

2. A Spirituality for Justice and Peace

Working for Justice and Peace is our Work and God's Work

Work for Justice and Peace is not merely our work, it is God's work too – or at least that's what we'll say if we are rooted and grounded in Christ, in Christian Vision and Values. For every good thing – including work for Justice and Peace with and on behalf of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised - has its roots and origins in God. It's His work we are doing. Speaking through the prophet Amos God says; "I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream". And for the psalmist "righteousness and justice are the foundations of God's throne."



The World seems to be in a Hopeless Mess.

Any reading of any newspaper on any day of the week in the United Kingdom glaringly reveals the mess the world is in. Cases in point at the time of writing would be:

- the escalating chaos, loss of life and destruction of social fabric in Iraq, which seems to be spiralling out of control despite the best intentions of the UK and US governments; and
- the rising crescendo of scientific alarm at the havoc we are wreaking on the earth through relentless global warming from carbon emission and the millions of human lives that will be at risk later this century from flood, storm, and drought.

'By Human Resources alone this seems Impossible.....'

We know that most of these terrible issues seem to be impervious to 'two-dimensional' merely human action. Despite our best endeavours nothing much changes and millions continue to suffer and die. Selfishness, indifference and apparent wickedness 'rule OK' as the next crisis escalates out of control. The world community has tried to solve some of these issues and failed, or not even bothered to address many of the worst of them. When they do succeed in bringing some relief and order to a situation, a worse one often rears its head where least expected.

'For God All Things are Possible.....'

This is precisely the situation that Jesus encountered when he and his three closest disciples came down from the Mountain of Transfiguration. They were met by a desperate father whose son's violent and extreme sickness had defeated the best efforts of the other disciples to heal him in Jesus' absence. These disciples were arguing amongst themselves. No doubt they were blaming each other and were angry and frustrated at their failure to help someone in great need, in the grip of an apparently uncontrollable destructive force:

Now Read Mark 9 v 14 – 29...

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' ¹⁹He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. ²²It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' ²³Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' ²⁶After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' ²⁹He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer and fasting.'

In other gospel records of this incident Jesus also says that if only we had faith as small as a mustard seed we could "say to this mountain 'be moved' and it would be thrown in to the sea".

Mary and Martha: Models for Justice and Peace

My thesis is simple: Some of the most mountainous problems we seek to tackle in our work for Justice and Peace are just as intractable to merely human solutions as was the condition of this demon-possessed boy. They can only be 'reached', tackled and resolved by people of faith actively involved in a life of prayer, who fast and pray and study God's Word, and who act in and with Christ. In this way, in the end, it is no longer they who live and act, but Christ who lives and acts in them – helping them to be both Mary and Martha. Mary sitting quietly at Jesus' feet receiving the gift of his teaching, prayer and grace, as they formed ever more fully into his likeness, and, at the same time, imitating Martha in their active work for Justice and Peace in the world. In this way we begin to imitate the ideal our Lord has modelled for us in his own life as active contemplatives, or contemplative activists!

But for our lack of faith, lack of prayer, and lack of fasting how many of the world's worst and most mountainous problems would not now be solved? And note – the Gospel writers are at pains to point out just how intractable was the predicament they faced in trying to heal the boy: his illness had been with him since childhood; it had appalling manifestations: foaming mouth and convulsions of murderous force throwing him into fire and water as if to destroy him.

Justice and Peace 'Saints' – People formed by Faith and Prayer

In the Christian tradition we find a deep vein of practical human responses to God's demand for justice in the lives of Christian men and women whose faith has impelled them to tackle head on the deep injustices of their day: Martin Luther King Jr, Josephine Butler, Desmond Tutu, Jackie Pullinger, Lord Shaftsbury, Oscar Romero, Florence Nightingale, and Thomas Merton. Behind and within such people and such prophetic activity lie deep foundations of Christian formation and prayer. Biblical reflection, spirituality and work for social justice are inexplicably bound up in the lives of such people. Cardinal George Basil Hume brought a further dimension to Christian values. His humble Benedictine spirituality engaged with people across so many divides and showed a human face of God.

This is clearly demonstrated in the life of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston in his leadership of the Anti-Apartheid movement, of whom Archbishop Desmond Tutu said; "it was all a consequence of his daily, moment by moment encounter with the transcendent and all-Holy Trinity in the regular offices of his community, in meditation and in the Eucharist. He took the incarnation and the doctrine of creation seriously: each person was precious, with an infinite worth, because they were created in the image of God".

And it was true for Josephine Butler in her campaigning and political action in the 19th Century against the vicious law that allowed the police to stop, then painfully and intimately search on the merest whim of suspicion any woman they encountered on the streets of London, and to brand them as a prostitute if they were found to be not a virgin and unmarried. Josephine Butler was deeply versed in the works and practices of St John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. Reflecting in her old age on a life-time of struggle for Social Justice for the oppressed and victimised she said: "When I look back I see that prayer has been heard, the divine hand has held mine, often when I knew it not. And friends, God can give more power to bear the pain; there is positive joy in his service, and in any warfare in which He who conquered sin and death and hell goes before us and is our reward!"

The Power of Prayer

Teresa of Avila says that people who pray regularly, and who reach a degree of intimacy with God in prayer that she calls 'the Prayer of Union', find themselves disposed ('willy-nilly') to be prepared to confront evil in the world and to be of benefit to our neighbour: "Having received this kind of prayer the soul becomes so courageous that if at that moment it were cut in pieces for God it would be greatly consoled. Such prayer is the source of heroic promises, of resolutions and of ardent desires.....(and) the soul begins to be of benefit to its neighbour almost without knowing it and (its) neighbours see the desirable fruits of its virtuous actions." As the Anglican Archbishop of York John Sentamu clearly demonstrated during his week of prayer, fasting and penance in York minister for peace in the Middle East, such actions strengthen and help Christians to "stop being the silent majority and to become more vocal..... a focus for action which makes it possible to realise there is something, with God, that they can do".