

A Fair Harvest

Am I the only person here with a soft spot for Old Testament prophets? You know the sort? The ones you get in those fabulous Cecil B DeMille films, prophets who look like they're meant to look – shouting and waving their arms about, with long flowing hair and robes and wild staring eyes, usually found half way up a mountain or in the middle of a dry, desolate wilderness, telling the n'er do well tribes that 'they're doomed, doomed' – like that marvellous Scottish character in Dad's Army.

Listen to these stirring messages from some of the biblical prophets:

Jeremiah shouted at the kings of Judah “but your eyes and heart are only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.”

Or Isaiah speaking Yahweh's words
“You may multiply your prayers
I shall not listen
Your hands are covered with blood
Wash, make yourself clean.
Take your wrong doing out of my sight.
Cease to do evil
Learn to do god
Search for justice
Help the oppressed
Be just to the orphan
Plead for the widow.”

Or the timeless cry of the prophet Amos
“Let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

No mistaking the message here - and the message that we humans should show compassion to others is an essential theme in most of the world's religions – for instance, it was through compassion for the suffering of the people he saw around him that the Buddha became enlightened. He understood that all life is suffering, dukkha, and that non-attachment is the path to liberation.

But it is the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – that develop a particularly clear sense of a duty of compassion - that one's faith must be integrated successfully into everyday life and be put into action in support of others as well to improve our own lives. And I think it's that that makes those Old Testament prophets so appealing to us today – because they speak to the part of us that warms to the ideal of fair play, of the haves being aware of the have nots and doing what they can to redress the imbalance which allows them their wealth at the expense of others.

The prophet Mohammad (pbuh) was hated by the wealthy merchants of his time. The society in which he lived in the early 7th century was going through rapid transitions. The nomadic, tribal way of life was being replaced for some by urbanisation and by the development of trade links that brought great wealth to a few and poverty to many others. Mohammad reminded the people of older ways of living in which tribal members were responsible for one another and in which hospitality to strangers was expected. Mohammad established clear rules for Arabic society, and one of the 5 pillars of Islam, the actions required by all Muslims, was zakah, meaning literally purity – purity which could be achieved practically through regular prescribed giving of alms to the needy. Furthermore Muslims were enjoined to act justly at all times in all their dealings with others. The Qu'ran states that ‘Allah commands justice, the doing of good and giving to all.’ Allah commands justice.

Sweeping forward into the late 19th early 20th century – Karl Marx famously described religion as the opium of the people. We know the role played by some religious groups in keeping the old order in place – what is that verse nobody sings today from the Victorian hymn all things bright and beautiful? – the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, you gave to each his station and furnished his estate – all things not quite so bright and beautiful – that's one sort of god – the god that likes to keep things just as they are – a god suspiciously aligned with free market economics - but I prefer the god of Amos and Jeremiah and Isaiah – the god that stirs thing up and shouts from the mountain tops – ‘life could be better and you human are the ones with the

ability to do something about it'. Listen to Amos again speaking against "they who sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way". The god that speaks through these ancient prophets has clearly got socialist tendencies – and a yearning for life to be a bit fairer for those who suffer under inequitable economic systems.

And that message has been picked up by modern church leaders such as Oscar Romero, the inspirational archbishop from el Salvador who was assassinated for speaking out about the injustices he saw all around him, Romero said, "[The church] has no intention of being the people's opium. ... The church wants to rouse men and women to the true meaning of being a people."

And throughout history there have been inspirational people like Oscar Romero who have had the passion and commitment to inspire the rest of us to show that bit more care for others, to think beyond our own individual concerns. I think of Mahatma Gandhi and his powerful message that the 'world has enough for everyone's need but not enough for our greed'.

Or Albert Schweitzer who held reverence for life to be the basis of ethical living and saw a moral imperative for the more fortunate in life to work to ease the sufferings of the less fortunate – to use our benefits of health, wealth, our natural talents, and the fact that we live in a safe environment to redress the imbalances we know exist in the world.

This week is designated as the annual Week of Prayer for World Peace – an inter faith activity that involves a wide range of faith groups here in the UK – and peace and justice are qualities that walk hand in hand. The greatest poverty is found in areas that have been ravaged by warfare or by seemingly interminable disputes over territory. Sometimes I can feel despair about this fractured and argumentative world of ours, with its human societies that are so far from perfect. In those times of despair I can be inspired again by people and organisations that work to make a difference, that have heeded the command for 'justice' and are working towards the achievement of that goal. I want to mention just two such organisations this morning as examples of the way in which human commitment and inventiveness can improve life for the world's poorest people.

The first is called Practical Action and was mentioned on Tuesday night here in our monthly science and religion group in which we were looking at biodiversity. Practical Action used to be the Intermediate Technology Development group and it was set up by Schumacher, the famous environmentalist, in the 1960s, with the aim of working within communities to develop suitable technologies to improve people's lives in a sustainable way, using local resources and local knowledge whenever possible.

Practical Action staff work in many countries of the world. One of their projects in the Sudan is to help re-introduce a wonderfully simple yet effective ancient invention known as the zeer pot. If you have ever wondered how people in desert lands keep perishable foods fresh – the answer is the zeer pot. You place one lidded earthenware pot inside another larger pot and fill the space between them with wet sand. By keeping the sand wet you have then created a naturally insulated portable fridge which will keep food fresh for up to 20 days. How clever is that!

Another organisation that we have supported over the years here at Essex Church is called Shared Interest. Shared Interest provides finance and business support to disadvantaged communities to enable them to trade their way out of poverty. It has been one of the groups that has funded the expansion of fair trading and is highly regarded for the training programmes it provides across the globe and the inventive ways it finds to invest in new projects.

Both Practical Action and Shared Interest demonstrate basic good practice in the charitable domain. They have moved far from that chilly model of early Victorian concern for the needy that Blake describes – the begrudging handing out of basic foodstuffs whilst maintaining the status quo that led to the poverty in the first place. Practical Action and Shared Interest say it all in their very names – the tasks need to be shared ones and the solutions need to be practical. Together we are stronger – as the stick story reminded us earlier on.

The world's population is predicted to reach 9 billion by 2030 – a scary figure indeed. But by all accounts we are capable of feeding that many people and of living sustainably here on planet earth if we manage to share things out more fairly and use our resources more sensibly. There are some commonly held misconceptions that need to be addressed

- The misconception that there is not enough to go round – in fact there is enough land and we can grow enough food to feed everybody if it is shared more fairly and if we stop allowing foodstuffs to be treated as commodities to be gambled upon by a market economy.
- The misconception that we cannot halt population growth in developing economies – in fact one of the best ways to encourage a slow-down in population growth is to educate women and also to ensure that communities have access to meaningful work and room enough to grow crops for their own consumption.

- The misconception that things are getting worse and that further decline is inevitable – in fact we humans have made great progress in tackling the problems of our world. Today we are more aware than ever before that we are one people living on one planet and that what we as individuals and as communities do affect everyone. Such awareness can be painful but let's not have that lead us to head burying in the sand or hiding under the duvet.

Let's go on educating ourselves and finding out all that we can about these challenging issues and use our knowledge to guide us to the ways in which we can make a difference – that we might be the people who help to create that fair harvest for all, for that really will be a harvest worth giving thanks for. Amen