

Saint Paul and the Justice of God.

For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. (Rms. 3:20-26. RSV)

It must be noted here that the translator has chosen to translate the same concept in two different ways. The Greek word *dikaioσunh* *dikaioσune* is translated as 'righteousness' whereas its verbal form **dikaioω** *dikaioo* is rendered as 'justify' But the word which is rendered as 'righteousness' could just as easily and accurately be rendered as 'justice' in fact the NJB has 'God's saving justice'.

In Pauline theology the issue of Justification is one of the biggest and most important. It's the main issue of the Reformation. But it's not an issue that we have particularly come here to engage with. But note that in the Bible justice, with all, means caring for the poor and doing the right thing for those who are downtrodden and relationships which are healthy life giving rather than exploitative and all the issues we are involved with are seen to be one of a piece with issues of personal righteousness and holiness. The statement of Jesus in Mt. 5:6 which is rendered by the RSV as *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied* is rendered by the Douay Rheims version as: *Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they shall have their fill.*

It's perhaps rather important to think through the implications of this. Sometimes there are tensions between 'devotional Christians' and 'social justice Christians' For Christians who are very concerned with personal righteousness, with holiness, religious devotion, the mere vocabulary of the bible reminds us that this can't be genuine, can't be truly biblical without some sort of concern for the sort of issues that a J & P network is involved with. On the other hand Christians who are involved with these issues also need to realize that social justice doesn't happen without personal righteousness. I once met a priest in the early eighties who was working as a missionary in Chile. He told me the whole reason for his group being there was to bring down the Pinochet government. He had simply lost the plot.

One of the reasons for the different translation of the same concept does have to do with the polemics of the reformation. In classic Lutheran and Calvinist theology, when a person stands before God for judgement, Christ (in Luther's words) "wraps the cloak of his virtues around the sinner". So when God looks at you or me on judgement day what he sees is not the sinner that I am, but the virtues of Christ which are then imputed to me. God declares me to be 'just' and that's salvation. This means that I remain the same lousy sinner, but God pronounces another verdict on me. Luther described the Christian before God as a "dung heap covered with snow" In other words there is no talk here of God rendering the person righteous. He simply declares a verdict of 'just' on a person who is, by his own merits, nothing of the sort. This sort of thinking is espoused by many fundamentalist Christians today, often people who are resistant in the extreme to social change, and there is a link. If there is no need for transformation of the person, there will be no need for the transformation of society. One sees how groups who concentrate solely on personal salvation have often been very at home with highly repressive and unjust political regimes. Catholic theology is rather more positive about the way God deals with the human condition. When the priest mixes the wine with a little water at Mass he says this prayer: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity" That's an amazing claim. As Catholics we claim that we become like God; that our share in the life of God grows to fullness. (The Orthodox churches of the East are much stronger and clearer on this than we often are. They say that the point of Christian life is 'divinisation') This means though that if people have an understanding that it matters that they are transformed – made righteous by God, then it will be easier to imagine a society being transformed or made righteous.

Paul and the Roman Imperial Order

In Romans 13 Paul gives guidelines about relationships with the Roman authority.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, (13:1-3)

This has often been used to justify a completely non-political Christianity. Except of course, one sees that a Christianity which claims to be non-political by taking Paul literally here ends up being highly political in that it supports the status quo. For people involved in the struggle for justice often a struggle in some way against certain governing authorities, this passage may seem like a real discouragement. But bear in mind three things.

1) The idea that people should be free to choose and if necessary change their government is a post-enlightenment one, and it simply would not have been available to Paul. At the time of writing the Roman Empire had been in power for four hundred years, would continue in the west for another three hundred and in the east for more than a millennium. It would scarcely cross Paul's mind that this might all change. Neither Paul, nor Jesus were political revolutionaries in any sense that we might understand today. Probably when Paul uses the word authorities, *archontes* here he means the actual officials who are in place in the various Roman colonies. They are civil servants and they are there to do a job, that's all.

