

(Printed version)

## The John Roffey Memorial Lecture

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### Preamble

I first encountered John Roffey through his writings when during my undergraduate degree I was researching discrimination faced by those living with HIV AIDS and John had contributed to a book called *AIDS and Compassion*. At that time he had moved across from the Church of Christ and was the Rector of Williamstown in Melbourne. The following year he was appointed Warden of my college, St. Barnabas, here in Adelaide and I got to know him fairly well. I was the student representative on the College Council when he was appointed and in my final year John appointed me 'Senior Student'.

John had an abiding sense of social justice and I was not surprised when he moved from St. Barnabas to Anglicare SA and indeed we spoke about it as a natural progression: a progression that I later made from parish priest to Anglicare. John's time as Anglicare SA CEO and mine as Anglicare Tasmania CEO overlapped and John was a vocal advocate for the importance of the prophetic voice within the church and community. He made it clear that this was required of me!

Given my relationship with John I am honoured to have been invited to deliver the 2010 Roffey Lecture especially here in Adelaide during Anglicare SA's birthday celebrations. Whilst I shared much with John, his passion for the Old Testament and the Hebrew language is not as strong in me. However I will try to make a connection in this lecture to that passion via Habakkuk who was one of John's favourites and whom I am coming to know better.

## The 'how' of social justice

### Habakkuk

I don't know whether you take much notice of those lists, produced in newspapers each year, of the ten most popular girls' names and boys' names of the time. It's been my observation that it's been some time now since the list of boys' names has included the name Habakkuk.

Despite his rather catchy name, Habakkuk was an obscure Old Testament prophet, who was not that well-known or particularly popular, even in his own day. His Old Testament book has just three short chapters and takes up only a couple of pages, and so is very easy to skip over. Really, the only reason Christians even know his name is that St. Paul quotes from him in his Letter to the Romans.

We know almost nothing about Habakkuk himself, except that he was a prophet. Anything else we can say about him is based on highly educated guesses. He was probably an official prophet at the court or the temple, living in Jerusalem in the Kingdom of Judah, by now separated from the northern Kingdom of Israel. The era is probably somewhere around the year 600 BC, which we can surmise from the likely historical events which form a background to his writing.

Scholars differ as to how much of his short book was actually written by Habakkuk himself. At the least, it was written in several different periods, reflecting the unfolding events of his time.

For Biblical scholars, that's all fascinating stuff. For most of us, it probably doesn't matter very much. What can speak to us is that Habakkuk's passionate concern is for justice, and he roundly condemns the injustice he sees in society, in economic, political and religious spheres. Whatever else Habakkuk is condemning, it includes the callous exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful of Judah. Faced by this

corrupt society in which he lives, Habakkuk prophesies the downfall, by God's hand, of the community. So far then, Habakkuk's message is not so very different from the denunciations of other prophets in Israel's long prophetic tradition.

Where Habakkuk does begin to stand out from most of the other prophets is that he doesn't just condemn the exploitation practised by Judah's leadership. Habakkuk also forcefully challenges God, accusing God himself of gross injustice in allowing the circumstances of injustice to exist in the first place. So he begins his book:

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?*

*Or cry to you 'Violence!', and you will not save?*

*Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?*

*Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.*

*So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.*

*The wicked surround the righteous – therefore justice comes forth perverted.*

[1:2-4]

In his tirade against God, Habakkuk was no distant observer. He was not a commentator sitting on the sidelines or pontificating from afar. The injustice within Judah was affecting him as much as anyone. As a prophet, not one of the rich and powerful, but close enough to smell their corruption, Habakkuk is in the thick of it. No wonder he rails against God, personally as well as publicly. In the words of that twentieth century philosophical dictum, 'It's my party and I'll cry if I want to'.

So, he asks, if God is God, how can he be allowing this to happen? This of course is an ancient question which still troubles believers. How can a just God allow injustice to flourish? How can a loving God permit evil to exist? The nineteenth century poet,

Gerard Manley Hopkins, posed the same question to a formidable opponent in his short poem, *Thou art indeed just, Lord*.

