

## Reflections of love and justice: interfaith forum Westminster Abbey January 2012

In Christian theology the key virtues which should shape our character and guide our action are not just contingent human dispositions: they are also rooted in the being and character of God. Pre-eminent amongst these virtues are both love and justice: these are not just descriptions of what we should be like and how we should behave; they are also central to our understanding of who God is. God *is* love, we are told (1John 4:7). *Just* and true are God's ways, we are also told (Revelation 15:3). Even if, in deference to our human limitations, these moral predicates may only be used analogously when applied to God, they must nonetheless be used: love and justice are both essential to the being and action of God, not just in human response to God and others. [*A Common Word*, incidentally, does not foreground this: it highlights our love for God and neighbour, but not God's love for us].

However, this insistence on finding both love and justice essentially within God creates a *prima facie* problem when the demands of love and justice appear to conflict. It would then appear to create conflict within the being of God, not just a dilemma for human action. This has led some christian theologians and ethicists - particularly those writing in what we call the agapeistic tradition - to choose between them. Usually this means prioritising love absolutely, making justice subordinate to it, or limiting justice only to carefully prescribed circumstances. A better route, in my view, is one taken recently by Nicholas Wolterstorff.<sup>1</sup> This is to show that, properly understood, neither love nor justice need be compromised; the meaning of *agape* love is always compatible with the true meaning of justice, and *vice versa*. And this remains true even in hard cases: e.g. where a generous, forgiving, loving, act to one or just a few, appears to create injustice for others who are left out of it.

This is best illustrated by reference to particular scriptural stories and narratives. Take for example Jesus' parable of the labourers in the vineyard, found in Matthew 20:1 -15. In essence it goes like this. A landowner needed workers for his vineyard, so hired some early in the day on the usual daily wage rate; but then, on several occasions later in the day, he sees others looking for work and hires them too, promising only to 'pay them what is right'. At the end of the day he pays them all the same wage, which is the rate for a full days work, even though only the first group actually worked all day. Not surprisingly this group complained about the injustice of the situation: 'these last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat'. The landowners reply is that he has done no wrong to the first group because he had given them the agreed daily wage, and it was up to him if he wished to be generous to others. This is what the Kingdom is like, says Jesus, implying that this is a parable about God's attitude to all those who come late in the day to his kingdom, whether Gentiles or others considered outcast: they will all receive the same welcome and benefits as those like the Jews who have always kept the Torah and considered themselves to be in the kingdom. [It echoes another well

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<sup>1</sup> Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, Eerdmans 2011

known parable of Jesus recorded in Luke's Gospel, the so-called parable of the prodigal son<sup>2</sup>. There the elder brother has always worked with his Father, and is duly promised all that is due to him. The younger brother goes elsewhere as a spendthrift and only later returns, penitent, asking for forgiveness. Like the late-coming labourers, he too receives more than he might be thought to deserve. Unsurprisingly there is a complaint in this parable too. The older brother complains. The Father's generosity to the younger brother, the generosity of forgiveness, appears unjust to another.]

It would be easy to read both these as stories of how the intrinsic generosity of *agape* love has overridden the rule of justice. However, if we think that, it is probably because we are working at least unconsciously with an Aristotelian view of distributive justice which is based purely on rational considerations of equality and proportionality. Broadly speaking this means justice demands we treat people equally and proportionally (unless there is a morally relevant reason to treat them otherwise). This is, rightly, the sort of justice used in public policy. But the more theological approach to justice underlying this parable suggest something different. If we take justice to mean always to give people their personal due, as equally valuable children of God, then justice was fulfilled, not overridden. The first group of labourers received their due, in the sense that they were not demeaned in any way, and no promise to them was broken. No injustice done to them. The act of being generous to some may be questioned for its proportional rationality, but not its justice.

One might still object that special generosity to some is nonetheless a form of favouritism, and that *is* 'demeaning' to the others because it denies them something given to the favoured. Put another way, generosity to only some might seem to create new rights and legitimate new expectations in those not favoured with this generosity. But the response to this is obvious. In a world of limited finite resources *no* form of rational distributive justice can extend to universal *generosity*, for generosity by definition exceeds what is *due* in a limited world. That is why if I give Christmas presents to some and not all, or give to only some charities and not all - or if in public policy a nation supports some, not all, overseas relief efforts - we do not normally think this demeans those who do not receive such generosity, nor do we think it creates new rights for them (provided, of course, we have at least given them their due).

In this way we can see a compatibility of generous love and justice, at least in the sphere of human interaction. But what about acts of divine generosity, bearing in mind God has no finite limits to His resources? How can there here be any kind of selection or generosity towards only some without implying injustice to others, when it is *God* acting? This form of the question, however, again betrays an over-rational understanding of God and God's ways, at the expense of a more personalistic theological understanding. If we see God's exercise of both love and justice primarily in terms of His personal action of forging saving and satisfying personal relationships, as distinct from the political action of rationally ordering world affairs, then we can entertain a different picture.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Ch15:11-32

Another biblical narrative helps make this clear: Romans 9-11. Here St Paul meditates precisely on the issue of the special action of God which favours some: in particular, the different paths allotted for Jews and Gentiles through history. Here love for some again appears to have created injustice for others, but it turns out otherwise. God's special covenant with the Jews, an 'election', might well seem at first like the injustice of favouritism: 'to them belong the law and the promises', just by virtue of God's choice.<sup>3</sup> However, when they 'stumble' this becomes, also by God's ordering, the stepping-stone to the Gentiles also receiving this inheritance - without even having had to work to keep this law.<sup>4</sup> So now the late-comers seem to get the same as others, and the perceived injustice is reversed, giving the Jews cause for complaint instead (mirroring the parable of the first set of labourers in the vineyard). The final point is then made that both Jews and Gentiles are in fact in the same overall position, for in the end both groups need and (through Christ) receive God's mercy.<sup>5</sup> In other words, within the personal processes of salvation, the particular generosity variously expressed to different groups turns out to be the means by which generosity is actually expressed to *all*, equally<sup>6</sup>.

In this way God's infinite resources are brought to bear to combine and resolve both love and justice.<sup>7</sup> The righteousness or justice of God, in respect of Jews and Gentiles, is shown as a saving relationship, working through particular acts of generosity and love to some, which actually work to the good of all in the end. [It is a complex but recognizable echo of the sort of promise given to Abraham in the Hebrew scriptures in Genesis 12:1-3, where God's special blessing to Abraham is given so that he may be 'a blessing to all the families of the earth']. How this works out, as St Paul freely admits, is a mystery: 'Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgement and how inscrutable his ways'<sup>8</sup> - but however mysterious the means by which God works, the goal and substance is always a divine love which is also ultimately just.

There is much more in the Christian tradition about the nature and meaning of justice and love and their relationship. I offer you this simply as one reading which does not wish to trade one off against the other either in God or human affairs. Properly understood - that is, when understood more through the narratives of scripture than through some philosophical traditions on which theology has drawn - to love *is* to act justly, and to act justly *is* to act with love

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<sup>3</sup> Ro 9:4

<sup>4</sup> cf. Ro 9:30-31

<sup>5</sup> Ro. 11:32

<sup>6</sup> One of the most sustained exponents in Christian Theology of this sort of relationship between particularity and universality was the Swiss reformed theologian Karl Barth.

<sup>7</sup> Note: in the history of Christian biblical exegesis establishing the *iustitia dei* has not always been considered as St Paul's primary theological motivation in this passage: my contention, with Wolterstorff's help, is that justice *is* illuminated here.

<sup>8</sup> Ro. 11:33