

The Twenty-ninth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

BEYOND JUSTICE

delivered by

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and

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**The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)**

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Beyond Justice

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BEYOND JUSTICE

About 25 years ago I was living in the Middle East when I had cause early one morning to head out to the north side of town, near one of the ancient gates of the city. In the half-light I saw dozens of shadowy figures, not huddled together, but separated individually, leaning against the walls of a huge square, waiting for something. Quite soon I saw a few pick-up trucks draw up, not all at once but every minute or two. I wandered closer to see what was going on. Each truck would park in the square, and the men would cluster around the driver's cabin. Each time some men would drift away, while others would climb wearily into the back. I couldn't hear the conversations with the driver, but it was obvious what was being said: 'Who will work today for this wage? Who will work for half as much? Who will work for a quarter?'

One of those men turned his head around and looked at me. I guess he was wondering, 'Who are you? Are you one of us, looking for work? Or are you one of them, offering it for derisory wages?' I didn't know if his look was a desperate plea for help or a glance of agonised rejection. But I know it went straight through me. And I know I've been trying to answer his question ever since.

Tonight I want to share with you, after 25 years of practice and reflection, the conclusions I've come to. I do so because I sense the churches are not at peace about justice. The churches find it hard to

hold together both halves of Jesus' claim, 'I am the resurrection and the life.' (John 11.25) Resurrection is where Christianity begins. Jesus is risen from the dead. Death is real, but it doesn't have the last word. Love is stronger than death. God's creative and life-giving purpose can't be permanently thwarted. Nothing can finally separate us from the love of God. That's what Christians celebrate in the beauty of worship and the urgency of evangelism. That's the good news.

But it's not the whole of the good news. There's also life. Christianity isn't just faith about the past and hope for the future: it's also love in the present. Christianity is a way of living made possible by the removal of our panic about death. It's a way characterised by joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, and patience. Today we'd add words that we associate with the virtues of our era – words like generosity, hospitality, kindness, inclusivity, respect, compassion, trust, and dignity. Jesus says I *am* the life – not I bring the life or procure the life or promise the life but I *am* the life. This is a present-tense thing. If you can't live it now, what hope does it truly give for the future?

The problem for the church is how easy it is for Christians to get a hold of one of these dimensions and not the other. Half the church grabs hold of the resurrection and runs the danger of missing the life. It concentrates on personal salvation, getting into heaven, knowing you're forgiven, having a personal relationship with Jesus, and often a rather narrow range of issues in so-called personal morality that keep us in

God's good books. The risk is that Christianity becomes a means to an end, a get-out-of-jail-free card, a device to avoid hell and head towards heaven forever; in short a rather self-centred and limited project. People tend to look at it from the outside and wonder whether it really and truly represents the life that Jesus is talking about.

Yet half the church makes the opposite mistake. It concentrates on the life, and talks about justice, and tolerance, and rights, and affirmation, and the planet, and never quite gets round to focusing on the crisis of death, the need for personal repentance, the awesomeness of judgement, the fear of oblivion or everlasting torment or isolation in eternity. The trouble with this is that it's admirable but it's not always clear in what sense it's Christianity, because the commitments and perceptions are often shared with a whole range of secular and religious people looking for a better and more equal society; and often Jesus doesn't get much of a look-in.

So whether you veer towards the resurrection or the life, there's a problem with justice. Either it seems a distraction from the real business of salvation; or it seems so much the centre of salvation that it obscures the traditional Christian language almost altogether.

Going back to my youthful experience by the ancient gate of that Middle-Eastern city, I'd never before witnessed the inequalities of life and the brutal economic humiliation of a mass of people so vividly. I'd

seen political oppression – I'd been to places where one part of the population was marginalised and subjected to discrimination and daily insults. But this was more subtle. It made me feel utterly powerless. It was a little epiphany. This is what in the jargon of our day we call becoming passionate about justice. What does one do in the face of this daily diminishment of human beings? What I want to do tonight is to look at the two conventional answers to that question, and then suggest a possible third.¹

Here's the first conventional answer. Justice is about freedom. It's about so ordering the affairs of a country that every person has the greatest degree of liberty compatible with similar freedom for others. These are the classic political liberties, of conscience, assembly, and speech; freedoms to hold property, earn a living, and avoid arbitrary arrest. This is what we could call justice from the government's point of view.