*Thou art indeed just, Lord if I contend*

*With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.*

*Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must*

*Disappointment all I endeavour end?*

*Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,*

*How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost*

*Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust*

*Do in spare hours more thrive than I who spend,*

*Sir, life upon thy cause.*

Bolder than Hopkins, Habakkuk not only questions God, he demands action from him. And he gets it. God responds to Habakkuk's demand to deal with injustice and exploitation, and promises: '*I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation*' [1:6] and we know historically that the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, did indeed invade Judah and hold the population under their thumb, overthrowing the corrupt regime Habakkuk had condemned. But as they say, be careful what you pray for, because God's remedy proves to be far worse than the original condition. So, in the face of magnified injustice and oppression under the Chaldeans, Habakkuk has to boldly confront God yet again: '*Why do you look on the treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?*' [1:13b]

God urges patience on Habakkuk and assures him that justice will ultimately be restored: '*If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay*'. [2:3b]

The corruption and injustice and exploitation of the Chaldeans have, God promises, the seeds of their own self-destruction within them. God warns the Chaldeans: *'Will not your own creditors suddenly rise, and those who you make tremble wake up? Then you will be booty for them!'* [2:7]

Then, when justice is finally consummated, *'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea'*. [2:14]

In the third and final chapter, Habakkuk gives us a sort of psalm, a hymn to God, praising him for the dramatic deliverance from injustice he has brought about. God's righteous anger against a lack of justice is tempered by his love: *'In wrath, may you remember mercy'*. [3:26] Habakkuk affirms that we don't have to accept things the way they are and can challenge even God to put things right.

### **A passion for justice**

Perhaps the most significant legacy of all the Old Testament prophets, Habakkuk possibly above all, is a total passion for social justice. Religious faith is not just a matter of personal piety or the activity of a holy huddle, cut off from the world. Faith also involves the pursuit of equity and fairness in the public sphere: political, economic, judicial. These are areas often characterised today as being purely secular and not the concern of people of faith at all. Yet they are our concern.

Andrew Sloane, in an essay entitled 'The Old Testament and Christian Social Engagement' says:

*God expresses his majesty and power precisely in his justice and care for the least and the marginalised. They [Israel] are called to mercy and justice in imitation of God's character and action. Such people – the disadvantaged and potentially marginalised – are the particular focus of God's generous justice. Israel is called to mirror this focus, both because that is what their God is like, and because they have experienced that mercy and justice themselves. [1]*

Deborah Storie writes:

*The Bible provides no explicit definitions of mission, of justice, or of injustice. What it does give us are stories, images, poems and songs, of justice done and not done. Embedded within these stories, alluded to in oracles and psalms, and reflected in poetic images are the covenant laws God gave his people to help them shape a just society, a society that would reflect his character. [2]*

### **The 'how' of Christian social justice**

Which raises the question of *how* the church should engage itself in issues of social justice. Not *whether* we should pursue justice, I'm taking that as a given, but *how*. What can the church offer that is unique in seeking justice, that apparently quite secular activity? Perhaps Jesus' approach to issues of justice can help us to see how our Christian foundations as agencies might characterise our pursuit of justice.

Let me share with you a brief story from the New Testament, from John's Gospel, Chapter 8:

*Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger upon the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by*

*one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir'. And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'* [John 8:2-11]

Like me, I suspect some of you are a bit suspicious of the story of the woman caught in adultery. In that thoroughly patriarchal society, the woman was likely to be punished, whether she was an innocent victim of rape, or a willing participant. And, of course, there is no mention of the man, who was likely to have got off scot free.

The story does make us think about age old problems, to do with justice without charity, as the scribes and Pharisees demanded. Or to do with charity without justice, which has long characterised and satisfied the church in our approach to social issues.

Pity and mercy, even love and compassion, are not always enough. The church, of course, needs to be committed to those qualities, but they are not enough. We also need a commitment to discovering and challenging the attitudes and values which have brought about the presenting problem.

The exercise of charity and pity towards the exploited, the homeless, the victimised, the poor, is relatively easy, because it doesn't disturb the status quo. And it confers a sort of power on the giver, even as it expresses mercy.

But the root causes of poverty and every other social ill will inevitably call out for a challenge to deep seated attitudes, and a change to structures which perpetuate injustice. Challenge and change are much more difficult than charity, and much less palatable.