2) One great handicap for modern westerners when reading ancient texts is our assumption that religion and politics are separate from one another. This means that often we don't see the political implications of a text which is apparently 'only religious'. A good deal has been written about the political implications of what Jesus said and did (not all of it true or helpful, but nevertheless a welcome corrective to a merely devotional understanding of Jesus). The same needs to be done with Paul. After all, he preached a gospel which proclaimed that someone crucified by the Roman Empire had been raised from the dead – in other words Jesus was right and the Roman imperium was wrong. The beginning of 1 Corinthians is a sustained presentation of this argument.

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1Cor. 2: 7-8)

In other words, the crucified Christ has 'outsmarted' the Roman powers. The things that people value highly, the things that give people power in this world God has ignored. It's also highly likely that Paul is referring here not only to the actual powers who had Jesus Crucified (Herod, Caiaphas, Pilate) but also to the ruling powers of the age, i.e. spiritual, we might call them demonic powers which lay behind all this. The book of revelation would work this out in much greater detail. Is Paul saying that those who rule the Empire are demonic? No, but he is at least hinting that there may be a complicity between the two.

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, (1 Cor. 1: 26-27)

This is not the language of political revolution, but it is the language of social revolution. The values on which the Empire bases itself, the things that are highly prizes are nothing to God. He's telling people not to take their cues from the Roman imperial order which dominates the city, but from someone who fell foul of the empire so badly that they publicly executed and disgraced him. The one the empire considered a threat, they are to consider Lord (and if Jesus is Lord, what does that make Caesar?) If God has vindicated this man killed by the empire, that means at least implicitly that God has pronounced judgment on the empire, or one might say on the values of the empire.

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor 7:29-31)

Probably because in the last hundred and fifty years or so there has so much 'millennial' Christianity, so many different Christian sects have read this (and other texts) as meaning precisely that everything we see is about to come to an end, even those of us who don't agree with them read this in the same way and conclude that in this matter Paul was as wrong as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Paul is in no way talking about the conclusion of the world. He means that the way things have been organised, the way the world has been run since its foundation has outlived its usefulness and that with the death

and resurrection of Christ a new age has dawned. We could start to list the countless ways in which Christ's coming has changed the world, and they are more and more profound than even Christians often realise, but it suffices to note that Paul, thirty years or so after the events, is still at the beginning of that process.

Paul opens his argument in Romans by referring to *the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God* (Rms. 1: 3-4) This is a direct counter claim to the claims and titles given to the Emperor, basically Christ has displaced Caesar. Throughout the whole argument of Romans 9-11 runs the belief – implied but not expressed – that God is bringing history to fulfilment, but that this 'script' is not running through Rome. So much Roman propaganda assumed that the Roman Empire, its successes and its glories were the fulfilment of history. Paul makes this claim perhaps even more explicit in Galatians 3:29: *And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.* In other words the fulfilment of history is much more something to do with Israel than Rome. Those who work in J & P are very conscious that a major cause of injustice is the assumption on the part of rich and powerful nations that the history of the world is somehow about them and what is best for the world is what is best for them. Paul's version of the story is a direct challenge to that.

We see from the life of Paul that the representatives of the Imperial order often vigorously opposed Paul. He tells us in 1 Thess. 2:2 that he had *been shamefully mistreated at Phillipi.* Apparently this was because they had set a soothsaying slave girl free of an evil spirit of divination, thus depriving her owners of a means of income. They complain against Paul and his companions saying: *these men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice.*" (Acts 16:20-21) Later on in Thessalonika a mob turns against them and accuses them of being dangerous subversives: *"These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."* *And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard this.* (Acts 17:7-8)

3) Paul's opposition to Rome was obscured or overlooked because so much thinking about him concentrated on his opposition to Judaism. In the period following the holocaust that has been re-thought

Paul's Conversion

What Sort of a Jew was Paul?

