

Date: 24 March 2024
Services: *Across the Diocese*
Series: Gazing on the Goodness of God
Title: Just
Passage: Exodus 34:4-7; Revelation 21:1-8

Well, welcome to our final session in our Lenten series on the goodness of God. It's not fair. It's not fair that that's the C of a heart, isn't it? There is so much in this world that is just not fair. It is not fair when people of different races are oppressed and discriminated against because of the colour of the skin. That's not fair. It's not fair when those who have lots of money can use that money for power, for pleasure, and to get what they want in this world. It is not fair that those who have a better education in life have more opportunities in life. That doesn't seem to be fair. It's not fair that just because you could afford private health insurance, you get your treatment more quickly. That's just not fair. And it's not fair that while we live in the comforts of Australia, there are children all around the globe who are being abused, oppressed, and trafficked for perversions on the internet. All across the globe, that is abhorrent, that is unjust, and it's just not fair.

I could go on—employment discrimination, ageism, sizeism, racism—all this is not fair. "It's not fair" is a phrase that we learn from a very early age. I think children have this acute sense of injustice. So in my house over dinner, I can have two bowls of ice cream, and if one ice cream scoop is just slightly bigger than the other, one of my boys will say, "That's not fair, Dad." Or if I'm disciplining one of my boys because they've treated the other brother badly, they say, "That's not fair, he started it."

So in this life, you have this deep-seated longing for justice—for what is fair and right and good. And that's because we're made in the image of God, and His fingerprint of justice is all over us. And so it's right that when we hear these horrific stories, we are crying out for justice, not just in the world but in our lives. No, when you've been treated badly, you want justice. When you're swimming the sea of lies and mistrust, you want justice. But here's the tension with this word "justice": we cry out for justice when somebody has wronged us. But when we've wronged somebody else, we don't want justice. We want forgiveness. We want grace. And so we have this deep-seated longing for justice until we are weighed on the scales and found wanting. And then we don't want justice; we want forgiveness and grace.

Well, our last attribute of God is that God is just, a God of Justice. Our verse for this series is Exodus 34:6. God, passing for to Moses, proclaiming the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Here it is, yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the sins of their children for the sins of the parents of the third and fourth generation. God does not leave the guilty unpunished; that's His Justice.

Got two Cs today. Firstly,

1. God's character.

God is infinitely, eternally, and unchangingly just. He's always fair, always right, always good, perfect in all His judgments (Deuteronomy 32:4). He is the rock; His works are perfect, and all His ways are just—a faithful God who does no wrong; upright and just is He. Not just all His ways are just, but He is just. He is a God of Justice. He loves justice; He loves seeing evil punished; He loves seeing the poor, the orphans, and the widows being helped; He loves seeing hurting people healed. He hates seeing people being treated badly; He hates seeing God's people, Christians, being persecuted. He gets angry when Christians are treated unjustly (2 Thessalonians 1). God is just; He'll pay back trouble to those who trouble the church and give relief to you Christians who are troubled. You see, a just God can never turn a blind eye to sin. He never winks at sin; He

never sweeps it under the carpet; He never pretends it never happened. He must and He will judge sin. That's His Justice.

Can you imagine a God who didn't care about right or wrong, a God who never judged wickedness, who turned a blind eye to every evil? That is not a God I want to follow; he'd be some kind of monster. So, God can and will judge between right and wrong; that's His character—a perfect, just God. I think the problem is that we can't comprehend the idea of a perfect, good, just judge because most of our models of Justice or judges in this life have a hint of lack of discernment or misinformation. You can never be absolutely confident that the right verdict has been given. But because God knows everything and knows all the details, His judgments will be just and perfect, always good, never offensive.

It's interesting in Western Society; I think we find the concept of God's judgment offensive. We like grace but are offended by judgment, whereas in most societies across the globe, it's the other way around. In many countries across the globe, people live day by day and hour by hour as the victims of abuse and horrible things happening all around them. So, they understand the idea of Justice or judgment. What they don't like is the idea of grace and forgiveness. But here in the West, we struggle with judgment. Someone said this: a God without wrath is a God who whitewashes evil and is deaf to the cries of the powerless. A student of mine who grew up in a gang culture and had many whom he loved taken from him by violence told me with profound honesty that if God will not avenge, he is tempted to avenge. Precisely because God is a God of love, He's also a God of holy wrath. There are those moments we cry out for justice. How long, O Lord, come and judge this world?