The churches have built and maintained a powerful network of care and compassion, beginning centuries ago with hospitals and hospices. And increasingly the church's

agencies, like Anglicare, have become more concerned with the structures and values which underlie the problems, rather than just with the handout mentality which has been part of the scene for so long.

### **Taking the blame**

Yet the church has to also take part of the blame. Christians have shown a vested interest in preserving the status quo and shown a keenness for perpetuating poverty. A little-known verse from that well-known hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful* says it all:

*The rich man in his castle,*

*the poor man at his gate.*

*God made them, high and lowly,*

*and ordered their estate.*

Fortunately, that verse no longer appears in our hymnals!

Equally, and relevant to the story of the woman caught in adultery, the church has long misinterpreted St. Paul's teaching to promote a pattern for the family in which the male is the unchallengeable head by scriptural decree – which makes a nonsense of what Paul actually teaches about *mutual* submission of husband and wife in love.

And the church has put its official seal on the sacred nature of 'the family' as an inviolate structure which must be preserved at all costs, sometimes hiding terrible and violent secrets, and discouraging victims from seeking the church's help when they find themselves in an intolerable family situation. The church has done some worthy things in the cause of social justice – its role in the abolition of slavery or child labour laws for instance – but it also has much to repent for. Above all, the church



needs to repent for its attitude to those we have seen as living with unchristian values.

When it comes to people living in de facto relationships, to deserted wives, to deserting husbands, to rebellious children, to violent parents, to victims and perpetrators of incest, to homosexuals, even once to orphans and the poor – with all these people the church has been, at worst, condemning and judgmental, at best unwelcoming.

But surely Christians *should* condemn unchristian behaviour and values? Surely they go against everything that the Bible teaches?

### **The first 'how': love precedes justice**

The Gospel story of the woman caught in adultery shows a quite different approach, which can illuminate the *how* of Christian social justice. The approach is of love and forgiveness towards the person just as they are, no matter how unpalatable their lifestyle may be to us. Jesus accepts the woman just as she is, and forgives her actions. Jesus love for the person is so great that he can forgive the sin.

Jesus does not encourage or condone the sins of the woman but he loves her just as she is, even while she was still a sinner according to the law. Her giving up her sinful life was not a *precondition* of Jesus' love.

Love precedes justice. 'Neither do I condemn you' is Jesus expression of love. It's that expression of love which makes change possible, which leads to a just outcome: 'Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'.

If we hope for change in those who lead destructive lives, if we long for change in unjust structures, then we need to first accept that condemnation and rejection are not God's way of bringing about those changes. It seems to me that the strident

judgmentalism of a holy huddle of Fred Niles is unlikely to produce repentance and change in those who fail to practise life-giving values or to promote just structures.

Compassion for the victims is not enough. Caring for the disadvantaged with all the resources our agencies can muster is not enough. We also have to work at revolutionising the values and attitudes which underlie the tragedy of the victims and, if we want change to happen, that means loving the sinner as much as the sinned against.

Of course, they are much harder to love. It's harder to love the husband who bashes his wife in an alcoholic rage; it's harder to love the mother who neglects her children; it's harder to love the drug addict who constantly fails to break the habit; it's hard to love the business or the government which perpetuates unjust policies. And yet, to love the sinner as well as the sinned against is God's way and so, given our Christian foundations, it should be our way.

The change in the life of the woman caught in adultery was not a *precondition* of Jesus' love; it was a *result* of his love. Ultimately it is only that unconditional love that will bring about change and true justice. Love precedes justice.

That's the first big 'how' of social justice for Christian agencies like ours.

### **The second 'how': the distraction of service delivery**

A second 'how' is that we must not let our call to be a prophetic voice be subsumed or distracted by the increasing pressure on us to be merely service deliverers for government. When I say 'merely service deliverers', I don't mean to denigrate our task of providing transforming services to the disadvantaged. That is a core part of our work, and NGOs can generally do it better and more effectively. As faith-based NGOs we also value-add to the services we offer, by delivering them in an environment of love and compassion. But there is always a pressure on us to focus

purely on service delivery at the expense of that other core element of our work, to speak out against injustice and to advocate for the disadvantaged.