The trouble about this kind of justice is that it begins to look suspiciously like justice for the winners. Over time huge economic inequalities can emerge, and a procedural justice that concentrates on protecting individual liberty can underwrite huge swathes of poverty.

¹ My sense of the two conventional kinds of justice has been greatly informed by Nicholai Wolterstorff in his books *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008) and *Journey toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2013). My position in this paper is informed by Wolterstorff, but Wolterstorff's account explicitly favours the second of what here I take properly to be considered three approaches.

What I witnessed in that market square in the 1980s wasn't unusual: in countries that prize political liberty to the exclusion of economic equality, it's more or less normal.

Here are the three questions Christians need to think about in relation to government justice. Number one, how does the church relate to situations of significant injustice in other countries? So, for example, when Western powers deliberate over military action in the Middle East, they say they're concerned about injustice and oppression and tyranny, but people suspect they're mainly concerned about oil. Again, it's not about simple justice, it's about *whose* justice, and whether the powerful get to decide what justice looks like, and arrange justice in their own interests. The ecological crisis is becoming the biggest example of how the reigning Western conception of justice is simply inadequate to comprehend the unprecedented levels of injustice being visited in our generation to those at most risk from global warming and in future generations on the whole planet. These are challenges where the norms of procedural justice are simply inadequate to the task.

Number two, how does the church get involved in helping nations move toward the rule of law in societies where many of the conditions are still fundamentally unjust? If you are living in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa, the likelihood is that the colonial power monopolised the land for the century or more of its rule. On departing a generation or two ago the colonisers didn't, in most cases, make much of a job of

returning that land to the descendants of its previous owners – those who constituted their rightful heirs. The meticulous work of identifying those heirs and resolving the complexities of inheritance and family history is crucial to crafting a just peace. But it's well outside the normal understanding of procedural justice.

Number three, does the church see this country as a place where the rule of law fundamentally prevails, or does it align itself with those for whom this is anything but the case? Last year my own church, St Martin-in-the-Fields, hosted a service to mark the twentieth anniversary of the death of Stephen Lawrence. As the distressing disclosures around that case continue to mount, and the disparities in treatment of people of different races continue, the question becomes, whose side does the church think it's on when it presumes that miscarriages of justice are the exception, rather than the norm? Can the church that sings the Magnificat ever be comfortable siding with a justice that's skewed towards the winners?

And so to the second conventional kind of justice. Justice is about rights. It's about recognising that every individual has inherent worth as a human being. Pursuing justice means taking up the cause of those whose rights have been ignored or suppressed, even if the person or body whose responsibility it is to uphold those rights is hostile, formidable, or hard to identify. This is what we could call justice for the losers. It doesn't start with a blank sheet of paper and a theory of good

order. It starts with people's experience of pain and suffering and cruelty and seeks to give those people a chance in life that has been snatched from their hands. It doesn't expect to win every time and it doesn't have a template in mind of what the end of all its striving might look like. It doesn't always know how the resources will be found or the adjustments be made to answer its demands: it just takes up one case at a time and seeks to give each person the honour that's their due and has been denied them.

Let me give an analogy from pastoral care. When a person comes to see a pastor, they sit down, they explore in subtle ways how much they trust their interlocutor, and when all goes well they tell a story and with the pastor they find a new or better way to locate that story within a wider story of themselves, the world, the church, and God. And when that point is reached, the pastor has a choice. He or she can slap their thighs, and say, 'Well, nice talking, time to head off to the youth group, and I'm sure you've got things to do...', thus bringing the conversation to a polite end. Or, he or she can say, slowly and gently, 'Was there anything else?' I believe it's no exaggeration to say that on this choice hangs a whole ministry. If the pastor takes the first option, and heads off to the youth group, he or she is saying all is basically well with the world, and life can be fitted into a routine. If the pastor takes the second option, he or she will never be bored. Overwhelmed, possibly: but there'll never be a need to scratch around for the new mission idea or a bold justice agenda, because it'll be provided free of charge.

The second kind of justice isn't tidy, smooth, or ever really finished. If a church is genuinely close to its community, and aware of a global community in which it's wrapped up even if it's not so tied by bonds of affection and encounter, then issues of justice will arise readily. You just have to pay attention, and keep your eyes open. Then there are two directions you can go. You can spend time and care supporting the wronged as they seek to make a journey toward their own vindication, restitution, or restoration. Or you can take up the struggle on their behalf, and join with others seeking to do so. We can call these two approaches working with and working for.

