

Tuesday Reflection 27 April 2021

What is Justice?

One of my favourite Bible passages is from the prophet Micah: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). Justice is the key; as Paul VI put it “If you want peace, work for justice”.

As Christians, we are concerned with the establishment of the Kingdom, a kingdom where peace and justice reign. But what is justice? How do we ‘do’ it, how do we ‘work for it’? Is ‘doing justice’ the same as ‘keeping the law’?

Recently a group of protestors from Extinction Rebellion were acquitted by a jury on a charge of causing criminal damage to the Shell HQ in London. The jury acquitted them even though the judge instructed the jury that the accused had ‘no defence in law’.

The defendants felt that they were morally justified in ‘breaking the law’ in order to draw attention to what they saw as the greater crime of environmental damage caused by the big oil companies.

The jury seemed to accept that the accused were following a greater authority than the laws of the land, and that is the dictate of conscience.

In a different case, a hitherto unknown police officer was found guilty of murdering a man of colour whose name the world otherwise would never have known. This case raises a number of questions, one of them being whether Derek Chauvin would have been charged, let alone convicted without the Black Lives Matter movement and the worldwide protests calling for justice for George Floyd - protests which at least in part were deemed to be illegal, in many cases triggering a violent police response and condemnation by politicians.

What both these cases have in common is that they were played out against the background of ‘illegal’ actions - actions performed by ordinary people who were not prepared to stand idly by and despairingly ask themselves “What can I do?”.

And the moral? If each of us does nothing, nothing will change; the poor and the oppressed will continue to be poor and oppressed, and if nothing is done to call the powerful to account, they will continue to get away with murder. Our Lady’s prophetic words in the Magnificat, that the Lord ‘casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly. He fills the hungry with good things, sends the rich away empty’ will only be fulfilled if we remember the words of St Teresa of Avila that “Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world.”

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