As Christian organisations, we have a commitment to transforming the world. On the whole, governments tend to be less interested in changing the world and more interested in changing the polls. The business community tends to be less interested in transforming the world and more interested in improving the bottom line.

We need to be a balancing voice, constantly drawing attention to the big picture and challenging any lack of social justice. This is a role seemingly beyond the scope of governments or oppositions, confined by a three or four year electoral cycle, and focussed on quick fixes. As agencies, we still deliver the bandaids and quick fixes on behalf of governments, but we must not let that become such a preoccupation that we neglect our prophetic role in crying out for social justice.

### **The third 'how': service authenticates prophecy**

The third 'how' of social justice advocacy for faith-based agencies like ours is, in some ways, the opposite of the last one. We have to focus on the quality of our service delivery to the extent that we ensure it always authenticates our prophetic voice. Think for a moment of the goodwill enjoyed by the Salvation Army, built up from years of ministering in civil emergencies, in the back alleys, in pubs and brothels. From the obvious authenticity of their work springs a well deserved and hard earned goodwill which accepts that the Salvos have a right to speak out against injustice and to be listened to. What's more, it is accepted that the Salvos are speaking out *with* the vulnerable, and not just *for* them.

We, like Habakkuk, have to take injustice personally. Like Jesus, we have to be prepared to get down in the dirt, to find the solutions *with* the disadvantaged, and not just find solutions *for* them. We are not called to be chardonnay socialists, pontificating on the ills of the world from the sidelines. The contrast is like going to a

footy match. We can be in the midst of the action in Bay 13, out in the sun and the rain with the raucous crowd, or we can observe it all from behind glass in a corporate box with a fine wine in our hand.

There is a special danger here for CEOs like me, and for our Boards and senior management, that our perspective is always that of the corporate box. It's a challenge for all of us to 'get down and dirty' so that we maintain a deep understanding of the issues of justice, we feel empathy rather than just sympathy, and increase our urgency about seeing justice prevail. I don't think any of us would be anonymous enough to participate in an episode of *Undercover Boss*, but perhaps we could sometimes be a front line volunteer in our agency or another community organisation.

#### **The fourth 'how': engage our networks**

A fourth 'how' of social justice is to recognise that protest and prophecy need not be just the concern of the professional. We need to mobilise all the voices we can in defence of justice and, as agencies of the Anglican Church, we have an unparalleled opportunity to bring parishes and individuals on board. Imagine if we could engage that vast network to speak out on issues of social justice. But the most effective prophetic voices are those who know their stuff, who can speak out with obvious knowledge and insight, as well as deep conviction. As agencies with the capacity for thorough research, we can inform people, provide accurate facts and figures, rehearse the arguments and mobilise those now well-informed voices to speak out with confidence and authority.

And that doesn't just apply to that network of parishes and individuals. We also have the capacity to equip the most vulnerable in our society to speak out on their own behalf. I'm no great fan of those magazine programs on television, which pose as current affairs, like *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*, but there is no disputing their

popularity. And their popularity springs, I think, not from having experts pontificate on social ills, or even from chasing con men and shonky builders down the street. I think it's the fact that they focus on letting the victims speak out for themselves, that grips the heart and wins the sympathy of the audience, Of course, that can be exploitative of vulnerable people, and we need to avoid that temptation. But we can equip the disadvantaged with whom we work to find their own voices and bring an indisputably authentic view to issues of justice.

### **The fifth 'how': mind our language**

My fifth 'how' of the way Christian organisations should pursue social justice is that we need to watch our language. Let me quote from Jim Wallis of the Sojourners community based in Washington. (And it would be a good idea if I distinguish this Jim Wallis from the Jim Wallace who is Managing Director of the Australian Christian Lobby). Jim Wallis of Sojourners, writes in his book *The Great Awakening*:

*The church must become "bilingual" in speaking the evangelistic message of the kingdom of God to all that will hear, while also speaking to the state about its role and responsibilities. [3]*

Wallis says we have to avoid two linguistic traps. The first is to use the partisan language of the political right or left. Instead, we need a moral language which focuses on right versus wrong, rather than right versus left. For example, the Religious Right in America, in fighting on issues like abortion or gay marriage, took up the language of the political right and lost much of the sympathy they might have had for their cause. In South America, liberation theology took up the language of the political left and lost the support of the wider Catholic Church.

