

Free from Injustice – Exodus 5.1-6.12

Team Talk 3

Introduction

(Recap last two talks and set up this one) Over the last two team nights we have looked at what it means to find freedom from our pasts and freedom to serve God. This evening we are going to look at being freedom from injustice. We are moving from how we can experience freedom, to how we can bring freedom; from looking at freedom from an emotional and spiritual perspective, to a more social and political perspective.

(Injustice in the world) The world is full of injustice.

There is injustice against the poor:

- A report by the United Nations in 2008, declared that the majority of the poor in the world live outside the protection of the law.
- A global study by the world bank found, 'Police and official justice systems side with the rich, persecute poor people and make poor people *more* insecure, fearful and poorer.'

Injustice against children:

- Child labour – there are 15 million enslaved children in India alone
- Child pornography -
- Child prostitution – 1 million children are forced into brothels each year.

Injustice against women:

- According to Amnesty International, 'Most acts of violence against women are never investigated. The perpetrators are not prosecuted. They commit their crimes with impunity. This contributes to a climate where violence against women is seen as normal, rather than criminal, and where women do not seek justice because they know they will not gain it.'

There is racial injustice:

- In 1994 in a period of about six weeks nearly one million defenceless women and children belonging who happened to be Tutsis were hacked to death by Hutus in Rwanda.

There is injustice committed by states and injustice committed by individuals, genocide, corruption, slavery, forced prostitution, and torture.

Poverty itself is a kind of injustice. As Bono put it, 'fighting poverty is not a matter of charity; it is a matter of justice.'

(The Christian call to combat injustice) As Christians we are called to fight against injustice. We have been liberated by Christ in order that we might become liberators. We have been

rescued so that we can become rescuers. We are called to bring freedom from addiction, and fear, and sin and shame, but we are also called to bring freedom to the structures of society – to ensure that there are just laws and the just application of laws, that people are treated fairly and equally, that people are paid for the work they do, and are not oppressed. We are called to rescue children from brothels, and prisoners from unjust punishments.

(Exodus as a book about freedom from injustice) Exodus is a book about injustice. It starts with an ethnic group who are enslaved, ill-treated, and whose children are murdered. And it tells the story of how God liberates them from these injustices. The Israelites start Exodus oppressed by the Egyptians as slaves and end free and heading towards their own land.

And in this passage we see some of the ways that we can become agents of liberation in our world.

(Our inadequacies) It is hugely encouraging to see who God sent for this work of liberation, for Moses is not the obvious choice. He has no position of influence with the Egyptian court. He has a bad track record in dealing with confrontation. He is fearful and lacks confidence. And yet God uses him to bring about the Israelites' freedom from injustice. If God used Moses, he can use any of us, and all of us.

Gary Haugen, president of the International Justice Mission, a human rights organisation, writes that the three main obstacles to being people who bring liberation to their societies are ignorance, fear and despair. This passage shows us how we can counter these three things: through compassion, courage and confidence.

1. Compassion

Our first response to injustice must be compassion. This is how Exodus starts, with God's compassion for victims of injustice. He says to Moses, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.' (Exodus 3.7)

a) Seeing and hearing

Compassion starts with listening. We mustn't block our ears to the cries of the world, oblivious to the thousands of voices crying out for justice. We mustn't live in ignorance; we need to see and hear what people are experiencing. We need to remember victims of injustice even when they are out of sight. God is always commanding us to remember, because it is so easy to forget.

b) Living Among

Compassion is more than just being aware of injustice. It means sharing in their suffering.

(God experiences injustice) God is not only concerned with the sufferings of the victims of injustice, he also comes alongside the victims of injustice. Jesus was born into a world of injustice. His birth was accompanied by the slaughter of all the boys in Bethlehem and its

vicinity who were two years old and under. He lived in country ruled by a foreign power without rights or self-determination. And he himself was falsely accused, without proper trial, of a crime he hadn't committed, tortured and executed. God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, was a victim of injustice, and shares in the sufferings of all who are victims of injustice.

(Moses and our calling to be among victims of injustice) And we are called to do the same. We are called to come alongside those who are suffering, sharing in their sufferings and standing alongside them. Moses may have lacked many of the qualities that would make him an obvious choice for this work, but he starts by being with the Israelites, coming alongside them, making their situation, his situation. This was Moses' first step, to go to Egypt, to be with the victims of injustice. And this is what we must start by doing, making sure that we are not distant from the weak and oppressed, but rather alongside them.