A few things to say about God's grace. Does not eliminate his Justice. Imagine if you're driving down the freeway, and you are 30 km/h over the speed limit, and you're caught by the cops, and they stop you, and they say you were speeding, and you say, "I was speeding," and they say, "You deserve to get a fine; the punishment is a fine." But imagine that cop is gracious to you, says, "I will let you go this once; I'll let you off." That is Grace. But if that same cop let every single speeder go and he never, ever, ever pulled up any speeders, you think that that's not just. There are laws there to be kept, and Justice demands some kind of punishment.

Just because God has shown you Grace doesn't mean he's not also just. God's love doesn't eliminate his Justice. People say if God is all-loving, then he should just forgive and accept everyone. Really, is that what you want? Imagine a human judge who is all-loving and every criminal who stood before him he just dismissed and said, "Off you go," every rapist, every paedophile, every murderer. I don't think we'd be saying, "Oh, he's a lovely, wonderful, loving judge." We'd say, "No, we demand Justice here; that's not fair. They deserve some punishment." And Justice doesn't eliminate consequences; there are always consequences. Justice demands consequences; that's the second half of Exodus 34. Yeah, he doesn't leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

Here's what that verse can't mean. It can't mean that God will punish my kids and my grandchildren for my sins. That wouldn't be just. God holds us all personally accountable. So what does verse 7 mean? The word "punish" there is not a particularly good word; it's too strong. The CSB is a better translation, more literal. It says, "God will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the father's iniquity on the children and the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation—the consequences." And you know that is true. Many children and grandchildren bear the consequences of their parents' choices. If their parents were alcoholics, that impacts the kids. If the parents have a problem with anger, that's passed down generationally. You see that throughout the Bible; Jacob was showing favouritism just like his father Isaac did. You copy what was modelled to you, and sin has these powerful influential consequences, and that is sobering because our choices today will have consequences on our children and our grandchildren. And you know that, but it's not supposed to scare us because it says that there are consequences to the third or

fourth generation. He's not saying that the fifth generation will be left off the hook; he's saying that the consequences are quite contained and small and limited compared to God's love because God's love extends to the thousandth generation.

So, church, I am not responsible for my parents' mistakes, but I do bear the consequences. Now, for me, that's both hard and empowering because I was brought up in a home of abuse, alcoholism, and lying. And that was the path that the entire next generation of my family, my biological family, have taken in the UK—abuse, alcohol, and lies. So, when I came to Christ, when I became a Christian, God said to me, "Paul, it stops with you. It stops with you. You can break that pattern of abuse; you can break that pattern of alcohol; and you can break that pattern of lying and atheism. You can do it with the help of the Holy Spirit." And I stand here today, the first generation of my family, God willing, many more to come, who are not abusive, not alcoholic, not liars because I know and love Jesus.

So, God's character: He is just, but there are consequences for your sins. Second C, is

2. God's cross.

God's cross because God's justice is at the heart of the Cross of Christ. Today is Palm Sunday where we celebrate that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, and he was hailed as the king, but he was heading to the cross. And the cross is all about Justice. We sing about that in the hymn, "When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look and see him there, who made an end to all my sin. Because the sinless Saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free, for God the just is satisfied, to look on him and pardon me."

This is the cross that the justice demands: that the guilty are punished. But God pours out all that punishment not on me and not on you but on his own Son Jesus Christ. The innocent is judged guilty so the guilty ones might walk free. And that is God's strange justice at the cross. It's beautiful!

I want to briefly unpack Romans 3 verse 23. It says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That's the problem; we've all sinned. I've sinned, you've sinned, from the day that we're born. God knows every single word, thought, and deed, and none of us are perfect. God knows all of that, and we'll all be held accountable. We'll all stand before the Judgment seat of God (2 Corinthians 5). We must all appear before the Judgment seat of God. I know I'm guilty; you know you're guilty; we all know we're guilty. The bar of Heaven's Justice means that we're all guilty, and a just God must punish sin. It will be unjust for God not to punish sin. So either I pay or somebody else pays.

