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**Embracing Justice**

*Summary of Section 2*

**From bondage to freedom** *Exodus and liberation stories*

In section 1 we looked at the foundations of justice in Scripture using creation texts.

“These texts give a broad-brush account of what lies underneath the world we inhabit: divine gift, abundance and generosity; a deep valuing of human beings, their dignity and fundamental equality; the interdependence of people and creation, and the preciousness of the natural world. And, together with all these, a clarion call for humanity to mirror the divine nature. “

Hamley, Isabelle. Embracing Justice (p. 53). SPCK. Kindle Edition.

We move now to Exodus – foundation to the Scripture story “a book that shapes the rest of Scripture, and has fired religious and political imagination ever since.”

It’s a story with cosmic themes of good and evil, God’s mastery of creation, and liberation.

**Exodus 1: Inequality, injustice and violence –** *Key Text Exodus**1.8-22*

The scene is set, the story of Joseph and the people of Israel moves to the slavery of the nation. Then we see patterns, beginning with the development of institutional prejudice and discrimination. The Hebrews become ‘the other’, creating a ‘them and us’ with the Egyptians. Calling them other justifies their mistreatment and exploitation.

The story explores justice and injustice. Firstly the relationship between inequality and injustice – not the same thing but interrelated. Secondly, the power of words and imagination in shaping a narrative of ‘the other’ “The division of humanity between self and other prevents the meeting of real people.”. Third, a commentary on structural and institutional discrimination, as headed by Pharoah. Fourth, injustice features exploitation. Fifth, Exodus affirms the importance of bodies – bodies used and abused, male bodies destroyed, women’s bodies controlled.

Exodus 1 “highlights the social and communal nature of injustice”

Violence also is key: “violence, in biblical texts is usually associated with an imbalance of power, including institutional and systemic power” Violence and injustice are linked. Physical and mental violence – violent thoughts become action.

**Questions**

1. Are there any groups you can identify whose identity is shaped as ‘other’ in public imagination around you?
2. What power do you personally have in terms of shaping what other people think, and how they are treated? What about the different systems that you are part of, at work, at church, in the family?
3. When have you felt ‘other’, or invisible? How does this experience shape your understanding of justice?

**God’s Response: Hearing, seeing, acting.**

**God hears, God remembers, God sees**

The story doesn’t seek to come from the viewpoint of neutrality. It is “involved, caring, personal story.” “As a story of justice, it proclaims vividly that the place to start is with real people, with the reality of oppression for human lives and bodied….justice starts with listening and being moved to compassion.

The Israelites groan and cry out, and God hears. God responds to pain, and responds with compassion and grace. Exodus 2.25 – God hears, God remembers, then God sees and takes notice, even more “God *knew*” – “seeing leads to recognition and understanding…God enters the lived reality of the Israelites.”

Witnessing – naming reality of oppression and confronting oppressor.

Compassion – God affirms humanity and dignity. “Compassion and empire are mutually exclusive.”

Exodus has inspired many activists and reformers, including ‘Liberation Theology” – saying the starting point of thinking about justice is always relational, always about people and their experience. As such, the voice of the oppressed must take primacy. Liberation WITH not liberation FOR.

God in Exodus works in partnership, with Moses, with the people, not over them. The Hebrew scripture “explores the art of the possible, rather than seeks to impose an ideal.”

**Justice and judgement**

To call something unjust is to make a value judgement. We make value assessments – ‘judgements imply a frame of reference that claims that certain situations are normative, while others are aberrant.” But who gets to decide what is just? With what criteria? From whose perspective? Rulers and kings? Meritocracy? Law?

“The root question is, what shapes our imagination, as individuals and communities?”

Exodus – shaped by divine action. Plagues root story in creation. A cosmic, not judicial action.

“To pass judgement on a situation and claim it is unjust is therefor a profoundly political act, because it claims a narrative of truth about how the world should be.” Justice is not politically neutral, but neither is it tied to only one ‘party’ or ‘worldview’. The Hebrew bible explores councils, kings, military leaders, religious leaders, leaders chosen by the people, representatives, emerging leaders, inherited leadership. No system is declared perfect, but any system that leads to abuse – slavery, hoarding, inequality – is judged.

**God’s initiative.**

Exodus is rooted in a view of the divine nature rather than in human systems. “It is God who initiates justice.” The work of justice begins even before the people cry out, preparations are made for the work of liberation.

“God’s initiative shapes the story differently to what it could have been had it rested mostly on human action towards liberation.”

This initiative is rooted in the original covenant, a relational and narrative framework. Liberation is not an endpoint, but part of a bigger story to create a people rooted in justice and righteousness – this part is ‘freeing from the imagination of Egypt in order to enter fully into a new way of living.”

