

DO JUSTICE, LOVE KINDNESS, WALK HUMBLY

Ian Rutherford

IAN RUTHERFORD CHALLENGES THE CHURCH TO HAVE AN INFORMED AND THEOLOGICALLY ROBUST POSITION ON SOCIAL JUSTICE.

I am often asked what drew me to be a member of and then a minister with the Methodist Church. My response is to refer to the three key elements of Methodism's D. N. A. – a zeal for evangelism, a striving for holiness and a passion for social justice. Methodists are known for having a pragmatism in their faith and I believe that we continue to display a commitment to live out Micah 6:8 and 'do justice, love kindness and walk humbly.'

I first trained as a solicitor and have always aspired to do justice. I formed a housing association with friends from university, undertook a free legal surgery in an area of multiple deprivation when I was in private practice and was proud as a local government lawyer to procure the first community legal advice centre in England and Wales.

A few months into my first appointment as a Minister in Doncaster, I was called to convene a group of Christian leaders within the town's unity movement, to engage with the local MPs, the elected Mayor, local authority officers and public-sector agencies. We were able to mobilise a significant contribution from our churches in relation to the prevailing social issues, encouraging Christians in all cultural spheres (business, politics, health, education, media and the arts) to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly.

My current appointment is as City Centre Minister at Methodist Central Hall, Manchester, and within my engagement role I am working with ecumenical colleagues and with the local chapter of Citizens UK in tackling homelessness, challenging hate crime, promoting the living wage and campaigning for better terms and conditions for those working in social care.

My motivation to be involved in social justice has always been fired by two Scripture passages: Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25.

IS NOT THIS THE KIND OF FASTING I HAVE CHOSEN: TO LOOSE THE CHAINS OF INJUSTICE...

Isaiah 58's vision of community, for Walter Brueggemann, is 'ethically demanding', requiring 'policies and actions of a neighbourly kind' (Walter Brueggemann, 'Isaiah 40-66,' Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1998, 186). The church must be engaged in 'worship and public ethics.... otherwise there is a distortion of social relationships' (Brueggemann, 'Isaiah 40-66', 188).

Elaine Applebee submits that Isaiah 58 shows that 'healing for the people of God, both individual and communal, is tied up with being involved in the healing of others (the avoidance of injustice and meeting the needs of the poor)' (Elaine Applebee, 'Shaping a Changing Society,' in John Vincent (ed.), 'Faithfulness in the City,' Hawarden: Monad Press, 2003, 163). I would agree with Applebee that this 'challenges both the assertion that there is no connection between private behaviour and public worship

and the tendency within churches to see the social responsibility element of the churches' mission as an optional extra' (Applebee, 'Shaping,' 164).

The church's confidence to contribute at a governance level within the city stems from its expertise in caring and compassionate service within the community, but also from an informed theology which is stronger for having been tested within the contemporary circumstances. This is the example that the church needs to set in the community and pronounce at the policy table. It is a message that is counter-cultural but is a critical one to be heard and implemented if there is to be a removal of oppressive or unfair systems. The church's role in shining a light on elitist, unequal policy decision-making is much needed to ensure a fair and just society within the city.

WHATEVER YOU DID FOR THE LEAST OF THESE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF MINE, YOU DID FOR ME.

Matthew 25 should be read, according to Graham Stanton, on theological grounds 'as a solemn exhortation to the church to give priority to the hungry, thirsty and needy of the world' (Graham N. Stanton, 'A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew,' Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992, 211). The acts of mercy of faithful disciples which are set out by Jesus in the parable of the sheep and the goats, reflect their commitment to him. Warren Carter states that 'to welcome strangers is to do Jesus' teaching of indiscriminate love (5:43-48) especially for the marginalised, healing the broken (8:1-4,5-13 and 15:21-28). Such actions are to be contrary to dominant cultural practices in that they are nonreciprocal and are concerned for the needs of the other, not the honour or social credit of the giver' (Warren Carter, 'Matthew and the Margins,' London: Continuum, 2000, 495).

For Jean Vanier, disciples of Jesus are called 'not only to serve the poor but to discover in them his real presence' so that 'the smallest gesture of love towards the least significant person is a gesture of love towards him since Jesus is the stranger...the homeless person...the oppressed person (Matthew 25 and Luke 9:48)' (Jean Vanier, 'Community and Growth,' London: DLT, 1989, 95).

We are therefore called 'not just to do things for them, or to see them as objects of charity, but rather to receive them as a source of life and of communion' (Vanier, 'Community and Growth,' 95).

This leads to a vision of a church fully engaged in urban life not only with compassion, but campaigning for justice; not only in consultation, but in contribution to the design and planning process, whilst utilising the example of its own diverse yet united make-up to drive the cohesion of the communities in which it serves. The church needs to have a voice into and within the regeneration strategy of the city and this will require an input into a broader range of systems than the contribution of individuals in formal meetings. Having an informed and theologically robust position on social justice, regeneration and community, which is expressed ecumenically, will provide an appropriate platform for contributions at all levels - from planners, architects, lawyers, politicians, fundraisers, administrators, social services practitioners, advocates and befrienders from within the church, who volunteer in order to make a difference within their city.

The church, according to Andrew Davey, has an 'exilic directive from Jeremiah 29 to partner with city shapers' to ensure that the city thrives. This can only happen where there is 'commitment to its wholeness and wellbeing and where its welfare is recognised as being bound up with the lot of its exiles and poor' (Andrew Davey, 'Being Urban Matters,' in Andrew Davey (ed.), 'Crossover City – Resources for urban mission and transformation,' London: Mowbray, 2010, 35).

The homeless person sleeping rough and the asylum seeker arriving at the railway station are looking to experience true community. They can be impressed at the reconstruction of squares and the renewal of city quarters, but unless the community structures are also regenerated in our cities, they will remain homeless and hungry and alienated.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What are the prevailing social issues in your town or city?
2. In what ways is your church engaged in doing justice and showing kindness (in the community and in engagement with the civic authorities)?
3. Which unjust systems can you discern in society and how are you personally responding to them?