So, how can God's justice be satisfied, and sinners be saved at the same time? The answer is the Cross of Christ. Only Jesus did not deserve death. Only Jesus did not deserve punishment because only Jesus was perfect. So, if you want to talk about injustice, the greatest act of injustice was actually the Cross of Christ because Jesus was innocent, and yet he was crucified. Romans goes on, "All have sinned, fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ." Justified freely, made right with God freely because of the grace shown in Jesus.

If you go on a London Eye, you'll see two buildings on the skyline. One is the Old Bailey, the courtroom, the court of justice, and there is this golden statue there of Justice with scales in one hand and the sword in the next. And at one point on the London Eye, about the 10:00 mark just behind this statue of Justice, you see this golden Cross of St Paul's Cathedral. It's this beautiful moment when you realize that on the scales of God, you are weighed and found guilty, and Justice demands that you are punished with the sword. But the cross of Jesus Christ covers you, it pays for you, it forgives you. Jesus dies for you, so you do not face the punishment you deserve. The heart of the Cross is one of justice. There is forgiveness, there's redemption. It

says in verse 25, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood." That word for atonement is the propitiation, turning away of God's wrath. So, God's wrath is satisfied.

I hope you know that the death of Jesus at Easter is not just about God covering your sins. Jesus' death isn't some kind of disinfectant that just wipes away all your sins. The problem isn't just our sin; the problem is God's anger, God's righteous wrath. And the Cross of Christ is about God forgiving your sins and turning the Father's wrath away, dealing with God's wrath because it's all poured out onto Jesus.

So, why would God do that? Why would God allow his son to go to Calvary? The answer, yes, it's love, of course, it's love, but it's more than love. It's about justice. The verse goes on, "He did this to demonstrate his justice because in his forbearance, he'd left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Christ." This is a bit of the Gospel we don't often get: at the Cross, God is demonstrating justice. He will not let the guilty go unpunished. We cry out really because in the Old Testament, all those people who rebelled against God and made that golden calf seemed to have got away with it. No, it's saying that God was looking forward even then to this time called Calvary where Jesus would die in our place, our sins would be punished onto Jesus. Not because of injustice on his part, but because that was God's way of intending to deal with our sin. That is justice. It's been done once and for all that only God could punish himself so that we could be acquitted. That is justice.

But if you believe in Jesus and God did not forgive you, that would be unjust because Jesus has died for you. It's all been paid for, and if God was demanding more payment, that would be unjust because Jesus paid for it all at Calvary. It would be unjust of God not to forgive people when people repent and believe in Jesus. And now perhaps 1 John 1 makes sense: "If we say we have no sin, we make him out to be a liar. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and God is just because Jesus paid it all and says he'll forgive us our sins."

John Stott says at the cross, in holy love, God through Christ paid the penalty of our disobedience himself. He took the judgment we deserve in order to bring us the forgiveness we do not deserve. On the cross, divine mercy and divine justice were equally expressed and eternally reconciled. God's holy love was satisfied.

So, as we close this whole series and think about God's justice, I'll leave you with his three Ps: Pursue Justice Now. As believers in Christ, it is right and proper that we cry out for justice now when we see abuse, harm, and pain. It is good to cry out for justice when you witness starvation and affluence at the same time. We don't want to live in a world where there is injustice everywhere and people seem to get away with it. "How long, O Lord?" And God's done it before; he could do it again. He could judge this world today; he does judge us regularly today. So, sometimes God does judge, so pursue that and profess it. And then be patient. Be patient that not all injustice will be corrected today. I find this personally very comforting. So when I've been so badly treated by other people, sometimes I don't see what I think is justice. Romans 12 is helpful: "Don't repay anyone evil for evil; don't take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written, 'It is mine to avenge, and I will repay,' says the Lord." And in my experience, God is way better at judging people than I am. 1 Peter 2: "He entrusted himself to him who judges justly." So sometimes we don't get justice now, but one day we will.

Lastly, practice justice. Practice showing justice to other people. In Micah chapter 6, we pursue justice, act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We treat people fairly, and when you see injustice, you seek to correct that. This is the character of God. He hates evil, loves good, and is always fair and just in all his judgments. It's been such a joy to walk through this series with you on the goodness of God. Please remember that your God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, forgives all your sins, and is a God who is fully just. The more you know him, the more you love him, and the more your life and your Christian life will be utterly transformed. Have a blessed Easter.