

Anglicare Australia National Conference 2006

John Roffey Memorial Lecture

“Climbing and Clamouring Towards Justice and Compassion – some biblical and contemporary perspectives”

“Whether the promise of a just and secure world? Mel will explore some current examples of the call for justice and compassion within Australian society, their corresponding implications for social policy, and possible biblical parallels. Questions raised will include: Who is best placed to effect positive social change? Those within or without the political and economic structures? Whatever happened to the ‘mutual’ in ‘mutual obligation’? And what is the nature of our responsibility towards the marginalised?”

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the Hebrew word **shalom** is a key concept, used to describe a huge variety of social, economic and theological settings where the fundamental ideals of peace and justice, safety and freedom, prosperity and compassion, are not merely dreamt of but are actually realised ... lived out. Shalom is also a journey.

Today I'd like to explore some of these elements with you, using both current Australian examples as well as a few biblical excerpts.

It is an honour and a thrill to have been invited to deliver the fourth Anglicare Australia John Roffey Memorial Lecture. It is a personal privilege to have this opportunity to share with you some insights that I've come to realise are directly attributable to many years of dinnertime debates and robust philosophical discussions with my father.

As Alan Cadwallader declared in the first of these lectures, John was a person who was simultaneously concerned with the poor and marginalised in our society, whilst wrestling “with what he called the commodification of life, the tendency to reduce human beings to items, factors, assets and liabilities”, and even as “disposable entities”.

Both the ancient Jewish gesture of hands raised to the heavens in an appeal for compassion, or justice, or both ... and many justice movements' logos incorporating the raised, clenched fist, stand as symbolic gestures of resistance to these human attempts to define people as economic units or dispensable commodities.

Much of the work of the Melbourne Diocese Social Responsibilities Committee also wrestles with these dynamics, blending a prophetic theological stance with a more quotidian social justice focus. The committee's work involves liaising with other agencies and making informed, theological contributions to current ethical, political and environmental debates that impact upon community life and social policy.

I would suggest that the Western Church also exists as an exercise in resistance. Alan Cadwallader points out that churches and church agencies have also experienced brokenness, marginalisation and financial distress. Alan's acknowledgement of this institutional woundedness, “and of ministering from that position” surely places the church and its partners squarely alongside those who are most vulnerable within our communities. As Alan goes on to point out, the key biblical injunction to care for one's neighbour also underpins this relationship,

and leads him to reflect upon an observation made by John Foffey 20 years earlier: that we are “doing theology from underneath”.

It would be fair to say that all of John’s activities: as a parish priest, AIDS education officer, counsellor, lecturer, manager and finally as CEO of Anglicare SA – saw an authentic expression of this philosophy. The stone that marks the place where John’s ashes were interred, in the rose garden outside St Peter’s Cathedral in Adelaide, reads: “John Roffey 1948-2001 creation, communion, wisdom ...”

When I use the term “justice” and “compassion”, I guess I’m making certain assumptions that there are moral aspects of these terms that are, to a large extent, universal across cultures and contexts (although this is something that is hotly debated in sociological and anthropological circles).

Let’s have a go anyway ...

What do we mean by the term “justice”? Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia describes many forms of justice, including:

- justice as harmony
- justice as divine command
- justice as natural law
- justice as a human creation
- justice as mutual agreement
- justice as fairness
- justice as egalitarianism
- justice as welfare maximization
- justice as distributive (that is, concerned with the appropriate distribution of wealth, power, reward and respect towards all citizens by virtue of our shared humanity)
- justice in its legal definition: (retributive justice)
- and even justice as “trickery” (in that it exclusively serves the interests of the strong in a society, thereby preserving their advantage, according to one of the players in Plato’s *Republic*).

Wikipedia adds that the concept of “**social** justice” is founded upon the ideal that individuals (as well as social groupings) receive fair and equitable treatment, and a just share of the benefits within that society. The web encyclopaedia then goes on to say “ideals of justice must be put into practice by **institutions** ... which raise their **own** questions of legitimacy, procedure, codification and interpretation”.

And while it would be fair to say that right and left-wing approaches to social justice do exhibit some dramatic differences:

The Right, having an emphasis on meritocracy, free market, charity, wealth generation and The Left having a focus on a comprehensive welfare safety net and equitable wealth distribution, **both** ideologies agree upon the justice-oriented principle whereby a society is always “working towards the realisation of a world where all members of (that) society, regardless of background, having basic human rights and equal access to their community’s wealth and resources”.

