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**Embracing Justice**

*Summary of Section 5*

**Justice in the shape of a cross**

So far God surprises people in how God engages with justice. Justice underlies story, a story based in love and relationship, essential to justice. “To love is to seek the best for the other.” Bible doesn’t abstract love, but embodies it and that finds its apex in the Incarnation. Jesus embodies God’s justice and way of doing justice, and God’s love for all. This chapter “a journey through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.”

**Justice in the ministry of Jesus** *Key text Luke 4.16-29*

Jesus, after time in the desert, returns filled with the Spirit and preaches at synagogue – quoting Isaiah and promises of justice and freedom. Real, embodied, justice not a spiritualized version. Jesus doesn’t divide ‘body and spirit’ – “Poverty is as much a spiritual problem as a material one. So are unequal wealth and privilege.” Good news – but threatening, even more when Jesus offers commentary, talking of the works of prophets who reached beyond Israel to ‘outsiders’ – to gentiles. And he misses out the next verse on Isaiah which talks of judgement which the people there would have hoped would fall to their occupiers, the Romans.

Jesus reverses expectations. People of God don’t live up to their vocation to be light to nations, God extends mercy to gentiles. Jesus refuses to dehumanize others because of their nation or background.

Links between this and temptation stories preceding are striking. Jesus offered kingdoms of earth, overpowering humanity ‘for the right reasons; is still wrong! Jesus offers justice from a place of vulnerable incarnation, identification and partnership. In synagogue Jesus embodies this working towards salvation from within, even when the people are enraged by his words.

**Breaking down barriers**

Another central thread – “breaking down boundaries that have turning into barriers and justifications for unfairness, exploitation, and marginalization.”

Boundaries – mark difference, can be crossed, make identity possible.

Barriers – prevent meeting others, keep them out, intensify invisibility and disconnection. Barriers usually come from fear – “to protect from another deemed dangerous or abusive, to prevent contamination, to preserve privilege, to ward off change and transformation, to avoid the claims the other might have on us.” Feel safer but are restrictive, prevent us seeing beyond.

Jesus broke down boundaries that had solidified into barriers. Sinners, outsiders, foreigners, women – challenging the ‘in and out’ – challenging the identity people had put up barriers to protect, shaking up social order, and even more the ‘insiders’ perceptions of their own self-righteousness. (cf Parable of Tax-Collector and Pharisee, Luke 18.9-12 – Boundary between right and wrong not removed, but crossed by grace – a grace freely available to all who recognize their need for it)

**From scarcity to abundance**

“Free, abundant grace disrupts the economy of scarcity that gives rise to barriers, injustice, and anxiety.” Jesus lived abundance – from start of ministry in John, Water into wine. Proclamation of abundance is proclamation of justice.

Feeding of 5000 (Mark 6.30-44) human need shown starkly – disciples need for rest, peoples need for teaching, and everyone’s need for food. Disciples see scarcity ‘how do we feed these people’ and are overwhelmed, Jesus responds with compassion to the ‘sheep without a shepherd’ and cares for body and soul. Whole person response. And all are fed, and leftovers remain. Like manna and Quail in desert, or command to leave edges of field for poor to glean, there is always enough. In an economy of scarcity there is no room for grace.

Compare to feast in Mark 6.17-29, a feast of privilege and status which ends in death (of John the Baptist). One simple, one complex. Two economies – Herod’s economy of empire, Jesus economy of abundance. Jesus breaks down barriers and structures of empire to invite all in and respond generously and compassionately. This generosity is the root of Hebrew law, and of Jesus embodiment of God’s ways.

**Questions**

1. Where around you can you see signs of God’s abundance? How could you celebrate these?
2. What boundaries are important to you? Are there any barriers? Why are they there?
3. Have you ever been kept out, or affected by someone else’s boundaries and barriers? How did that feel? Why do you think those were there?