2. Courage

First we are called to have compassion. Next we are called to have courage.

We are God's agents in bring about justice to the world. As he says in Isaiah, 'Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?' (Isaiah 58.6) And in Micah, 'He has told you, o mortal, what is good: and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6.8)

If we do not act, then injustice will flourish. As Edmund Burke famously put it, 'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men (and women) to do nothing.'

We are called to act, and to act requires courage.

a) Courage to speak up

(Moses speaks up) First of all we need to have courage to speak up. Moses goes to Pharaoh and tells him, 'Let my people go.' You have to remember that this is an extraordinarily courageous thing to do. Pharaoh is the most powerful man in the world; Moses is a political exile, without position or influence. The Egyptians are the most advanced and powerful civilization of the day; the Israelites are the slaves on which they depend for their cheap labour. And yet Moses speaks up.

(A voice for the powerless) Victims of injustice tend to be in their position because they have no voice, no means by which they can plead for justice. So we need to speak on their behalf, ensuring that they are not powerless to defend their rights.

b) Courage to step out

(Courage despite our fear) Action requires courage. Courage has nothing to do with how we feel. Moses certainly does not come across as a courageous person. When Moses is called in chapter three he is afraid, reluctant, and lacking in confidence – but he decides to

go to Egypt. He gets to Egypt and he is still fearful and reluctant and lacking in confidence – but he still speaks to Pharaoh. Moses doesn't wait until the appropriate feelings arrive – he just does what God tells him to do. This is the nature of courage – not the absence of fear, but acting obediently despite our fear.

And yet as he begins to step out, following God's directions, you see him growing in confidence and ability. For God doesn't tend to give us the ability to do things before we start, he usually tells us to get going, and then supplies what we need while we're on the way.

3. Confidence

So we start with compassion, siding with and coming alongside victims of injustice; then we need to have the courage to speak up for the weak and the oppressed, and to act on their behalf. Thirdly, we need to have confidence.

(Despair) It is easy to be overwhelmed by the scale and depth of the world's injustices so that it seems that we can do nothing. And even when we start to try to do something, it can feel like we're having no real impact. The natural response is despair.

(Moses' efforts) Moses goes to Egypt, he speaks to Pharaoh, and as a result things get worse for the Israelites. His efforts are apparently not only futile, but counter-productive, making himself incredibly unpopular with the very people he was trying to help.

(Confidence which combats despair) Working to combat injustice in the world means committing to a long process. It is not going to be a quick fix. It is going to be discouraging, and unrewarding, with setbacks and disappointments – and yet through all of this we need to have confidence. C. S. Lewis wrote in the Screwtape Letters that 'despair is a greater sin than any of the sins which provoke it.' But we have several sources of confidence.

a) God's heart for justice

First of all, we need to have confidence that justice is close to God's heart. Isaiah declares, 'The LORD is a God of justice' (Isaiah 30.18). God says to the prophet, 'For I, the LORD, love justice.' (Isaiah 61.8)

b) In God's power

Secondly, we have confidence in God's power, for although God sends Moses, it is actually through God's power that the Israelites are rescued from their oppression. God is at work to bring an end to injustice. He has already acted many times, through many inspiring men and women to bring about the end of various injustices: slavery in the British Empire through William Wilberforce, apartheid in South Africa and the USA, equality for women, protection for children.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.'

So we must never give up. Despair leads to inaction, but confidence in God keeps us going.

In 1791 four years into his efforts to abolish slavery, following yet another defeat of his bill in Parliament, John Welsey, aged 87 wrote to Wilberforce what was probably his last ever letter, and in it he said, 'Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might.'

Wilberforce put a bill to Parliament for the abolition of slavery almost every year for 20 years before it finally succeeded, because he was confident in the power of God to end injustice.

Conclusion

So if we are to have an impact on the world to bring justice, we will need compassion, courage and confidence. And this is something we are all called to do. For we are all called to love our neighbours as ourselves, and when Jesus was asked 'who is our neighbour?' he gave the example of a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho who is attacked and robbed, and who is rescued by a Samaritan. He gave an example of loving a victim of injustice.