Furthermore, justice, particularly **social** justice, is inseparably bound up with “morality”. We could go on and on unpacking the definitions, but let’s get to the meaty stuff ...

Jim Wallis (a US-based liberal evangelical and author of *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*), states in a recent blog on the Sojourners website:

Insisting on full humanity and dignity for all people by opposing discrimination and oppression for ethnic or racial reasons, whether intentionally or due to systemic structures, is a moral imperative.

He includes racism, human rights, poverty, sex-trafficking, torture and genocide amongst justice issues that have a corresponding morality impact. And to which I would add same-sex relationships, the recent Federal counter-terrorism legislation, euthanasia, embryonic stem-cell research and capital punishment (all issues in the broader public debate that the Social Responsibilities Committee has addressed recently).

Even the **environment** comes with a built-in dimension incorporating moral concerns. Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is built upon this assumption. And as Jim Wallis puts it:

Despite official indifference and denial, the future of our fragile environment is in jeopardy as global warming continues unchecked. Caring for the earth that sustains us is also a moral issue.

Moreover, says Willis (and the biblical prophet Isaiah would agree), these are not partisan issues. Neither right nor left wing political agendas have a monopoly on what are actually larger and more fundamental concerns: the promise of just, secure and healthy societies. (Wallis p xxvii)

Globally, I believe our environmental crisis is the single more urgent issue needing to be addressed ... on these grounds of compassion, justice and morality. Without an environment that is capable of sustaining life, all other issues become secondary (wealth generation, governance, social policy, etc, etc).

Let's take a look at the accounts of creation in Genesis (there are two), as each tradition has something to say about the inbuilt morality within creation, the unique responsibility of human beings towards the rest of creation, and ... surprise surprise ... the nature of human **work**, and its onerous and fallible dynamics.

The more recent of the two texts (probably around the 6th century BCE) comes first:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

God begins. Light is created, then separated from the darkness to form Day and Night. The waters are separated from the sky, then "gathered together into one place" so that land appears. Plants and animals are created, and in each of these foundational creative acts, the result is unambiguously described by the Creator as "**good**" (**a moral value**). Humankind is also created, and is also good. Like the creator, the first man and woman have "dominion" over every living thing – a unique responsibility (in other words, "**a moral imperative**") that many ecotheologians interpret as meaning an innate right to utilise the created world according to our needs **as well as** a call for responsible stewardship of this creation. And this too was good!

The older creation story, predating the first chapter of Genesis by possibly 500 or 600 years, describes in more detail humanity's role within the created order, and is more problematic, in moral terms. While it seems clear from this story that God calls each person to be all that they can be, in relationships of mutuality and interdependence with others ... due to a temptation involving a tempter and a tree or two (with all sorts of narrative ins and outs!), humanity gains self-knowledge and loses the innocent, trusting relationship with its creator. We learned the

difference between good and evil. As a result, humanity is thenceforth burdened with a sense of anxiety and guilt. It's almost like a mythic psychological insight into human motivations, even before "psychology" was discovered.

The final result sees the creator's "ideal" creation somewhat fractured. Human beings, while still made in the image of the creator, become mortal, and toil and suffering are new realities within human existence.

Now if that's not a pair of stories with some foundational concepts concerning morality, justice and compassion, than ...?

Late biblical texts (in both testaments) establish a couple of principles upon which all human conduct may be measured:

- a call for justice, life and freedom for all people
- a mandate for economic and structural responsibility towards the poor, mercy towards the vulnerable and, by the time we get to the Jesus stories, even a privileging of the marginalised over everyone else!

As the prophet Micah said: "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God".

Let's move now to our contemporary Australian context ...

Mutual obligation

During the 1990s, when the concept of "mutual obligation" was being debated, then implemented, across Australia via social security schemes, I remember a conversation with John about the positive and negatives aspects within this social policy. While John argued that the benefits of such a scheme included:

- its potential to enhance community interrelationships
- the socially responsible notion that mutual accountability between the state and its citizens for support services granted was a reasonable requirement
- that on an individual level a citizen in receipt of social security payments, in contributing their time and work in exchange for the benefit, would experience a sense of their importance and responsibility within the society, potentially alleviating the depressing social security trap of spiralling inactivity and non-productivity
- a potential to increasingly bring about responsible, productive and accountable "civil society" on all levels.

I, on the other hand, was more pessimistic, suggesting that "mutual obligation" was a dodgy ideology that would be selectively imposed upon particular citizens to demonstrate their status and entitlements to social support services, by virtue of their being citizens, being required to jump through additional, potentially punitive hoops in order to prove their already-established status as a worthy recipient of some sort of "safety net" benefit from his or her own government. Whew!