The second linguistic trap is to speak in the language of religious absolutes rather than moral imperatives. The language of religion has its rightful place in our evangelistic endeavour but it is inappropriate when used to seek justice in an

increasingly secular world of business or government, simply because it will not be understood and because it holds no special authority for those in that environment.

Jim Wallis again:

*Religious convictions must therefore be translated into moral arguments, which must win the political debate if they are to be implemented. Part of the work to be done includes teaching religious people how to make their appeals in moral language, and secular people not to fear that such appeals will lead to theocracy. [4]*

### **The sixth 'how': engage in the political debate**

My final 'how' is that those of us who seek to promote social justice need to engage, vigorously and unashamedly, in political debate. We have given too much ground on two distinct fronts. We have given too much ground to the argument that religion and politics don't mix, a patently false dichotomy; and we have given too much ground to the Religious Right, in an arena where the theological left clearly has something worthwhile to say.

We must regain ground and overcome the misapprehension that faith has nothing to say to politics. Of course our faith should be beyond political stances, but it can and must offer a new perspective on political issues. Australian theologian John Gaden wrote, on faith's role in politics:

*The church cannot require the state either to legislate for the Christian ethic or to behave as though it were a Gospel community. But Christians corporately, as a congregation, a diocese, a denomination, can and must act in accordance with Gospel precepts. Our failure to do so produces a credibility gap: what we do does not correspond to what we proclaim. [5]*

When we address these issues in the language of values and morals, faith-based organisations like ours can be heard in the political arena and can bring a

perspective above political wrangling, which opens up the possibility of consensus solutions.

We must regain ground in the false dichotomy of faith and politics, and part of that effort must include regaining ground from the Religious Right. Jim Wallis, a committed Evangelical, is optimistic about that. He says:

*Ironically, despite how the Religious Right has discredited the role of faith in politics in recent decades, faith is now coming back to life as a force for progressive social change. [6]*

So, how might that force come back to life in Australian political debate? First, we have to broaden the agenda, far beyond the restricted concerns of the Religious Right, whose primary focus seems to be on personal sexual morality and that amorphous quality 'family values'. Groups like the Australian Christian Lobby (what an incredibly presumptuous title!) tend to see issues in black and white, and speak out, not in moral language, but in moralising language, on a very narrow range of issues. Jim Wallis, the one from Sojourners, not the one from ACL, sees others in the faith community providing a broadening of the agenda:

*The moral-values discussion is now wider and deeper than it was in the past, and it is now extending to how we treat and respond to the poor, the environment, human rights abuses, pandemic diseases that wipe out millions of people, issues of war and peace, the crucial matters of family and community, and a consistent ethic of life. All of these issues go beyond the selective moralities of left and right. [7]*

The second stimulus to a broader voice in the political debate might be the risky strategy of being a proactive voice, rather than just reactive. On matters of social justice, we should be prepared to raise the issues that are not even on the agenda, to draw attention to the elephant in the room or, to mix my metaphors, to point out

the lack of clothes on the emperor. Let's find ourselves *promoting* causes, as often as we find ourselves defending them. Let's find ourselves setting the agenda rather than just responding to someone else's priorities.

## **Conclusion**

So, there are six 'hows' for agencies like ours to promote social justice in ways unique to faith-based organisations.

One, love precedes justice. We focus on condemning the injustice rather than condemning the unjust.

Two, don't be so distracted by service delivery that we neglect the need to raise a prophetic voice against injustice.

Three, ensure that the quality and deep engagement of our service delivery authenticates our prophetic voice.

Four, mobilise all the voices we can in support of social justice. Equip parishes, individuals and especially the victims of injustice to speak out.

Five, watch our language, avoiding the partisan language of left or right, and speaking moral imperatives rather than religious absolutes.

And six, engage in the political debate but on higher ground, broadening the agenda and being proactive as well as reactive.

If Habakkuk can challenge the most powerful in his society to restore justice, then so can we. If Habakkuk can challenge even God to be true to his just character, then so can we. On the basis of our faith in a just God, reflected in the loving justice of his Son, then, as faith-based agencies, we too must pursue a passion for social justice in our own unique way. That commitment could truly transform the world.



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