Embarking on a justice campaign, whether it's the patient accompaniment of working with, or the more strident advocacy of working for, requires a sober estimation of what it means to raise awareness in victims, perpetrators and the wider public. Each of these constituencies – victims, perpetrators and the wider public – has its own reasons for shielding its eyes from and refusing to name injustice, and, even when it has called it what it is, still not doing anything about it. Each constituency requires a different strategy, a different kind of perseverance, a different kind of cajoling and trickster spirit.²

² For more on the trickster spirit, see Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage 1971), and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1990).

And the only tried and trusted way of bringing about change is to awaken anger and compassion. Injustice provokes anger, outrage, shock, horror, disgust, fury. And here lies a major problem. To provoke such strong reactions can involve a degree of simplification, amplification – even an element of deception – in order to achieve the required response. These are bridges one has to find a way to cross. If one is going to campaign on homelessness one needs a picture of a person sleeping rough. If one is up against deadline day and no such picture is to hand, does one dress a colleague up to lie down in a doorway? Or is that a lie that undermines the credibility of the whole organisation? These are the kinds of questions justice work turfs up every day. The public can only usually deal with a certain degree of nuance before losing interest or the flow of the story: but people's lives are almost entirely made up of nuance. So in the quest to get a justice message across, one can end up exploiting a victim of injustice by simplifying and thus distorting their story.

And that names the danger in justice work. In the quest to achieve the goal, it can chew people up who get in the way, and thus generate its own kind of injustice. Justice work almost always involves building coalitions, and coalitions require compromise, and compromise is generally something that passionate people who see the world through partial lenses find hard to swallow.

And it's not just about treading on people. George Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs Warren's Profession* tells the story of Vivie Warren, who goes to Cambridge University to read Maths, and while there is filled with all sorts of righteous and outspoken opinions about the world, about men and women in it, about justice and about morality.³ But half-way through the play she makes a humiliating discovery. The money that's paid for her education has come from her mother's professional profits. It turns out her mother, Mrs Warren, has made her fortune by running a chain of brothels all across Europe, in which women have sold their bodies to men for payment. It turns out Vivie's high principles are rooted in her mother's low practicalities. When Christians style themselves according to the fashionable phrase 'speaking truth to power,' they invariably assume they have the truth and someone else has the power. Too often one or both of these assumptions proves incorrect. Sometimes Christians discover they themselves are Vivie Warren, and their righteous advocacy has been funded or facilitated by deeply-compromised commitments they themselves prefer not to see or disclose.

So to summarise where we've got to so far, the first kind of justice concentrates on guaranteeing people's freedom to be able to do things that don't harm others. The second kind of justice is about securing people's right not to have harmful things done to them. The first kind

³ George Bernard Shaw, *Mrs Warren's Profession* (London: Methuen 2012).

looks to biblical leaders like Moses and Solomon; the second to prophets like Elijah and Amos.

Let's return to the Middle-Eastern city gate. I wonder what that man's piercing look in the market square does to you. I wonder if it goes straight through you, as it did through me. I wonder which side you feel you're on, by conviction or by economic interest. The truth is the church has always been divided between these two kinds of justice. Because it's always, or almost always, sought to be close to the poor, it's always been alert to the second kind of justice. It's always seen the worth of every person in the fact that Jesus came to be one like us, so each of us is precious in God's sight. But to the extent that the church has felt it had a stake in the good ordering of society as a whole, and, we have to acknowledge, to the extent that it's often been more or less in the pocket of the wealthiest and most influential in society, it's always had an interest in the first kind of justice. I wonder which kind of justice instinctively makes most sense to you. I wonder whether naming these two kinds of justice articulates some of the tensions of your personal and professional life.

One way of dodging the question, and averting the gaze of that man in the square, is to say the only justice that matters is God's justice. This sees each one of us as being in the wrong before God, and rejoices that Jesus stepped in to take God's punishment on our behalf. Our eternal salvation is secured by the merciful justice of God – a process called

justification. What's good about this account is that it makes Jesus central to our idea of justice, and insists that mercy is at the heart of God. (After all, it's not clear how the two conventional notions of justice have anything much to do with Jesus.) But what's bad about this retreat into piety is that because it has so little to say to the searing gaze of that man in the market square, in practice it more or less ends up siding with the first kind of justice, because it takes no initiative to change the status quo. It justifies the winners today by saying we can all be winners in the end.