Alas, many years down the social security track, "mutual obligation" has become an exercise in compliance – a one way exchange between state and citizen whereby the citizen (having established his or her credentials to Centrelink) has a responsibility to the state in terms of accountability (fair enough) but the state is not able to be held to account by the citizen.

In recent times, this has become even more extreme ...

For example, following the welfare-to-work changes in this country, church-based organisations have been approached by public sector employees who have expressed concerns that thousands of Australians may be in real trouble (in financial terms, in relation to housing and so on) as a result of being found to have breached the terms of their social security payments following a **redefining** of those terms. They have actually asked if these church-based agencies would have the capacity to catch these citizens in a net that may be stretched out across the space where the government-sponsored social safety net **used to be**.

While it is arguable that all citizens do indeed have a responsibility towards their fellow citizens and to their elected governments (according to their capacity), there is nothing “mutual” about this level of abnegation by the state towards its constituents.

To be **prophetic**, in the truly biblical understanding of that word, means to see what’s really going on in the society in which you live, to expose previously hidden assumptions and agenda, and to speak out! It entails drawing people’s attention to the disparities across the society – between rich and poor, powerful and weak, the well-off insiders and the systemically marginalised. It means operating in ways that are independent of party politics. It means sounding the call to all citizens of a universal right to become all that they can, in fulfilment of a loving creator’s vision for the creation.

It’s not for no reason that one of the symbols of many small, grassroots movements for social justice is a clenched fist, raised in prophetic protest and defiance of the status quo. The image of Jesus violently, angrily overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Jerusalem temple (reported in Mark Chapter 11 and filled out in Chapter 21 of Matthew) sits, in my mind, as one of the most powerful, prophetic acts in the biblical canon.

What follows on from prophetic action? In the biblical tradition, it is this reminding all citizens (leaders, priests and ordinary folks) of the creator’s call for us to become all we can be, both individually and as a community. It means literally standing alongside those who are in the firing line (women, the disabled, the homeless, the structurally impoverished, economically marginalised, GLBTs, our Muslim brothers and sisters, anyone who doesn’t live in urban settings along the east coast of Australia (where most policy is created), and so on). On this criteria, the mission and work of Anglicare Australia and its agencies may be seen as truly prophetic.

As John Roffey said during the 2001 Joy MacLennan Oration in Adelaide (only two months before his sudden and unexpected death),

if I have a vision for Anglicare ... and the wider church, it is that in our mission and work we demonstrate a commitment to our belief that society and life are **sacred**.

This **prophetic, sacred** stance, towards society, governance and the marketplace, requires that all policy-making be held accountable to the belief that “no individual is a commodity and that no social practice or structure ought to treat people as disposable entities”.

Now I come to the second half of my paper, where I plan to ask some questions about:

- firstly, the role of the “marketplace” in social policy
- secondly, whether social change is most effective from within the dominant social structures, or from a place outside these structures
- and thirdly, whether social change is only ever effective when carried out by the social privileged within our communities (whether by virtue of race, religion, socio-economic status or geography).

A very recent book, produced by the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, entitled *Prosperity with a Purpose*, seems like a good jumping-off point ...

According to one of the contributors, Niall Cooper, the formulation of social policy must take into account, and function alongside, the marketplace context as part of that social policy's creation. Both economic and social policies "should affirm the idea that the fostering of competitive enterprise and the pursuit of social justice can be compatible aims. (page 11 summary)

What do you think? Is it appropriate that "marketplace" ideology be incorporated into a theology of a just, compassionate and civil society? To clarify my use of the term "marketplace ideology", I'm referring to a set of ideological assumptions that privilege wealth generation over care for the marginalised, on the grounds that where the resultant wealth is distributed appropriately, the vulnerable, the marginalised and the disadvantaged in that society will cease to be so.

An underlying assumption throughout the book (*Prosperity with a Purpose*) is that if churches and church-based agencies do not include this marketplace ideology into their social policy formulation, these agencies will themselves become increasingly marginalised by the larger, more dominant social paradigms surrounding them.