**A radical reconfiguration of power**

Throughout Jesus life themes resonate: meeting people, seeing and helping others be seen, hearing and helping others listen and hear, caring and healing, challenging sin and its impact. It becomes inevitable that Jesus will clash with power and with the crowds as they respond to Jesus message of radical transformation. Feeding miracle in John is soon followed by ‘bread of life’ which leads to ‘this is a difficult teaching’ from even disciples.

Jesus is found difficult. “Compassion does not build empires, it challenges them, and challenge is painful.”

Jesus in the line of the prophets, not easy people!

Jesus challenges structures of power, embracing all (including the ‘unworthy’. He has power, over nature, over healing, but it always comes from openness to the other, invitation, gentleness, grace. And all this power is ‘held in a frail, fragile, human body.

Power is directed towards others, compassionately responding to pain and oppression, and deeply saddened by refusual to change (Lk 19.41-44 for example). Jesus like Hebrew prophets calls for justice, and judgement, and weeps over the judged.

Washing of feet – John 13.1-16 – Jesus takes on menial role. Affirming dignity of his disciples, and repudiating any form of social hierarchy. But even here, story is ‘bookended by betral’ – but he ‘loves his own to the end’ – including Judas. A pattern is set for community life to come in how to treat offending members – even Judas is invited to change. Jesus holds together love and justice.

Jesus is most powerful person in this story, but works with power towards liberation, not colluding with oppression. “Power is deeply reconfigured into responsibility towards the other, and even more surprisingly…..in the form of a cross, bearing himself the cost of the change he was bringing about.”

**Questions**

1. What power do you think you hold? What power do others think you hold? What might you be called to do with the power or influence you do have?
2. What do you think you would have found difficult about Jesus, had you been present back then?
3. Compassion is a clear call of the gospel. Who do you have compassion for? Might God be calling to you to extend that compassion further, perhaps in costly ways? Who might help you on that journey?

**The cross as the unexpected embodiment of justice**

Story of Jesus’ crucifixion full of allusions to justice and abuse of justice. Contrast human justice to justice of God in Jesus.

**The justice of the elders, Pilate and Herod** *Key Text: Luke 22.66-23.25*

Story of Jesus arrest in garden is familiar to us. One who challenges social order is dangerous. Compassionate response, crossing boundaries, affirming outsiders – a threat, calling for change, which is volatile and unstable.

Powerful twist narrative of justice, who ‘deserves’ respect, privilege, comfort – and twist the judicial system.

Jesus had already appeared before ‘elders of the people’ – chief priests and scribes – before being sent to Pilate. They change the story between their examination and what they bring to Pilate. They serve own interests, not nation, nor Rome, nor God.

Human justice fragile and subject to desires of sinful persons. Retrubitive or remedial justice cannot work unless values are applied equally to all.

Justice of “Herod, Pilate, and the elders is also curiously disembodied, abstracted from relationships and connection to the wider community.” None know Jesus, only hearsay and accusation. In end, perverted justice means Jesus sentenced to die, despite Pilate and Herod not believing that to be correct.

“Justice is meant to witness to truth and vision in the public square, to enable the righting of wrongs, and fair judgement that helps sustain peace and justice in the wider community, and shape its moral imagination.”

This is justice of empire, scarcity, in service of oppressive power, dispensed only by the powerful seeking to preserve their own status and way of life. And the crowds follow their leaders.

**The Justice of the cross**

Jesus, alone, is example of a different justice. Reaching out in love, encounter, relationship. The cross is the end of this process – the danger of speaking justice. The cross is the result of the proclamation of love and justice in the face of empire and power. All other meanings are read back into it (salvation, atonement, substitution).

Cross universal, yet tied to the particular: the life and ministry of Jesus. And Jesus’ exercise of power, and refusal to exercise ‘worldly power’ “Jesus does not save the world from a neutral, external position, but from within.”

Entire story of Scripture is call to justice, tasking humanity with pursuing it. Here we see total failure of justice, yet leads to story of transformation.

