

Justice and Ecology: Action of Justice as a Constitutive Element of the Christian Gospel.

The ecology crisis in the world today is partly due to our lack of awareness of the wonder of Creation and our place in it. As humans we have developed in amazing ways, technology, science, medicine, all fields which have enhanced our lives, but which have also caused disharmony within Creation.

We have exploited rather than cared for our common home, we now need to realise that we can longer cause harm, or contribute to behaviour which causes climate change, exploits poorer nations or causes species of wildlife to become extinct.

Theme of Justice in the Old Testament:

In the Old Testament, the mosaic laws give us great guidelines of how God would like us to, indeed expects us to treat each other. The Ten Commandments set out clearly that murder, theft, adultery etc are not acceptable behaviour towards our fellow human beings. We can not be one with God while separated from each other. Justice in the Old Testament is about righteousness, and acting in a way that respects God, self and others.

Theme of Justice in the Prophetic Books.

The Prophets preached a clear message, how to love God and our fellow man. This love for God is pointless unless we love God in union with others and respect our fellow human beings especially the poor, the oppressed and marginalised among us. In the book of Amos, Amos is appalled by the lack of social justice he witnesses in Israel at the time of his ministry. In pointing this out to the people, it does not help him in the popularity stakes, as he tells them that their love for God is not being lived out in their dealings with others. They are behaving in a way that is neither moral nor just by using others for their own gain.

This strong theme of love for all of God's creation, is one of hope for a just society. A society in which mankind will take to heart the message of God through the prophets and "*they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning forks*" (Is 2:4) and in unity with God and others and Creation, justice will prevail and "*nations will not take up sword against nation ,nor train for war again.*" (Is 2:4)

The Theme of Justice in the New Testament.

In the Gospel of Luke there is no guess work needed on how to bring about a just society as Jesus tells us exactly what He is about. He is concerned with the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed. Luke tells us of Jesus visiting with tax collectors, talking to outcasts and curing the sick and the lame.

St. Paul tells us to be like this Christ, to have the same mindset as him who by his kenosis emptied himself for the service of others.

To act justly we must be of service and to be humble in this service. Jesus instructed us to “*love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn 15:12) and this can be brought about as Paul tells the Ephesians, by redemption in the removing of barriers that separate people. Jesus did not separate himself from us but instead, became human, to walk with us on our journey, not in front of us or behind us but with us.

Catholic Social Teaching:

The social doctrine of the church is not specifically preached about in name on a weekly basis, the encyclicals are not your usual bedtime reading and thus we as Christians in some way may not understand fully what the social teaching of the church actually calls us to do and the connection that this teaching is a very important part of our faith. We are committed as Christians to look out for those in need, the people who have no voice and to recognise Christ in all of creation.

From the encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*, *Evangelii Gaudium* and to the present times *Laudato Si*, the themes within are those of human dignity, common good, community, working together and the care for creation.

All the above are challenging points and remind us of God’s gift to us, his creation, our fellow human beings, the animals and the universe. They are all ours only to maintain, to care for and to nourish, in order that we are in communion with one another and with God.

In the 1970’s it was seen by members of the Christian Churches that working for ecology and against poverty, was the way ahead. The term eco justice was coined. We are to respect and value the whole of creation of which man is only a small part.

Justice and Ecology

We are called to love our neighbour as yourself, we are called to be children of God. As a Christian I am coming to this issue because of the impact that climate change has on people and their right to food, water, education and shelter. If we can’t love and take care of each other how can we love God and his creation.

Water as a basic right:

At the baptism of children in our parish, the younger members of the gathering are asked by the priest, “*what would happen if we didn’t have water*” many varied replies but most of them are aware that we need water to survive. Water is a basic necessity, not a luxury to be accessible to some and not others. We are all familiar with the story of the woman at the well. Jesus is not supposed to talk to her but instead he gives her the gift of acknowledgement, of respect of equality with others in her community. He spoke and acted in Gods name. He introduced God into everyday events of the people he met.

The woman at the well is seen by many as a disciple and Jesus called the disciples to live in His name, to pray in His name and to meet Him in His name. The woman returns to her village, changed, Jesus had reached out to her. Our action to live justly according to the Gospel also changes lives when we reach out to others and reach into ourselves, and then anything can happen at a well!

I come from the SMA parish in Wilton, where our priests have spent time in Nigeria and other African countries. So for our parish, Africa is very much a country that comes to mind when looking at how climate change effects people. The Sahara Desert is creeping deeper and deeper into African countries causing more and more people to move towards arable land, but this becomes increasingly harder and harder as climate change occurs causing long periods of drought, flash flooding followed by more drought. Villages, livelihoods and harvests are all being destroyed. The concerning thing about this from a justice point of view is that the people most effected by climate change contribute the least to the causes of greenhouse gas emissions which are causing these problems.

The United Nations, tells us that “the human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity”¹ In that same article, it says “the human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, affordable, physically accessible, safe and acceptable water for personal and domestic uses.”² We need water for drinking, washing and hygiene. This water should be safe, free from contamination and the guidelines from the WHO state that “the water source has to be within 1,000 meters of the home and collection time should not exceed 30 mins”³ In most of western society the above guidelines are easily met. Water is as it says above, safe, affordable, accessible, a basic human right and one that doesn’t really concern us until maybe we have a frozen pipe or a major leak which causes disruption to our supply. In parts of Africa, people share their water sources with animals. Where is the safety in that? Where is the dignity in that?

