

Session 2

WHERE'S THE JUSTICE?

'Justice' is a word frequently found both in the Bible and used in our society. This session looks at how different understandings and dimensions of this key concept can help Christians to explore God's agenda for the world.

Key messages of the session

- a) 'Justice' is a complex idea that has several different and even conflicting meanings
- b) What it means to act justly is a key theme in the Bible
- c) Our political commitment to justice will be guided by our faith's understanding of justice

Preparation

You will need

- A pack of smarties or similar sweets
- Copies of three newspaper articles which illustrate a contemporary issue where there are competing views of justice (e.g. Israel/Palestine; Iraq; funding of anti-cancer drugs; taxation)
- Copies of the three symbols for the dimensions of justice
- Bibles
- Flipchart paper and pens

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

God of justice, we see clearly the unfairness present within the world and our own society. A few enjoy vast wealth while many experience unrelenting poverty. Some have almost limitless opportunities while others struggle simply to survive. There are those of us who have secure jobs, a steady income and homes to live in, while at the same time many of us are unemployed, burdened by debts and homelessness. Forgive the ease with which we live with such unfairness, and guide us to a renewed vision of what it means to proclaim your justice. Amen.

INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to brainstorm what phrases and ideas come to mind around the word 'Justice'?

Examples might include: Law, Courts, Fairness, Inequality, Punishment, Oppression, 'Peace with justice', 'Justice must be seen to be done', 'Racial justice', 'Justice for the world's poor', 'It's not fair!', 'Let the punishment fit the crime', 'Rough justice'

Talk about justice quickly reveals that we encounter issues of justice everywhere we look. We are regularly confronted with questions about what is just or unjust. Our politicians are trying to determine what it means to act justly, and public life is often about seeking to do to what is just.

And not only are issues of justice fundamental to life, they are also fundamental to faith. If you take the Bible seriously, you will be concerned about what is just and unjust. If you take Jesus seriously, you will be involved in justice issues. Doing justice belongs at the centre of our faith.

But justice is not a straightforward concept....

COMPETING UNDERSTANDINGS OF JUSTICE

ACTIVITY (10 mins)

Give a member of the group a pack of Smarties and ask them to discuss how to distribute it in a just way.

The kinds of questions they might ask could include: Who do they belong to? If they are mine, is it just that I should have the right to eat them all? Does justice require some kind of sharing? Who with? If we divide them should the hungriest person (or the one who loves chocolate most) have more? Should sharing be with those in the room? What about those absent? Or those living

next door? What if some members of the group boycott Nestle products? How does the group decide what is a just thing to do?

Then steal a smartie from the group! What is a just response now? Does justice demand recompense or punishment?

When we begin to talk about justice it is soon clear that it is not a straightforward concept. We ask the basic questions, such as what does it mean to do justice? How is justice to be practiced? What does justice look like? And quickly we realise that it is possible to give very different answers to those questions. Justice looks very different to different people. Justice is practiced very differently in different places. Justice can be described in very different ways.

ACTIVITY (10 mins)

Choose a few newspaper articles, perhaps a couple for every two or three members of the group, which illustrate competing ideas of justice: What is just in each situation, and why? What counter-arguments might be offered?

We live in a world of clashing justices, often rooted in clashing ideas. The search to know what justice looks like is complex because we have so many different understandings of it. But 'justice' is central to the way we think and behave, and the way society orders its affairs. So we need to gain a better understanding of the complex picture surrounding this word 'justice', to look at possible answers to the question of what we mean by justice, and to begin to see what contribution Christian faith can make to the debate.

DIMENSIONS OF JUSTICE (20 mins)

ACTIVITY

Hand out or display copies of the symbols of the Old Bailey, the United Nations flag, and a circle around a hand with a heart on the palm. Perhaps draw the three circles below on a flipchart. Name the three dimensions of justice and ask the group to brainstorm what each means.

This activity looks at the differences between criminal justice, social justice and restorative justice. These dimensions of justice are not to be seen as alternatives. They interact with one another, and each finds its place within the Christian tradition, as we struggle to know what it means to create a just society.

Criminal Justice

- Most famous image – the statue of a blindfolded Lady Justice on the Old Bailey
- Blindfold signifies impartiality – that justice pays no attention to wealth or status
- Sword illustrates society's determination to protect itself and punish wrongdoing
- Scales signify a commitment to weigh the evidence and decide without favour
- Greek word for justice – *dike* – also means punishment or vengeance: criminal justice is about justice through punishment
- Society establishes laws to enable people to live together and holds individuals responsible for keeping or breaking these laws
- Punishment aims to ensure that a penalty is paid, that others are deterred and an offender reforms their behaviour



Social Justice

- Symbol of the UN – one world, in which the injustices of fundamental inequalities are tackled
- Social justice is about the fair distribution of benefits and burdens, including housing, food and education
- The term "social justice" is recent, coming into use in 1850s
- Yet social justice has been a central concern in Hebrew and Christian traditions
- The social justice agenda has key themes including: the gap between rich and poor, the use of violence to oppress, discrimination based on gender, race or religion
- Social justice challenges understandings of criminal justice – e.g. how far is crime a result of social injustice?

