonstrate the same kind of abundant generosity, trust, and life giving relationships that God displays in creation. Further more, the inclusion of sabbath rest is a recognition that work and production do not define the whole of God, “work stops, and the stopping is hallowed as nothing else was.”

Questions

1. What stories/explanations do you have for how the world is organized? For inequality in society, locally and worldwide?
2. How do/could you consciously honour ‘the image of God’ in the people you meet? In the people whose stories you see on the news? Are there people you struggle to see the ‘image of God’ in? What might help?
3. What parts of your life are obviously interdependent with the wider creation? How might you become more conscious of your impact on nature, and its impact on you?

Part 2 - When good goes bad: Genesis 3

A breakdown in relationships

How did we get from justice and abundance in Genesis 1,2 to inequality, abuse, injustice, and oppression? Genesis 3 answers this theologically.

God places limits on humanity, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil “not gratuitously, but out of loving care.” God is seeking to teach humanity the value of relationship, decision making, learning. The tree symbolizes the power to define good and evil, but divorced from relationship. The couple had full access to God, they could ask any question they wished, but the temptation the tree represents is independence rather than interdependence. Instead of learning right and wrong within relationship it becomes externalized, categorized, divorced from relationship.

The world of harmony and interdependence crumbles. They hide from one another (by clothing themselves) then from God. They blame one another, they blame God ‘the woman you gave to me...’, they blame creation ‘the serpent made me do it’. Relationships break down. Hierarchy and inequality appear. Pain and struggle appear. The breakdown of human relationship to the earth appears. ‘The man’ dominates ‘the woman’, naming her ‘Eve’ and himself ‘Adam’ – now a ‘proper name’ not a representation of human relationship to the ground.

Genesis 3 and justice

Calling this ‘the fall’ suggests a one time event – yet the story is meant to invite us to see ourselves within this ongoing story.

The individualization of ethics

Firstly - Humans seek to define right and wrong for themselves, rather than in relationship to God and to the earth, putting ourselves (says the story) at the centre – “this leads to marketized ethics and unbridled individualism as people do ‘what is right in their own eyes’. Multiple visions of right and wrong compete, and it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint what ‘justice’ actually is.”

When the people pursue radical freedom and radical individualism, communal identity fragments and disintegrates. There is less agreement on a shared ethic, and harder to ‘do justice’. The questions arise ‘what is justice? For whom? How do we know?’”

The sins of the father

Secondly - The story highlights from here the continuity of humanity, and the impact of one generation upon the next. What is more helpful here is to consider how our actions, choices, mistakes, and sin will affect not just ourselves but those to come. Some have used the term ‘original trauma’ to describe the story. “How does a recognition of intergenerational dynamics help us think about justice? How do we weigh personal responsibility alongside influences, pain, and brokenness?”

Those who have known nothing but pain, or exclusion, or crime, or trauma are bound to pass it on, and see it as the only way of living open to the, Hamley illustrates this with some of her experiences in the probation system as a social worker. Then, referring to Exodus 34 she talks of the iniquity of the parents being visited upon the generations that follow. Children endure or participate in ‘sin’s consequences’ The reference to family can be easily transferred to community, as we realize the actions of those before us have affected us. Also we are reminded that in Exodus 34.6-7 the passage may refer to the consequences of iniquity being passed on, but begins with Grace towards many generations. Justice and love are held together.

From abundance to scarcity

Thirdly in Genesis 3 we see the change in the human mindset from abundance to scarcity. From co-operation and abundance in the garden, the scene shifts to harder work, “the earth’s bounty diminishes, animals become a threat, and human beings jostle for power and status.” A scarcity mindset emerges, encouraging competition, and mediating against co-operation, sharing, and generosity. Acquisition, even hoarding, become a way humans deal with a fear of scarcity.

“...an imagination shaped by scarcity constrains and limits our approaches to justice by defining what is ‘possible’ or ‘reasonable’ according to the need to survive and keep ourselves safe. The stories of Scripture call us back to an imagination of generosity and abundance, to proclaim confidently a different way of being, even when faced with scarcity.”

Scarcity is never an excuse for oppression and abuse. Poverty is never simply due to a dearth of physical resources but tied up with a lack of co-operation or a care for the vulnerable. A society rooted in an imagination of scarcity often demonizes or excludes certain groups in order to justify not including them in the sharing of resources.

In Scripture ‘the poor’ – as we translate the Hebrew world – might be better translated as ‘humiliated/afflicted/raped’. Poverty is rarely a result of their not being enough to go around. People are not being treated as though they are made in the image of God. Their humanity is diminished.

The suffering of the land

In our Scriptures justice is never reduced to humankind – the whole of creation suffers from injustice. Human actions have impact upon the land. This should lead us to consider the importance of eco-justice, and an understanding of our deep interconnectedness with not only one another but creation of which we are a part. The actions of one group will always affect others, and the world – as richer nations, for instance, cause environmental damage to the poorest parts of the globe.

We cannot consider justice apart from our place within the creation. And the complexities of such issues, remind us of the complexity of justice within human relationships also.