So how can Christians talk about Jesus in relation to justice in a way that doesn't retreat into piety or simply underwrite the shortcomings of the conventional approaches? I'm not pretending I can pull a rabbit out of the hat at this point. Christians will continue to pursue both conventional approaches in painstaking and honourable ways. But I think we need to say something more about justice, something more that doesn't preserve the problem that we somehow leave Jesus behind when we seek justice.

Here I would like to refer to Paul's short letter to Philemon.⁴ Let me read the crucial verses.

⁴ The radical and novel dimension of Philemon in this context was brought to my attention by N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK 2013) 1-74.

Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love ... I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ... I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ... Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Now we have to recognise that Paul isn't being entirely transparent in this letter. He doesn't actually say what the problem is or what he wants Philemon to do. In the parish where I grew up I recall the rector once receiving a letter from the wife of a churchwarden that said 'Dear Rector, It grieves me to have come to the stage where I must write to you and I have held back for many months out of respect for your ministry here and all the work you have done with us for many years which has been so cherished in our community and yet over the last few

weeks I have felt increasingly that I cannot be silent any longer and the time has come when I simply can no longer delay putting pen to paper. I'm sure you will understand my reluctance to write and how difficult it is to express what I really must say to you in the strongest terms. Yours sincerely, Jane.' She never actually said what she was concerned about and I recall the rector had absolutely no idea what the problem was. Paul's letter is a little bit like that on first reading. But let's look more closely.

It seems that Paul is returning a runaway slave to his master, asking the master to treat the former slave with mercy, and, if there is any loss of money or honour, to charge that loss to Paul's account. Paul is talking about the creation of a new kind of community. He regards Philemon as a brother in the faith; he wants Philemon to recognise Onesimus as a partner too; and he hopes so to move Philemon to make Onesimus a legitimately free man. This reconciliation is possible and plausible because Jesus, by laying down his life, has brought about our reconciliation with God. In the same way by saying 'charge it to my account' Paul is laying down his life to reconcile Onesimus and Philemon. This is hardly a retreat into piety. This is putting one's life on the line for something better than justice.

Twelve years after that encounter in the middle-eastern market square, I happened to be on the outskirts of a town in East Anglia, again around 5.30 in the morning. I saw shadowy figures loitering in a lay-by,

hoodies up, faces obscured, occasionally speaking to one another in a language I didn't know. And then I saw a van draw up. And lo and behold it was a replay of what I'd seen in the middle-eastern square, but this time for day-labour picking East Anglian fruit. It was another epiphany. Oppressive economic relations weren't just an issue in a faraway land: they were an issue right here, right now. I felt that man's piercing gaze upon me, once again, from all those years before: it was as if now he was saying, 'What are you going to do about it? It's on your doorstep. You can't hide any longer.' I realised that in being sought out by that man's searching gaze, by being held by that man's piercing eyes, I was looking into the face of God.

And ever since I've had two songs singing in my heart. One is a song of justice. It's good to pursue justice – especially that second kind. It's good to be close to those who've been deeply wronged, and walk with them as they find strength to seek restitution. It's good to awaken victims, perpetrators and the wider public to things that should not be, to stir grievance and anger and compassion, to build coalitions to achieve results, to change laws and alter practices and seek a better future together. This is about dignity and honour and rights and solidarity and setting people free.

But when all this activity is over sometimes people still haven't got what they really, really need. Because there's only so much the law can do. Justice can give dignity, justice can affirm rights, justice can restore

property, justice can clear one's name, justice can outlaw domination. But while those things make life possible, they alone don't make life. Life is about more than getting one's due and living free from harm. Life is about restored relationships, about flowering talents, about passionate friendships, about costly forgiveness, about the release of hidden joys, about what Paul describes in his letter to Philemon when he talks about going beyond what he asks and discovering a beloved brother.

Here's the central point of my argument. If Paul had followed the first kind of justice he would probably have had such respect for the law he would have made sure Onesimus remained a slave. If he'd followed the second kind of justice Paul would have made sure Onesimus was a free man, but Onesimus and Philemon would probably have ended up at best strangers to one another, perhaps enemies. Paul was looking for a way of life that goes beyond justice. And the name we give to these practices that go beyond justice is church.