Ian Linden and John Kennedy, writing in the same publication about prosperity, the market and the common good (in the context of our first-world Western societies), argue that the ensemble between government, a market economy and its citizens

can work well or badly. It works well under the following conditions. Innovators in the marketplace create successful businesses, which call into being newly prosperous workers and consumers. The revenues generated by this success make possible extensive levels of public expenditure. Democratic policies regulate the market, and set the levels of taxation that are necessary to sustain social progress. The labour market is regulated to permit access without discrimination. Such access is encouraged at as high a level of reward as possible, so that high value added is achieved by ever better equipped works. Minimum wage levels are set, and levels of benefit agreed for those who have insufficient access to earned income ... [and this sees] the fulfilment of private interest as ... one feature of a shared common good. (pp 26-27)

On the other hand, this ensemble

can also work badly. The powerful operators in the marketplace can dominate politics, and use their power to inhibit competition and to depress social investment. They can collude with government in keeping wages and levels of compensation low ... Politicians may close down ethical and political exchange by imposing unrepresentative, secretive and unaccountable government. Citizens may turn away from public engagement and find satisfaction simply as consumers. The demands of work and obsession with the fulfilment of private desire may suck the spirit out of public life. (p 27)

What would be say is currently happening in our 21st century Australian context?

It is appropriate that "marketplace" ideology be incorporated into a theology of a just, compassionate and civil society?

These terms (theology, compassion, justice, civil society) are, without exception, underpinned by moral concerns. Ray Cleary remarked in a recent conversation that the "market" is in fact an amoral entity, perhaps not as a concept but certainly in recent history, as it turns out. How does

one incorporate elements of market ideology (lacking, it seems, a code of human morality within its own framework) into visions for society that do include issues of justice, compassion and care for the marginalised as part-and-parcel of their policy paradigm? (as in the work of Anglicare. Do we risk being overlooked or undermined in the formation of social policy if we omit the above economic aspects? If we suit outside the marketplace, do we in fact become increasingly marginal and largely ineffectual service providers?

And this is the \$64,000 question: is the prophetic voice for justice and compassion most effective as an agent for social transformation, when it's delivered from within or without an organisation (or even a government)?

In our conversation, Ray Cleary and I suggested that it may be the latter – if social policies aiming to realise justice, equity and compassion are created from within a larger economic structure (with, by definition, different interests), those policies are inevitably compromised and then limited into inaction by virtue of the policy having become incorporated into marketplace structures. An economically rationalist model of social policy, for example, will inevitably treat that society's citizens primarily (even exclusively?) as economic units, rather than as fundamentally moral and relational individuals bound together by one common humanity sharing in the resources of this planet ... and together, theologically speaking, made in the image of the creator.

This was also an argument that I used to have with John on a regular basis during my adolescence – usually from across the dinner table, much to the annoyance of my mother and sister! We'd both bang on about changing the world and how best to do it. You know the story: redistribution of wealth, world peace and so on. On my side of the table was the argument in favour of social change being more achievable, potent and effective by persons or agencies outside the social structures that were either oppressive or amoral (or both). On dad's side of the table was this (perhaps more pragmatic?) view: what better place to begin transforming the world for the better than by changing the structures that oppress from within? From there, justice and compassion naturally follow.

Well, the reality is probably somewhere between the two. And in fact there are social policy-making activities that encompass both models, church-based agencies being perhaps the most common example, and ongoing compromise and renegotiate being essential ingredients in contemporary politics.

What has your experience been at Anglicare?

The Jane Elliott debate

Have you heard of Jane Elliott's *Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes* experiments? Jane was a student teacher in the USA during the 1960s. She conducted an extraordinary exercise in a classroom of third grade students, following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr in April 1968. What better way to help third graders understand what racism and prejudice mean, than by artificially creating a classroom situation in which the children were not treated with fairness or equality? Students with blue eyes were consistently (maybe even mercilessly) treated as inferior to their brown-eyed classmates. Then the roles were reversed. This experiment was a simple exercise in systematically removing individuals' power and seeing them as inferior purely on the basis of a characteristic over which they had no control.

While Jane Elliott's exercises were not without controversy, communities across the US and later the world were keen to have a similar exercise designed for, and used by, adults. In one of these exercises (which was later made into the documentary simply called *Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes*), a woman of Anglo-European descent in the blue-eyed group, having endured almost an

entire day of prejudicial, insulting and demeaning treatment (not just from Jane but from the comfortably-seated, well-fed, brown-eyed people surrounding her) refused to remain seated on the floor any longer. She began an attempt to mobilise her blue-eyed neighbours by standing up and saying “if we all stand up together and fight this treatment that denies our human rights, she can’t punish all of us at once. There would be too many of us to defeat. Come on, we don’t have to take this anymore!”