‘”And yet, within the story of failure, a narrative of transformation is hidden, one that proclaims that the justice of God sweeps away, transforms and redefines what human beings think justice is. If justice was just deserts, then Jesus would have walked free. If justice was just deserts, every human being would be condemned. Therefore, either justice is swept aside in the cross or justice is not primarily about ‘just deserts’, but needs to be rethought, and anchored in the very attributes of God that have come through the story of Scripture: compassion, love, grace, covenant relationship.” P202 Kindle ed

Luke 23.32-43 – Jesus identification with humanity goes further as he is crucified with two who by own admission are guilty – and he invites them to new life. Not forces them not cajoules, invites. Not responding to the taunts of ‘if you are the messiah…’ or using power for self-preservation “The cross affirms there is another way, a better way.”

Exchange with criminals redefines justice – first criminal doesn’t care, just mocks. Second refuses to be a bystander and challenges untruth. He is based in a framework of ‘just desserts’, getting what he deserves, and asks not for justice, nor even forgiveness, but for possibility of grace, and it is given. “God’s compassion reaches far beyond ‘just desserts’ and affirms the humanity, the lovability of a man who had almost given up on himself.”

Jesus enters the consequences of twisted justice and its results. Jesus stands in solidarity. All of humanity is embraced, and justice redefined by one who is entirely engaged with the suffering and injustice of the world. A challenge as to how we think of justice

**The foolishness of the cross** (1 Cor 1.18-25)

Cross makes no sense. It makes no sense ‘in an economy of scarcity driven by fear’ – it is foolish because grace does not make sense.

Grace goes against human instinct of protecting self and loved ones, of retribution. Instead forgiveness is escalated not vengeance. Justice and mercy hand in hand.

Justice is humanized, rooted in compassion – past acknowledged and consequences accepted but future not defined that way.

Grace does not mean no consequence to wrongdoing

Divorcing grace from pursuit of justice and vision of community is to ignore the whole of the life of Christ. Power is radically reconfigured in Christ. “Grace is indissolubly linked to compassion, to seeing the other, hearing their voice, and accepting their claim on us.”

Justice and mercy hand in hand means truth-telling, and to join with the work of God and learn through our process of seeking justice. To cultivate justice within ourselves and communities. Openness and embrace to those around us, seeing the world through God’s eyes. Justice is a vocation

**Questions**

1. When have you experienced grace for yourself? How easy do you find it to accept grace – from God, from others, from yourself?
2. How do you feel about forgiveness and grace?
3. Can you think of a situation where you or someone you know might be called to hold together justice and grace? How might you go about it?

**Justice, resurrection and ascension**

Justice, love and mercy intertwined through Jesus life, and death, and resurrection. Jn 21.4-19 is Jesus encounter with Peter and the disciples as they fish…

Jesus disrupts even in resurrection appearances – to women first, then not recognized as he appears to the exhausted fisherfolk. Like the Gospel of Luke version in 5.1-11 there is the echo of abundance. Reversal of scarcity – and in both cases points to the work of Jesus moving forwards.

Peter’s ‘restoration’ – after he tries justice with the sword at Jesus’ arrest, and denies Jesus ‘moving from participant to bystander’ in the work of justice. Peter’s restoration needs the naming of his denial and takes place in a context of Jesus providing a meal and sharing with his friends. It takes three questions to undo the three denials – but Peter avoids referring to his failure, wanting to jump straight to ‘you know I love you.’

“Grace that bypasses truth and transformation is not true grace, because it bypasses justice.”

“Past acknowledged in truth shapes a different future…”

Peter commissioned to care and nurture, to feed and tend – tying together body and soul. Calls disciples back to community. In economy of scarcity, ‘care’ is rationed.

Peter’s restoration ends with foreshadowing of how he will follow Jesus’ example, not misusing power, not turning to the sword, choosing to proclaim a gospel of justice and mercy, love and liberation.

Mystery and foolishness of the cross suggests transformation cannot be happen without pain, yet God can transform that pain. Cross remains even after resurrection. Jesus’ scars remain. “God fully absorbs the scars that go with him, and the cost of injustice and of fighting.” God identifies, feels, understands/a