**Questions**

1. What can you see around you that speaks of justice and injustice? How comfortable do you feel making a judgement on what is just or not?
2. There is a project in 50 countries called ‘The Human Library’. Instead of books you can borrow a person you would not normally meet and listen to their story. Who might you ‘borrow’ and why? How might seeing and hearing their story change you?
3. God’s response is first and foremost one of compassion for their suffering people; who do you feel instinctive compassion for? How could you help others share in this?

**Transforming People**

**Pharaoh: a threatened leader** (Key text Exodus 5.1-14)

Pharoah is responsible, says the text, for Israel and Egypt’s woes – but there are many complicit in this – army, generals, taskmasters, and people. The wider community buys into the story of fear (of Israelites) and scarcity. “It is the interaction of leadership and public imagination that makes sustained, ongoing oppression possible.”

Moses speaks in the name of God. Pharoah speaks in the name of Pharoah. Sets himself up in opposition, taking the rightful place of God. He ignores Moses request for worship, increases workload on Israelite slaves, cuts them off from ‘sabbath rest’ and religious/cultural identity. Seeks oppression, assimilation, and to take away freedom of worship.

Pharoah continues the false narrative of ‘lazy’ Hebrews, and that they are too numerous. “He constructs a false reality which he uses to shape the public imagination; he hides the level of his how power by claiming others have more than he has (by being more numerous) and blames victims for their plight.

Continues to refuse to listen to truth, shoring up his crumbling world through violence. His whole sense of identity is bound up in one way of viewing himself, his power, his kingdom. All of which he is afraid of losing. In doing this he hurts his own people through the plagues and eventually death of first born. “…tyrants hurt their own people, and bad leaders cause suffering to the most vulnerable.”

Pharoah bears the burden of not opening his imagination to an alternative to his world view.

**The transformation of Moses**

Moses has a dual position as Hebrew brought up Egyptian. Yet still initially lives in the same binary world of “side A good and side B bad’ – albeit with a reversed view to Pharaoh. He sees the beating of a Hebrew slave and reacts violently, and doesn’t judge the Hebrews with the same value when they fight between themselves. He doesn’t meet either Egyptian or Hebrew as real people, complex, multifaceted. “Labels often work against relationships by clouding real persons and turning them into projections of fears, prejudices, and impressions.”

We label the world, people included, to make it easier for us to make sense of reality. Then those labels become reality. This can be dangerous if we stigmatize and caricature ‘the other’. Moses simplistic view of Hebrews good/Egyptians bad prevents him from seeing the deeper picture.

Moses shaped by Egypt – first meeting violence with violence and retribution. An unending cycle of violence. Moses works in secret, hiding his acts rather than the need for justice to bear witness and shape imagination

Moses is transformed by the desert – both his first time and later on in Exodus.

He loses his self-centred confidences and gains humility. He recognizes limitations. And then he learns to rely on others, God, Aaron, Zipporah. Egypt lessens its hold.

But in Exodus in the desert he starts off again alone, and realizes he needs others, elders, companions to assist in leadership. He lets go of Egypt’s autocratic models. “Autocratic leadership is inherently open to abuse, and does not recognize the abilities, skills and gifts of other human beings. A just community is one within which the gifts of all are being recognized and put to the service of the whole…” (p. 78). SPCK. Kindle Edition

**The liberation of the imagination**

Exodus is not just about physical liberation, but liberation and conversion of imagination. “Exodus is not simply a story of physical liberation, but a story with a much more fundamental call: the liberation and conversion on the imagination.”

The people struggle with imagination- distrust of Moses, fear of taking steps to move from what they knew, looking back to Egypt. (There is a long discussion that follows this about the inability for many to accept and imagine a world where we seriously address and ameliorate climate change, and that we are trapped in habit and bound by what we have previously thought)

This journey reimagination is summed up in story of Manna. The people have seen so much, yet still look backwards and are ‘held hostage to an imagination of scarcity.” They cannot believe in God’s provision – “They may be physically free, but they carry the trauma with them in ways that will again and again affect their ability to form a new, healthy community.”

They wander in the desert, caught between bondage and freedom, but this experience is necessary to free them from living with the imagination of Egypt.

God cares, they are valued, their bodies are worth feeding and resting.

Each gets to eat their fill, and there is enough for all. Hoarding is impossible (it rots) and though double can be collected before sabbath, rest is encouraged. Merit and reward are no longer the order of the day – all are fed, not based on whether they are ‘worthy’ or not. They learn to rely on God’s provision ‘ “This is a lesson in radical justice, and in radical trust.” There is more than food and work, there is rest and provision.