We must understand that Paul's zeal is much more than mere religious enthusiasm. Paul was a Pharisee and a rigorist. A big area of concern was how, as true Jews, were people to get on with the Roman occupation? Many thought the best way was to somehow adapt and accommodate and not upset the ruling power. The Herodians and the Sadducees thought like this as did some Pharisees. In Jn. 11: 48 one of them says that if they don't stop Jesus there will be a revolution and the Romans will come and destroy Jerusalem. A much more extreme set of people maintained that there should be no accommodation with Rome and that the only hope would be holy war, when the time was right. The evidence is that Paul would have had more sympathy with this wing. Not that he was a dagger-wielding assassin, we can't equate Paul with Barabbas, but he may have been at least sympathetic to that rabble rouser's ideas. Many educated and pious believed that in the end religious zeal would demand the violent removal of Rome.

Perhaps a modern parallel to this would be the Lawyer Yagal Amir who shot Israeli premier Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Zeal for the Torah meant for him not just devotion but getting up and doing something about it. Misguided as he was, he believed that Rabin had gone soft, that he was leading Israel away from compliance with God's will and that the only way to deal with that was violence. Paul would look very much like him. Or perhaps like many of the Islamic Mujahideen say in Afghanistan for whom religious devotion and taking up arms to fight the religious cause are one and the same. In the OT there are people whose zeal leads them to violence. Phineas for instance when he saw that an Israelite, by marrying a Midianite woman was taking the risk of syncretism took a spear and killed both of them. Their behaviour was seen as a threat to the whole community and in order to save the people they had to be stopped. (Num. 25:10-11) Or there was Matthias who during the attempt by Antiochus Epiphanes to destroy Jerusalem resorted to violence to stop this happening and was seen as a hero. (1 Macc 2:45-50)

Saul, before his conversion, stands firmly in the line of these and other heroes. Paul believed that the promises made to Israel by God had still not been fulfilled, but that the countdown was on. The reason for the delay was that so many Jews were still not worthy of them, were not living the Law

fully, were accommodating themselves too readily to pagan ways. Rather than just sit and wait for it to happen, Paul and many like him believed it was necessary to take matters into their own hands. Defeating the Romans was a tall order, perhaps impossible, but much could be done as regards the behaviour of fellow Jews. The behaviour of stricter Pharisees towards fellow Jews was rather like that of the religious police in Saudi Arabia today. If fellow Jews were weakening the nation's holiness then they had to be beaten into line.

The followers of Jesus of Nazareth were just one such group. They were people who had abandoned pure living of the Torah and had followed a lax Galilean rabbi who had openly broken the Sabbath and been publicly disgraced by crucifixion. They were at least badly letting the side down, but worse they were endangering the whole nation with their false teaching. (Imagine Mr. Hodges, the self-important ARP warden in 'Dad's Army', running around telling people to put lights out and threatening them with sanctions. Take away all the humour and give Hodges the power to impose the death penalty for shining lights and you have a caricature of Paul.) It wasn't just their own salvation the Christians were endangering. Salvation was not the purely personal thing we imagine. Salvation was the full restoration of the Holy Nation of Israel, and if some people were not pulling their weight, they spoiled it for everyone else, so they had to be stopped. If God was honoured by the perfect keeping of the Torah, any mitigation of this was seen as a dishonour to God and had to be stamped out. The fury (sometimes violent) of modern Muslims when they perceive that the Qur'an or Mohammed has been dishonoured is a good illustration of the fury Paul and those like him would have had towards the Church. Perhaps what is significant in all this is that we find in Paul before his conversion echoes of religious attitudes that are becoming increasingly common and increasingly worrying today. And his conversion consists precisely in realising how wrong these attitudes are and learning to imitate Christ

Paul has often been criticised by politically radical Christians for being too submissive to Roman authority. Take for instance Rmns 13:1-2: *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.* Perhaps part of the reason for such submissiveness is that he wanted to make sure that Christians did not establish their identity in opposition to the empire? He's tried that option and found it wanting, found it led to violence, and didn't want Christians to waste energy getting hot and bothered about something that they couldn't change anyway. Maybe by using such statements he deliberately intends to distance himself from the zealot cause. Just a few years after the writing of Romans the zealot rebellion would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the needless death of over a million Jews.

Paul's Conversion is a Turning Away From a Persecuting God.

