

*Trinity 10 2011*

He got what he deserved.

What a hugely satisfying concept that is. Whether we are talking about someone who has achieved the results they need to get to university or been put in prison for rioting. As you sow, so shall you reap. It is the concept that underpins many a moral fairy tale.

But poor Jeremiah didn't get what he deserved, or at least that's what he told God. He cries from the heart: "O LORD, remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors".

The suffering he endured came as a direct result of preaching the word of God. He had followed God's commands and got nothing but trouble in return. He protested his faithfulness, his blamelessness. Why should he be punished while his persecutors got off? Where was the justice in that? If God can't bring about fair play, then what hope is there for the world?

Jeremiah was not alone in thinking like this. You should get what you deserve.

600 years later in the time of Christ, this was still the view of how the world should work. Peter certainly thought like that. Peter, faithful impetuous follower of Jesus, the one who blurted out in a moment of revelation that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, thought he knew how justice ought to work. So when Jesus took him aside to attempt to explain to him that the Messiah must suffer and die, he could not, would not accept it. How could he? This overturns the whole moral order. If Jesus is the Son of God, and therefore good, how can he suffer, be punished at the hand of God? This would be God acting against himself. It just can't be.

And poor Peter, his love and sense of protection for Jesus earns him the reprimand, 'get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block.' And where's the justice in that either?

So. Have we got it wrong? Justice lies at the heart of the bible. The prophets all cry out for justice when they see the poor oppressed and persecuted. Justice is a hugely important issue, all societies have a system of justice, a sense of what is right and proper. So how come God doesn't seem to play fair.

This troubled the disciples of Jesus. They had to confront this issue when they understood that Jesus had really died, been killed unjustly, and then risen again. What did this mean about God. What did this mean for the whole moral order? What were the implications for society? If we can no longer

rely upon the idea that the good will get rewards and the evil be punished, what's the point of trying?

In the years that followed the question of justice became even more pressing as Christians were persecuted, and accused falsely of all kinds of crimes, and imprisoned without charge.

These Christians were not getting what they deserved.

Did it mean that God no longer cared? No. they knew that could not be true for they had experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. They saw its effects. Did it mean that God had lost his power? No. Christ had been raised. This they had witnessed.

But gradually they came to understand something extraordinary, revolutionary, life changing.

Paul knew that his past, his own role in the persecution of Christians, meant that he deserved punishment, and yet he had received the love of God. More than that, God trusted him, chose him, appointed him to be his ambassador. Such was Paul's insight that he was able to write to the Christian community in Rome:

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all."

Because Paul really understood. This was about the power of love. The cycle of hatred and revenge, of punishment and retribution can only be broken by the transforming power of love. This is not about what we deserve, for we deserve nothing. It is about the generosity and forgiveness of God.

No-one, no-one at all, is beyond redemption. No-one is outside of God's love. They can choose not to reciprocate, but even then God does not stop loving them.

We do not get what we deserve. Instead we have the offer of forgiveness, of love. That is the extraordinary message of the cross.

But what of society? What about those who behave badly, selfishly, cruelly. Those who steal, and murder?

God loves them too.

Which means that when we decide how to treat those convicted of crimes we are not, or should not be, solely interested in punishing them, nor solely interested in protecting the public (although that is of course vitally important) but our purpose should be to change lives. We need to believe in the transforming power of love. It affects how we treat those in prison. It means that we have to look not just at the crimes and perpetrators, but at all the spheres of influence that shape our lives, the stability of families, the impact of education, the power of television shows. History has shown us the fickleness of crowds, how cries of adulation can turn to shouts of crucify. Now we have virtual crowds, the group mentality via facebook. We have not even begun to think deeply about how we shape and control these influences. And we need to.

Our faith is not just about our individual salvation. It is about building the kingdom here on earth. The Christian values that seem so subversive, where the good can suffer and the wrong doers are still loved, are values for society. No wonder Paul said that the cross seemed like foolishness to many.

Justice, true justice, is a matter for God. We have to order society so that it is safe and to minimise wrong doing. How we do that is a measure of both our humanity and of our faith. As St Paul says: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Our aim, as Christians, is to imitate, however weakly and imperfectly, the love of God as seen in Christ - as individuals, as a church and as a society.

We do not always get what we deserve. And thank God for that as we can never deserve the love of God. Amen.

*Mary Bide*