“in the desert, a place of utter scarcity, the people are to live in abundance of food, and abundance of rest.” If they can break the habits of Egypt, perhaps that new way of being can be the foundation for their new living.

Another challenge to the imagination of Egypt is that previously leaders are responsible for all things, including food. In manna all behave responsibly for themselves. Leaders are not all powerful, it is God who provides. The Israelites are being taught that all can work together justly. No autocrats in this economy. Moses and Aaron, as leaders, are charged with preserving the story of this provision, and passing it on to generations to come.

**Questions**

1. Does Pharaoh’s story help us understand why we are sometimes fearful, or push back against, those who ask for redress in the face of discrimination
2. Can you think of one habit you might take up that may help you live more justly or sustainably?
3. Who are the guardians of collective imagination today – in society, in local communities, in churches? What stories might you pass on that may shape another generation?

**Exodus as a prophetic book**

Exodus looks backwards and forwards – what God has done, and what God may do in present and future, How do we move from past patterns to present realities? Exodus as model, but not blueprint.

It is not an isolated text, but part of a bigger story and needs placing in that framework.

**The Back Story**

This comes from the story of Joseph – often read like a fairy tale. Sibling rivalry, slavery, dreams, God’s plan, salvation from famine, touching reunion.

But it sets up what will later happen to the Israelites.

Joseph and Pharoah work within the ‘Imagination of Egypt’ – with pharaoh having absolute control and consigning many to slavery and starvation, whilst making provision for others. Those who were already privileged were protected, the rest had to plead. It could be argued that Joseph not only breeds injustice by his actions, but puts in place systems that embed it.

Similar actions, of acquisition, hoarding, control can be seen in pandemic, with vaccine inequality threatening all. “The logic of Egypt, the logic of scarcity and efficiency, says that it makes good sense to look after yourself and ‘your’ people first. It is a logic that does not value all human lives equally…”

Joseph had compassion on those he could see – his family – but what about the many he could/did not see. Joseph stands between Israel and Egypt, but unlike Moses who did the same, he enters deep into Egypts imagination whereas Moses goes into a new imagination.

The story affects our reading of Exodus

* It undermines the clear Israel/Egypt distinction
* It fits within a biblical pattern of drawing attention to the fragility of power and prosperity. Nations rise and fall.
* It links back to the theme of the transgenerational impact of one’s actions.

“The story shows that Israel’s imagination needed converting long before the events of Exodus.”

**The risks of a captive imagination**

If the people go forward to the promised land but take the imagination of Egypt with them, what then? Various parts of the Hebrew scripture remind the people that they were slaves, that they might deal with slaves and aliens and one another differently.

If Israel, feeling powerful, with God on their side simply reproduced Egypt in the promised land they would “simply reverse the poles of oppression” Instead, liberation was not an end in itself, but to be the foundation of a new imagination of justice and righteousness. “true freedom, a stepping awy from the binary dynamics of self/other, Egyptian/Hebrew, citizen/stranger, poor/rich, master/slave, oppressor/victim, with compassion, equality and dignity defining social organization.”

Living justly is not just casting down systems of oppression but new and differently structured systems of social belonging and interaction, holding together justice, and worship.

Reminded of communal, structural, and political aspects of justice, and sin throughout Exodus.

**Being the people of God**

Calling is for liberated people to truly be ‘a people’. Moving from being saved from death in Egypt (open to any who would smear blood on their doorposts, not just to Hebrew people) to struggling with reality of forming new community (via some idol worship – idols are much easier to control than the relational God of Exodus) and wrestling with both consequences of their actions, and responsibility to create a new community.

The understanding of God moves from judgement first (plagues) to mercy first. Israel learns mercy and is also chastened through their experience and called to new imagination. To being the people of God, and the responsibilities that involves.

**How we call for justice**

How do we call for justice with passion, and remain faithful to the different reality of an imagination that doesn’t conform to ‘Egypt’. How to call for justice in prophetic ways – casting a vision for a different world.

“Prophetic voices are not reasoned voices, they are rooted in compassion and pain in particular people, places and situations.”

Exodus proclaims a radically different vision from the punitive, violent culture that prevaisl. “Oppression is not inevitable, that freedom is possible, and that tyrants will be called to account.” All characters are challenged to be transformed, regardless of their place in story, and we must seek the humanity in all the actors in any story.

**Questions**

1. What do you think of Joseph’s actions? Are there questions you would want to ask today’s rulers about how economic priorities and decisions are made?
2. Israel had to choose to put blood on the doors to identify as God’s people; what identifies you, your family, your community, as ‘God’s people’?
3. Are there groups of people who are rendered one-dimensional in the way that social media and mainstream media speak of them? Why do you think that is? Are there ways for you to meet the people behind the charicatures?