When Christians today talk about conversion they typically mean the process by which someone who has no faith or weak faith comes to strong personal faith in God. This is not the case with Paul. He had faith and commitment in abundance, as he puts it himself: *I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.* (Gal. 1:14) He was determined to propagate the whole truth of Judaism. But of course someone else, Jesus the Nazarene had been doing that for a few years and had been killed for it.

One of the deepest truths of the Old Testament is that God takes the side of the victim, of the underdog, of the outcaste. In the Pentateuch there is complex legislation about how to treat the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor. The touchstone of Jewish faith is how one treats marginal people, victims. In something like 100 of the psalms God is on the side of the lone victim and against the crowd which is persecuting him. The prophets represent a voice pleading the cause of the victim in a way unparalleled in the ancient world. In the suffering Servant song of Isaiah 53, God works through this despised, rejected and persecuted figure of the Suffering Servant, rather than working through the persecuting crowd. Jesus consistently made God available to people in this way, and taking the side of the marginalised was made as marginal as possible through crucifixion. It's not a total surprise then that the only way God can get through to Paul, or the only way he wants to get through, is as The Persecuted One. Paul assumed that his zealotry, his attitudes feelings and opinions were identical to God's. His persecution of Stephen and his fury with the Church had perhaps become the thing dominating his life at that moment. Paul believes he has to do this in order to maintain stability and order, to keep his world safe. Paul has to learn about a new God, or rather the God who was there all the time, the only God the OT makes available. Paul's zeal set him up for being 'tripped' by the voice of God. Jesus doesn't knock him down asking, "Saul, Saul, why don't you

believe in me?" Rather, it's "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul is, as it were, 'ambushed' by Jesus.

Faith is always the invitation to step out of the crowd, out of one's culture. When Paul is persecuting, he's just one of his culture defending himself against those who are different. When the *fatwah* was issued on Salman Rushdie in the late 80's, commentators noted how ironic it was that it was made "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." People asked how an injunction to kill someone can be made like this. Within a certain understanding of God it makes perfect sense. Some people see God as merciful to the group by defending it against people who are threats, so the killing of a blasphemer or heretic is an illustration of God's mercy. But for instance in the parable of the lost sheep (Lk. 15: 4-7) Jesus proclaims a God who behaves in exactly the opposite way and will even put the group at risk for the sake of one wayward person. Paul had thrown all his energy into defending the cause of the God who stands behind *fatwahs*. While he was doing this, the God of Jesus who cherishes even the lost sheep crept up behind him and came as a blinding light, shining in the darkness of sacred violence and knocked him to the ground. So faith became for Paul not that which enabled him to persecute, but that which enabled him to listen to the voice of the persecuted one. Paul was convinced that in persecuting the Church he was carrying out the justice of God. He came to realise that God's justice makes itself known rather in those who are persecuted – an OT understanding and that above all this had happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was God's declaration of where he stood. This is a perfect example of what Christianity is. Paul's conversion is an archetypal conversion. An essential ingredient of Christianity is learning that God doesn't persecute.

Paul and the Cross

The Cross is the Revelation of the Justice of God.

The Jews, rightly so, considered themselves to have a unique and privileged understanding of God. Ps. 19 talks first of how nature bears witness to God's glory and then goes on to speak of the Law does the same but even better. In other words, the two ways we can know about God are nature and religion. Paul came to realise that the cross was much sharper lens than either of these two through which God may be truly perceived. The Law which was supposed to be God's clearest showing of himself actually caused more problems than it gave light, so Paul can claim: *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the Law and the prophets bear witness to it*, (Rms 3:21) The last place, the last person, the last thing on earth that one would expect, a crucified criminal, has revealed God in a most surprising way. But on reflection, that is what the scriptures were talking about. Whatever creedal statements have been made about God, the truest by far is that we met him in the Crucified One, and that self-giving, self-sacrificing love is the truest revelation of who God is. In other words, cruciformity is the character of God. Had Paul claimed that Jesus is Messiah because of his life and teaching, many could accept that. Had he even claimed that despite his ignominious death, Jesus was still Messiah, a Jewish martyr, this too would be understandable within Jewish frames of reference. But Paul claims Jesus as Messiah precisely because of the cross, and without it he would not be God's promised one.