Neither is there dignity in walking 6 km in the heat of the African skies to collect this contaminated water, a journey not easily done in 30 mins. We are aware of the importance of water, but it remains a terrible reality that “In least developed countries 22% of health care facilities have no water service, 21% no sanitation services and 22% no waste management service”.⁴

Justice is more than just duty, it is linked to our faith, our value and respect for our neighbours and ourselves. God didn’t act out of duty when he freed the Israelites, he heard their cry and he answered it, God didn’t act from a sense of duty when he sent Jesus to save us to have life to the full and Jesus didn’t act out of duty when he raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. These were acts of love in response to the needs of others. Our response too must be of compassion and love.

¹ *International Decade for Action ‘Water for Life’ 2005 -2015*
https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human_right_to_water.shtml

² International Decade for Action.

³ International Decade for Action

⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>

Oceans in Peril:

The enormous amount of plastic evident in the ocean is detrimental to maintaining our ocean life for the future. But the ocean is fighting back, this is evident when we see the amount of debris on our shores, it's as if the ocean is saying here you go, we don't want or need this, you can have it back. But the ocean obviously can't speak, so we might miss that point. However, the ocean is throwing pollution back on our doorstep in a language we can understand, in the forms of contaminated fish and sea food, entangled marine life and expanding oceanic dead zones.

Some of the main contributors to change in our oceans come from ocean acidification, coral bleaching and of course plastic waste, these are not temporary changes but forever, once the coral reefs go, they will not rejuvenate themselves.

If we continue, with business as usual , Slyvia Earle, marine biologist and author tells us that “in 50 years there may be no coral reefs and no commercial fishing, because the fish will simply be gone”⁵ a point also made by Ocean Pollutants guide , that “ that one of the most shocking predictions is that plastic rubbish would outweigh fish in the ocean by 2050 unless the world takes drastic action”⁶

This to some may seem like a bit of an exaggeration until further research shows that a whale washed up on a shore in the Philippine Islands had 40 lbs of plastic waste in its stomach.⁷ This is not a rare occurrence. The oceans are in peril, but it does not just affect the more affluent nations, we have already mentioned the contaminated fish that have made their way into the statistics. “Fish provides at least 40 % of protein for two thirds of the world's population including most of the world's poor”⁸ making this a problem for all people.

Thankfully Ecology is now creeping into our understanding of theology.

We believe that God created all things to be in harmony. We are all part of creation, just a small part, and no part of creation, including humanity can separate itself from the whole. God is in all of creation and therefore all things are of the divine.

Humans with our intelligence, and by our choices are given are to act responsibility in protecting creation, not exploiting it. Exploitation of any kind is an injustice that jeopardizes the harmony of the whole cosmos. Rather than looking at dominion over animals etc as seen in Genesis, stewardship is seen as a way of expressing how humans might more gently and responsibly with its neighbour/ creation. Domination is no longer understood in the terms of

⁵ Slyvia A. Earle, *The World is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean's are One*. Pg 464.

⁶ Mariann Lloyd- Smith and Joanna Immig, “ Ipen.org.” *Oceans Pollutants Guide: Toxic Threats to Human Health and Marine Life*. https://ipen.org/sites/default/files/documents/ipen-ocean-pollutants-v2_1-en-web.pdf

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/enviroment/2019/mar/18/dead-whale-washed-up-in-philippines-had-40kg-of-plastic-bags-in-its-stomach>

⁸ Oceans Pollutants Guide:

our right to do with the earth as we please, but more as interdependence and responsibility toward the gift of creation.

For nearly two millennium the western world viewed nature as an “it” something that was created for the benefit of man who exercised complete control over it. Eco justice sees nature not as a thing but a life giving and sustaining and not an object to be used for humanity’s benefit. Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si, Chapter 2. The Gospel of Creation* “it is good for humanity and the world at large when we believers better recognise the ecological commitments which stems from our faith” (LS, 64)

As long as exploitation of the environment for profit and power remains, the weaker members of humanity will suffer and if injustice prevails, exploitation will remain profitable. We see this in the sweat shops of Asia where children, the weakest members of society are exploited purely for profit.

Creation and nature were important to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. The Gospels tell us that Jesus was a teacher, a preacher and he used nature in his parables and images of nature to illustrate his understanding of the kingdom of God. Jesus recognised the importance of all of creation. He was relentless in his message of love and compassion. This is not how the world works, unfortunately, but the good news of the Gospel is that it can, the role of the church is to bring this about. It states in The Catechism, the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel and promotes justice peace and love, the Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members. As Christians we are called upon by the very nature of our baptism to be ministers of our faith, a faith which calls us to live a just life.

In our modern world, we have probably lost sight of this a little bit, but our Medieval ancestors, when observing nature and reading the Gospels recognised that the whole universe together participates in divine goodness. Thomas Aquinas in his famous volumes of writings called the *Summa Theologiae* says “ For He brought things into being in order that His divine goodness might be communicated to creatures and represented by them, and because His divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplied by another”⁹ Humans are a perfect example of this , we all have different gifts and talents by which we can show to others the face of God.

Our actions have consequences and we are called, by God to live a just life. We are called to awareness of others and how our decisions impact on creation.

Our demands on the earth are not always ones of pure necessity but demands which a lot of the time are ones of desire. We must respect the law of the natural world, we need to recognise in plants and animals that their place in the world is important, not only to how beneficial they are to us. This is put clearly when quoting the Catechism Pope Francis says

⁹ <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1047.htm>

“man must therefore respect in particular the goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things.” (LS,69) that goodness of every creature that Thomas Aquinas wrote about.

The Ecological Crisis seems like a huge challenge, but we can all do our bit.
I am reminded of the starfish story, **by: Loren Eisley**

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean.

Approaching the boy, he asked, “What are you doing?”

The youth replied, “Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them back, they’ll die.”

“Son,” the man said, “don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can’t make a difference!”

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf.

Then, smiling at the man, he said.....“I made a difference for that one.”¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://academictherapycenter.com/about/the-starfish-story/>