Restorative Justice

- Symbol sometimes used is of the circle of life, around an open hand representing the healing of human relationships, with a heart shape on the palm representing the depth of healing needed.
- Victim, offender and community are brought together in the search for reconciliation
- Our society has particularly used Restorative Justice as a way of trying to address and prevent youth offending
- Aim is to help offenders to understand the impact of their crime, to face up to the effect it has had on the victim, and so to take proper responsibility for it
- Normally, ways of making reparation are agreed by all three parties – e.g. writing a letter of apology, putting right damage caused, carrying out community service
- Helps the community to have confidence that offenders are making amends
- Enables the victim to be heard and – hopefully – to be able to begin to move on in their own life
- Other examples of restorative justice in action might include the Corrymeela community or the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

FAITH AND JUSTICE (25 mins)

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to identify stories or verses from the Bible which introduce the concept of justice. Write these up on the flipchart.

Examples might include:

- *God-given laws in Exodus, Deuteronomy etc (Deuteronomy 27:19)*
- *Job crying out for justice (Job 19:7)*
- *The Psalmists sing to a God of justice (Psalm 33:5)*
- *Isaiah says that God will not judge with his eyes or ears but give justice to the poor (Isaiah 11:4)*
- *The Pharisees are condemned for not focusing on the true matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23)*
- *The widow and the unjust Judge (Luke 18:3)*
- *The workers in the vineyard who are paid the same wage (Matthew 20:8)*
- *The woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus (John 8)*

Themes of justice run throughout the bible. The gospel is more than salvation for the soul and it is more than good works of caring and healing. It is about dealing with root injustices in ways that challenge and transform the whole of human society. In reading this biblical witness, a distinctive understanding of justice begins to emerge.

1. Shalom

The word that encapsulates God's vision for humankind is shalom. Shalom is how God intends things to be. It is a condition of rightness, when a person's entire being is as it ought to be. This includes physical well-being, relationships with God and with others, and personal character. Where there is any kind of injustice there cannot be shalom, for not everything is right. This provides a holistic vision of justice rooted in what people need in order to experience this state of rightness. Whereas we think of justice (particularly retributive justice) as having to do with what people earn or deserve, biblical justice rooted in the idea of shalom is concerned that people have what they need, even if it is far beyond what they deserve.

Question: What examples are there in your list of Bible stories of shalom justice?

2. Covenant

Closely linked with shalom is the idea of covenant. A covenant is an agreement between two parties, and in the bible it is between God and the people. This covenant was the framework for the development of law and justice in Hebrew society and so, unlike other societies where law was imposed by the dictates of a ruler, it grew out of relationship - a relationship with God who was personal, faithful and concerned for the shalom of everyone. Thus, when the prophets attacked the people for their failure to keep the covenant, they were attacking a failure to maintain relationships. Justice is best exemplified by a community of restored relationships and healed memories.

Question: What examples are there in your list of Bible stories of covenant justice?

3. Restoration

Certainly the biblical vision for justice includes the threat of punishment when there is wrongdoing, but there is the constant reminder that the focus is on restoration. God does not give up; God is merciful and compassionate; God is faithful even when we are unfaithful. Restoration rather than retribution is the key, and this means that love and justice are linked together, working towards achieving shalom. Many understandings of justice place it in opposition to love, or at the very least in tension with love. But as Christians we believe we learn what justice truly is from God, and God's very nature is always love. Justice and love are not opposites, with justice somehow controlled and tempered by love. Rather, justice cannot live without love, and this must affect policy and practice.

This emphasis on restoration means that Christian justice also has a future dimension. For many, the fight for justice in a world where there is so much injustice, can seem like a hopeless cause. We are aware that it will never be achieved by humankind on this earth. But the Christian vision looks beyond the coming of the kingdom of God, and it is this future hope that gives meaning and direction to the present struggle. The present reality is not all there is. We do not have to rest content with the status quo. The gospel announces the coming of God's justice.

Question: What examples are there in your list of Bible stories of restoration or future justice?

FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)

What relevance do our Christian perspectives on what makes for justice have for public life?

What have you learned from this session?

Are there issues on which you have gained new insights or perspectives?

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

God of justice, you give us a vision for life together. You call us to work for a world and a society where what is broken is restored, where relationships are marked by faithfulness and fairness, and where everyone is able to enjoy 'shalom'. Show us ways in which we can work for this vision until your kingdom come in all its fullness. Amen.

HOMEWORK

During the week look out for situations where understandings of shalom, covenant and restoration gives new perspectives on justice for our world or country.