So although the cross may seem like the obstacle to faith in Christ – "I could believe in this man only if they hadn't crucified him" – perhaps Paul's central claim is that God is most clearly available through the mystery of this event. So when Paul says: *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*, (1 Cor. 2:2) he is not being anti-intellectual. He is saying that there is no knowledge superior to that of the crucified Christ, that this will teach us more about God and humanity than any religious book or technique or any body of wisdom. The cross means that the way in which the one true God can be known is his self-giving love. It is the great manifestation of the wisdom of God. This is nothing like conventional wisdom.

There are hints in the OT about this, and on the Road to Emmaus Jesus tells the disciples as much, but without Christ's death no one would ever have put the pieces of the jigsaw together. So while it was important for the early Church to show that the one they preached stood firmly in line with the OT, there is nevertheless a very radical departure from what had gone before. It is going too far to say that Paul was preaching a new God, but it is clear that God is now available in a way unthinkable before the resurrection. So when we say "Jesus is Lord" we are affirming Christ's divinity, but we are also affirming the fact that God is Christ-like. Whatever we say and think about God, however we try to imagine him, if we don't hear the echo of the cross or see its form or at least its shadow, then it isn't God.

People have all sorts of ways to protect themselves magically against evil. These are myths. The cross is protection against evil, but not mythical or magical. It's not that holding up a crucifix can stop an evil doer, (as in vampire films) but the only way to protect our community and our world from evil is to learn the lesson of the cross, to be crucified with Christ and all the other things Paul says about it. The power of the cross does dispel evil but spiritually and anthropologically, not magically. Christianity offers miracles but not magic.

The Cross Makes it Possible to be Good Without Others Being Bad.

The story is told of a state banquet at Buckingham Palace given by Queen Victoria; very splendid, very lavish and chokingly stiff and formal. Whatever was served, it necessitated the use of finger bowls. One visiting dignitary, unused to these things, picked up the finger bowl and drank it, taking it to be one of the many drinks offered. The people around were horrified at this breach of etiquette and looked on him with scorn. Queen Victoria (not known for being easy going) saw what was going on, saw that the man had just made himself a social pariah and rescued him by picking up her own finger bowl and drinking it, which meant that everyone else around the table had to do the same. She 'saved' him by deliberately occupying his place of shame and because she was queen emptied it of all shame.

In a difficult but vital passage Paul claims that God in Christ does that with sin. *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2 Cor. 5: 21)

The place of shame is something created by people to reinforce their own sense of righteousness. It may be the cross, it may be position occupied by the class geek in school, it may be the position of an ethnic or social group who are lowest in the pecking order like untouchables in India. For many people the fact that someone else occupies that place is the guarantee that they are OK. For such people it's essential that the place of shame exists since their sense of righteousness depends upon it, and usually they will fiercely resist any attempt to rehabilitate the shameful person or people. Once Christ has occupied that place, the most shameful place on earth, there is no longer any need to create such places or to establish our own goodness by not being there. (The cross was doubly toxic; used by the Romans as the ultimate deterrent it could produce martyrs, people who because they were killed by the occupying power became local heroes. But Deut. 21:23 says that anyone executed by hanging on a tree is cursed by God. For the Jews then Crucifixion robbed them of the ability to become heroes.)

We find a similar idea in Galatians. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree"* (Gal. 3:13)

For the Christian, being baptised into Christ's death means we forego any claim to righteousness through a human system – because that claim depends on our being able to identify others as bad – which Jesus forbade us to do. (Lk. 6:37) Paul says the same: *Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself,* (Rms. 2:1) One could almost translate that as: "what goes around comes around". In other words: "If your sense of being good depends on being able to identify others as 'bad', sooner or later you will end up being the bad one in someone else's system of goodness." If people believe they need guns to protect themselves, they are likely in the end to be the victims of shooting. If people believe and invest in that system of goodness, then sooner or later they will become the victims of it. Once Jesus has occupied the very worst place in that system and come back from the dead, that toxic place is emptied of all its poison.

Rev John Hemer