

Twin pillars

Charity and social justice

Recently, a close friend who had returned from a year's work in Ireland said that in the time she had been there, she had attended Sunday Mass in a variety of parishes. While charity had been a regular theme in homilies, never once in all that time had a priest mentioned social justice.

Her remarks set me thinking about the relationship between charity and justice. Charity we understand. But what is it about social justice that sticks in the craw of so many? When we truly love our neighbour, surely we must act with justice towards them. That is what the Scriptures tell us. That is what the church teaches us. It is a notion absolutely basic to a Christian understanding of life. We cannot truly love without practising justice.

Yet many seem unwilling to embrace social justice as a lifestyle choice. Fewer still display a passion for it. The sacred Scriptures reveal a God of justice who has compassion for the poor, and condemns the lawmakers and the rich for their injustice. The prophets make it clear that social justice sits at the very heart of the nature of God. Its practice is a principal expression of God's love of the people. It is when the poor are marginalised, the sick unattended, orphans ignored and widows neglected that the prophets issue their harshest condemnations. They speak in the name of God.

Thus does Scripture reveal that love is not complete without justice. Justice is a deeper more committed version of the love of neighbour. Together charity and justice constitute love. One is not complete without the other. Jesus, who said he came to fulfil the Law and the prophets, freed many he met from unjust social situations. In so doing, he reveals that the practice of social justice takes us into the heart of the divine, the source of love.

There is a large body of church social justice teachings that grows by the year. It covers practically every dimension of human social interaction. It is part of Catholic teaching. It is part of our good news for the modern world. The last several popes have made social justice a central part of their teachings. The Synod of Bishops in 1971 declared justice to be "a constitutive dimension in the preaching of the Gospel." Justice forms part of our church constitution! How much clearer can we get as to its importance?

Why then is so little heard in the church about social justice? Why is it systematically ignored in homilies? There are probably many reasons. Three stand out. Surely a principal cause lies in our level of material comfort. In terms of income and stability, New Zealanders live among the top five percent on the planet. Our nation's goals are wedded to greater economic growth and wealth accumulation. Social justice questions do not sit easily with such goals.

A second reason could be our own prejudices. We all have them. Having them challenged can be upsetting. A third reason will be our fear of losing popularity. Highlighting injustice tends to upset people, including family and friends.

Yet billions of God's children live in poverty under unjust structures of oppression. Christ teaches they are our brothers and sisters. Could it be that church leadership (and membership) has become so comfortably materialist, so soft morally in relation to our poor neighbour that it is convenient to simply ignore our own social justice teachings? Have we made such a god of our material comfort that, as James K. Baxter wrote, we "seek to serve comfort first?"

Let's hope not. Social justice sits at the heart of good race relations, the abortion debate, issues concerning ecology and the environment, global capitalism, law and order, corporate power, world poverty, immigration policy, technology development, our attitude to war, our relations with one another. Why then do we make it an optional extra for the dedicated few? How many parishes have a social justice committee? How many sponsor overseas projects to alleviate poverty? These are simple litmus tests of our commitment.

How can we say we are truly Christian if we blithely ignore so much injustice in God's world? A few months ago we celebrated the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ. He calls us to a new way of being here and now. He teaches us that God's reign has started. Resurrected power should transform our way of seeing and doing things. The message of Christ is one of hope built on love, founded on justice. The Law and the prophets fulfilled; charity and justice producing love: it's there for the taking.

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