Questions

1. Try and think of situation where doing what is right or just is not obvious. What resources do you use to make a decision? Who defines what is just?
2. Watch the news or read the papers for today. How are different people groups represented? Can you see evidence of an 'economy of scarcity'? How might different groups tell their own story?
3. Can you take a product you have recently bought and trace its journey? How many hands have made it, distributed it, shaped it? How were they each treated?

Part 3 - In search of original justice

Learning to respond in a broken world

From Gen 1 & 2, a place of spontaneous equality and justice deriving from God's nature Gen 3 brings us to 'what next?' Bonds of interdependence break down, competition arises. How do we respond?

We have addressed these issues, as human beings, with theology, philosophy, politics, sociology – with many and varied (often contradictory) responses. Solutions, who is responsible, what needs addressing are all disagreed about.

As Christians if we turn to scripture we are not given a simple answer. Nor is there one political philosophy, structure or system of government lifted up. Primarily using stories Scripture invites us to interact with the text and its meanings and reminds us that justice is always rooted in specific context, time, culture, peoples. "Stories keep real people, their pain, hurts, and limitations, to the fore."

Scripture is honest in naming problems and consequences, categories around justice are sin, evil, choice, transgenerational trauma and damage, communal responsibility, brokenness and ruture. Guilt, shame, anger and punishment are held up against mercy, grace, forgiveness, restoration. How do we attended to the complexities of humanity and the text of scripture.

God appears as partner in this work, holding people responsible for their choices, yet walking with them as they face the consequence of their actions. "not to address evil is to fail the next generation – and the next and the next...To deal with evil and its unfolding consequences, in the universe of Scripture, is an act of love for an interconnected, interdependent, humanity."

Vestiges of justice

How does the harmony and justice of creation interact with the world post Gen 3. "Justice is not lost...it is distorted." Toddlers cry 'not fair', adults ask 'why me?' because we have some idea of how we feel the world should be. The imprint of creation is carried by all.

Paul talks of the law being written in all people's hearts, but that understanding is tempered with the understanding that human instinct and natural revelation are often twisted or incomplete. If cries of 'it's not fair' were completely rooted in a concern for justice then we would not tolerate the injustice and inequality we see in the world. The sense that justice and fairness should exist does not take us any further than our own individual way of thinking.

We are better at pointing at what we think injustice looks like, than agreeing on a model of human flourishing.

We are still prone to act sinfully, selfishly, shaped by a belief in scarcity. We are limited by our single human experience and injustice often has roots and contexts which shape it which we often cannot see, though this is not an excuse for inaction, but a recognition that attempting to be just needs to 'be marked by humility and provisionality' – and by facing up to the realities within ourselves, and our societies.

When in pandemic church moved online, many had access to virtual gathering who had no way to enter physical gathering, at the same time many were shut out by lack of resources or inability to grasp the technology. Looking at how to move forward will mean attending to a just solution to this. How do we work together to welcome all.

In Scripture wisdom is, amongst other things, to pursue justice and to be aware of our limitations and failings. Holding justice alongside grace and compassion and withholding judgement – on ourselves and others. Scripture addresses the desire to do right along with our own limitations lack of recognition of those limitations, particularly in parable – which often critique the hearer's presumptions. Prophets and storytellers often point out the limitations of our view of justice, or where we don't apply truly just values to our own actions.

We are limited – committed to justice, but often afraid to lose our comforts, our conveniences in order to make sure all we buy and use is fairly produced and traded. Generosity has limits for us. We recognize ourselves to be in unjust systems of trade and production, but are reluctant to look too deeply, or give up those things which we like. The interconnectedness of the world means that we exist often at the expense of others. We must face up to this reality, not allowing it to overwhelm us, but neither neglecting it – realizing that we are not the whole solution, but that we are part of addressing injustice. Justice, says Genesis 3, is always part of a larger story.

Justice in scripture

Justice within scripture comes from many contexts, cultures, languages. The word in English is not enough to encompass all the nuances in Scripture. Justice in scripture is often paired with 'righteousness'. Justice has implications of judging rightly, concerned with putting things right whilst righteousness is about putting something 'straight' with implications of relationship, connection, and context. One needs the other – the vision for what is right along with the desire to put it right. Other words linked with justice in scripture are 'loving kindness/steadfast love', compassion, mercy, love – attributes of the Divine, to be reflected in human action.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says justice must include charity because nothing in the world belongs to us – the land is given in trust to human beings, to hoard is therefore to hold to that which does not belong to us but is for the benefit of all.

The New Testament pairs justice and righteousness also. Jesus blesses those who 'hunger for righteousness' – communal and relational justice.

In Hebrew and Christian writings justice and righteousness are attributes of the divine, and to be lived out by humans as we follow in God's foot steps – being made in the image of God carries responsibility. Failing to seek justice is distorting the image of God, pursuing justice is the work of restoring and honouring that image.

Questions

1. When was the last time you thought, 'that's not fair!' Exactly what was unfair? How could it be put right? What might another person involved say?
2. What is your 'comfort zone' when it comes to 'doing justice'? What feels challenging to too big? Is there anything you would rather ignore?
3. What do your use of money and buying choices say about your priorities when it comes to justice?