

# BUILDING COMMUNITY SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SCRIPTURE

by Fleur Dorrell

SHARING

DEFENDING

## Creation care

Social justice runs like a golden thread throughout the Bible. God created the world so that we could live in harmony with each other and flourish in community (**Genesis 1-2**). 'The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made' (**Psalms 145:9**). Any breakdown in relationship between humans, and humans and the rest of the created world, is a violation of God's design and purpose. Social justice helps to address this violation and to restore all of creation once again.

## The poor at the centre

Again and again in the Bible, God defends the most vulnerable from social injustice: 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan... If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry' (**Exodus 22:21-23**). A commitment to respect and pay the poor for their work promptly is repeated explicitly, as is the provision to share the harvest with the most poor (**Deuteronomy 24:6-22**).

## Equality and respect

Jesus re-defined the idea of kingship and the 'Kingdom of God' on earth by championing equality before God rather than hierarchy. His new politics is: 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all' (**Mark 10:42-44**).

## Wealth and poverty

Jesus despised luxury at the expense of those in poverty. He addresses the economic roots of social injustice by challenging our fear for personal security and greed with regard to material goods. 'No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?' (**Matthew 6:24-34**).

## Law and a new social order

The prolonged oppression of the Hebrew people exiled in Egypt is the original social injustice. God hears their cry (**Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7**) and calls Moses to lead them to a free land (**Exodus 19:4**). On the way, on Mount Sinai, God establishes a constitution for them to live according to a different order of social justice - the Ten Commandments (**Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21**). The institution of the Sabbath promotes social equality, enabling everyone to rest and worship God, whether servants, strangers, employers, citizens and even the animals (**Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15**).

## Kings and prophets

The Scriptures take a critical view of the many kings of Israel who represent an often abusive, centralised national power (**1 Samuel 8**). And we see the result of the breakdown in the fall of the kingdom and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (**2 Kings 24-25**). The true king of Israel and of the world is God (**Psalms 95-99**). His messengers are the prophets who serve him as they cry out for justice and liberation.

The Law (Torah), as described in the Pentateuch, locates our fundamental duty towards the weakest people at all stages of life. This duty is based on the fairness and strength of its legal system and the ability to challenge corruption, the Torah states: 'You shall not render an unjust judgment' (**Leviticus 19:15**); 'You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God' (**Leviticus 24:22**). God is the model of the just judge who 'loves righteousness and justice...' (**Psalms 9:5; 33:5; 36:6; 37:6**).

*'Woe to those who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right...'* (**Isaiah 10:1-2a**).

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Micah constantly speak on behalf of the marginalised. They are the social reformers who oppose the bastions of power – the bad kings, corrupt judges and flawed institutions, including religious leaders and the wealthy, in support of the poor and oppressed. They command the people to: 'Hate evil and love good, and establish justice at the gate' (**Amos 5:15**). Later, Jesus becomes the ultimate prophet dying for justice as well as speaking up for it.

This inspires Paul to say that belief in Christ enables us to overcome social, religious and cultural differences. 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (**Galatians 3:28**) and therefore, the gifts of each should be valued (**Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12**).

Jesus continues to develop his teachings on social justice beyond the limits of the Jewish Law, to help one's neighbours even in situations that fall outside the legal framework. This is demonstrated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:29-37**) as well as his healing people on the Sabbath, and talking with children, women, prostitutes, lepers and tax collectors. Jesus' criteria are laid out in the Last Judgement: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me' (**Matthew 25:40**) and in the Golden Rule (**Mark 12:28-34**).

Here Jesus is re-emphasising the founding values of the Torah (**Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:4-9**) as the key to religious living and warns of unethical working practices (**Matthew 18:23-35; 25:14-30**), so that the private and the public spheres are equally called to justice and compassion (**James 2:14-26**).

This mandate motivated the early Christian community to live modestly: 'All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need' (**Acts 2:44-47**).

## Belonging and community

The biblical vision for society is rooted in a community of love and belonging among all its creatures. The animals are to enjoy the same Sabbath rest as the king and the pauper.

**James 2:14-26** summarises this vision as 'faith without works is dead'. It took Jesus' death and resurrection to unite faith in Christ with social justice. In his Spirit, we build community and the common good. And we must continue to work towards the peace and reconciliation of a new heaven and a new earth (**Revelation 21**).

BELONGING

VISITING

CARING

SERVING

CHALLENGING

THE  
GOD  
WHO  
SPEAKS