Church is where we practice the justice of God, which goes beyond vindication and restitution and legitimation and liberation. Church is where we find there's something beyond freedom and that's friendship, there's something beyond dignity and that's celebration, there's something beyond guaranteeing a person's security and that's laying down one's life for their flourishing, there's something beyond vindication and that's forgiveness, there's something beyond good

order and that's worship. When I stood in that middle-eastern market square and that man's gaze went straight through me, I hadn't read John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* or John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* or even Martin Luther King, jr's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. And I'm not under any illusion that I had some kind of innate insight into injustice. But I had read Matthew 25 a bunch of times, I had spent a lot of time in home groups wondering about the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner, and I had in retrospect been trained to spend my life expecting to see in the dispossessed the face of Christ. Human nature didn't teach me that; school didn't teach me that: church did. But church didn't think confronting injustice was an end in itself; church though seeing the face of the unjustly treated was a way of encountering Christ.

Jean Vanier has a way of describing justice.⁵ He says the story begins 'with a huge gap of injustice and pain. It is the gap between the so-called "normal" world and people who have been pushed aside.' But this injustice cannot simply be rectified by fixing a disability or outlawing discrimination. Vanier says the first time he entered an institution for intellectually disabled people he heard their simple cry: 'Do you love me?' And he realised that was his cry too. He realised his need of these people – for they could help him 'grow in the wisdom of love.' (31) His goal for them was not autonomy – which he describes as

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove: IVP 2008). Page references in the text.

the ability to 'live alone, watch television and drink beer.' What autonomy doesn't grasp is the need for belonging. 'The church,' he says, 'is a place of compassion and fecundity, a place of welcome and friendship.' (37) It is bound together by sharing food, prayer and celebration.

Beyond justice lies transformation. Janine came to L'Arche aged 40 with a paralysed arm and leg, severe epilepsy and difficulties understanding and learning. She was angry with her body, her sisters, and God. At L'Arche she discovered she could dance; and she could be loved. She would sit down next to Jean Vanier, rest his tired head on her shoulder, and say, 'Poor old man.' (26) This mode of life beyond justice is one in which the so-called needy or victim becomes the teacher. In the words of John Paul II, 'In revealing the fundamental frailty of the human condition, the disabled person becomes an expression of the tragedy of pain. ... The difficulties of the disabled are often perceived as a shame or a provocation and their problem as burdens to be removed or resolved as quickly as possible. [But disabled people] can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence, and aggression, but by love, solidarity, and acceptance.' (38-9)

On a rather humbler level than the prophetic work of the L'Arche communities, my own church holds a gathering for 30-40 people every

Sunday afternoon. A handful are congregation members, and the rest are people from outside the European Union with no recourse to public funds. We know them because most of them spend significant amounts of the week relaxing in the pews of our church, having spent the night on overnight buses or on the streets of London or in some kind of ad hoc accommodation. They are used to four kinds of interaction: denial, hostility, human rights lawyers or sandwiches. We seek to offer them warmth, washing machines, showers, friendship, a hot curry and space to recover their identity and dignity. We hear their stories, stories of people who were often highly qualified in some of the more troubled and oppressive countries of the world, stories of people who risked everything to come to London and who now experience untold hardship rather than return to the even worse hell from which they came. Gradually vulnerable people gain confidence, become leaders, recover their inner strength, and Sunday afternoon becomes the focus of their week. We can't fix their problem and we don't know what their future holds. But we can help them discover something deeper, more lasting, and more human than bare justice.

Vanier and the Sunday group explain why, while I believe Christians are called to seek justice, I don't believe they can finally be content with seeking justice. Beyond the care for the freedom and flourishing of society and the upholding of the rights of individuals lies the vision of the church as a community of reconciliation, forgiveness, and friendship. It's almost impossible for this church to flourish without

justice; and this church should certainly be committed to both kinds of justice, in appropriate degrees depending on its social context. But justice cannot constitute this church, and it certainly cannot substitute for it. What grieves the world is not simply oppression, cruelty, exploitation and fraud – though of course these need to be outlawed, confronted, and resisted. What grieves the world even more is exclusion, isolation, ostracism, neglect, and loneliness. There can seldom, perhaps never, be a law against these things. Yet they abide when processes of and campaigns for justice have done their work. And it is in their transformation that the church’s work most truly lies.

So I sing the song of justice. I sing it with those who struggle, with all who seek a world where people are not oppressed, a world where people stand with one another in times of cruelty and hardship. But I also sing another song, a song of worship, a song of forgiveness, a song of celebration, a song of unbridled, overflowing joy, a song of reconciliation and resurrection, a song that goes beyond justice, a song that Paul sang to Philemon. It’s a song we call love.