What do you imagine happened?

Before any of her companions on the floor could rise up in the resistance and support (and it remains a lingering question as to whether any of them would actually have done so), Jane Elliott brutally castigated this woman, saying things like “How dare you stand up and speak! Who told you you could say anything?! Do you realise that what you’ve just done is so typical of a white, middle-class, educated and uppity so-and-so. These people won’t join you – they can’t!”

And this was unpacked later on, the blue-eyed white woman shamed back into compliance, Jane Elliott made the observation that effective social change can only be initiated by those in a position of privilege (whether this be racial, economic, class-based, educational privilege, on the basis of one’s geopolitical context, and so on). For this woman to have presumed that her structurally-disadvantaged group even had the capacity to mobilise in any great numbers and actually influence the outcome of that group’s practices was presumptive in the extreme, and in fact a luxury that systematically-marginalised groups in our communities do not have!

What do you think? I look forward to the discussion following this presentation!

Perhaps in contrast to this anecdote, we could take a look at the prophet Amos.

Unlike, Nehemiah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos is not one of the more prominent prophets in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), but he’s an interesting character in terms of the challenge he poses to the Jane Elliott-type dynamics ...

Living in the middle of the 8th century BCE in the southern kingdom of Judah, Amos was a shepherd from a small and insignificant village – an ordinary peasant with livestock responsibilities – certainly not a professional oracle like many others during this period. At this time, the northern kingdom of Israel had become wealthy and uniquely powerful in military terms. The Israelites interpreted their privileged societal setting as a direct blessing from God, indicating the creator’s approval of their principles and practices as faithful communities. The northerners tended to look down upon the southerners as unsophisticated country hicks, of marginal political influence and not much socio-economic worth.

Any of this sound familiar?

All the more remarkable then that Amos (called by God to preach some tough words to a society enjoying a comfortable ride) travelled north to denounce the kingdom of Israel for its reliance on military might, its persistent social injustices and maltreatment of the marginalised, its competitive materialism and overconsumption, and its meaningless, shallow piety, things started to happen ...

Amos’s prophetic call for justice, compassion and genuine honouring of both humanity and God, did have a unique power ... the power for positive social transformation ... laying the foundations for a future realising of equity and love.

As God speaks directly through Amos in this text (in the beautiful, rhythmic poetry of the Hebrew language, which carries, even in translation), he cries out to King Jereboam and the wealthy, powerful elite:

They shall now be the first to go into exile
And the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.
(6:7)

And

I hate, I despise your festivals
and take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(5:21-24)

Seek good and not evil,
That you may live;
And so the Lord, the God of hosts will be with you ...
Hate evil and love good,
And establish justice in the gate.
(5:14-15)

Naturally enough, Amos and his message were not welcome at the royal sanctuary in the northern kingdom's shrine at Beth'el. He was banned from further prophesying in the region, and returned south to Judah to record the significant elements of his preachings in the north, to form the basis for the book of Amos as we have it today.

What's remarkable about the story of Amos, following on from the judgement that the kingdom of Israel had fallen short of the divine vision of justice and compassion for the nation and all its inhabitants, is that although Amos is a character who was **not** privileged (by class, race or wealth), he **was** able to have a prophetic voice in describing a vision of a society whereby peace was not maintained by military force and prosperity was not at the expense of one's neighbours.

Concluding remarks

To revisit two of the questions raised earlier:

- is social change most effective when put into action from within the **dominant structures or outside them**? And
- can social transformation be initiated by individuals (or groups) who are not in a position of privilege?

I keep thinking of Martin Luther King Jr. Here was a prophetic figure who was structurally marginalised in 1960s USA by virtue of his **colour**, but who was one of the insiders by virtue of his **education and his profession**. He traversed both worlds: the privileged and the oppressed. What going on there?

To finish ...

In much of what I've talked about this afternoon, there is an intrinsic connection to a tidy theological trinity. As human beings, we are innately moral and relational, bound together by our shared humanity and the foundational concept that we are made in the image of the creator. In the threefold image of God as "creator, redeemer and sustainer", we have

1. the idea that we are truly sacred, due to our nature as *imago Dei* (in the image of God)
2. the Redeemer as inseparably linked to the prophetic voice of Hope
3. the Sustainer as the one who gives life and promises justice.

As I stated at the start of this talk, the Hebrew word *Shalom* involves **journeying**.

In the end we may have raised more questions than answers, but let's see where it takes us!

To quote TS Eliot,

With the drawing of the Love and the voice of the Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Shalom!