

Social Justice

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] I find it's not that uncommon as a minister, if I'm out and about and not got this bit of white plastic around my neck, to find myself getting into a conversation with somebody I've not met before, and sooner or later they ask, so what do you do? And I tell them. And I usually find that the conversation at that point goes in one of two different ways. It either completely closes it down, or completely opens it up. My favourite response to that question was years ago from the evangelist Jay John, who's a minister in the Church of England. He describes how he was sitting down in a plane, about to go on a long-haul flight, got into conversation with a lady sat next to him who he'd never met before, and she spent quite a time describing to him her business that she ran. It was quite a big business, and describing all the different things that they did. And then eventually she turned to him and asked the question, so what are you doing? Rather than just tell her, he decided to have a bit of fun.

He said, I bet you can't guess. She looked at him blankly, so he started to say, I work for a global enterprise.

She said, do you? He said, yes I do. In fact we've got outlets in almost every country in the world. Have you? She said, yes I have. We've got hospitals, we run hospices, and homeless shelters. We do marriage work, we've got orphanages, we've got feeding programmes, educational programmes. We do all sorts of work with justice, and reconciliation, and mental health. He said, basically we look after people from birth to death.

And we specialise in the area of behavioural modification. She went, wow. And by this stage, everybody else sat around, was also listening in.

[2 : 29] She said, who do you work for? She said, I work for the church. Haven't you heard of us? Today in a series of what would Jesus do, we think about the theme of social justice, social action, the place that that has within being a follower of Jesus today, and asking themselves the question, what would Jesus do in this situation right now?

Sadly, there is the danger that when we think about that theme of social justice, social action, that we can fall into one of two extremes.

On the one hand, we can fall into the extreme of thinking that social action, and social justice is, that's all there is to being a follower of Jesus.

That's a vital part of being a follower of Jesus. But if we think that that's all there is to it, then we lose sight, or are in danger of losing sight, of the fundamental reality that being a Christian is about knowing God.

Knowing God who loves us. Knowing God who sent Jesus to die for us. Knowing God as the one who raises his son to death.

[3 : 53] The one who promises us the gift of eternal life. And so, it's not without reason that over the years, occasionally you'll hear, I've heard people sort of talk of social action as part of the expression of Christian faith, and almost kind of in a derogatory way, sort of write off what they would call rather scathingly the social gospel.

But on the other hand, there is the other extreme, and that's where in response to that, we so emphasize the importance of personal spirituality that we exclude the importance of social action, and reduce the gospel to only a matter of personal, individual spirituality, at the cost of paying attention to those around us who need us to take action.

It was out of that extreme that the parody that I'm going to read to you now was written years ago. The parody of the story that Jesus told me he was talking about judgment in Matthew's gospel, and how eventually we will all be judged and separated as a shepherd would separate sheep from the goats and say, but I was in prison and you came and visited me, I was hungry and you fed me, and

when Lord, when were we in those situations?

You know that story. Here's the paraphrase, sorry, the parody that was written. I was hungry, and so you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger.

I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar to pray for my release. I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

[5 : 51] I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely, and you left me alone so that you could pray for me. You see, to separate, to separate social justice, the importance of taking action from personal spirituality and faith in Christ, to separate those two things is a false dichotomy.

They go together, they're inseparable, they're integral to one another, they're part of that holistic vision of expecting and living in expectation of the kingdom of God that is coming to us.

And in these words that we see today from Luke's gospel, we see that there is a particular emphasis to the role of the Holy Spirit here. See, at this point of the story of Jesus, Jesus has just been, we're told, blasted by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights.

And then we're told that led by the Spirit, in the power of the Spirit, he returns to Galilee. And it's then when he walks into the synagogue and he takes the book of Isaiah and he reads, the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me.

[7 : 30] And then he goes on to say, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit anoints me to proclaim the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

You see, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, two things happen broadly. You fall in love with God and you fall in love with those around you.

Now, Jesus sort of put it that way when asked what the most important commandment is. But you know, even the word commandment can miss the point if we think it is something that's theoretical.

You see, loving God and loving neighbour is not something that we do because, well, you've got to do it. It's what happens when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

And the Holy Spirit turns that which is theoretical into that which is experiential. The Holy Spirit takes what at face value may appear to be a law and makes it a living reality of the way we relate to those around us.

[8 : 52] And so we read of the key role that the Holy Spirit takes here. The Holy Spirit leads Jesus and the Holy Spirit upon Jesus in Jesus and powers him with those words.

The Spirit is upon me to set the people free. And it's the same Spirit that Paul writes is on every single one of us when we follow Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 1 Paul says, Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come.

You see, when the Holy Spirit is upon us and within us, we catch this vision that is central to the message of Jesus, the message that the kingdom of God is coming. That ultimately when the kingdom of God comes in all fullness, we will be raised for eternity.

There will be no more death or dying or suffering. There will be no more injustice. But right here and right now it begins. As the Holy Spirit takes root in our lives and instills within us that kingdom vision to usher in the kingdom here and now.

[10 : 17] That same Spirit that anoints Jesus, the same Spirit that raises Jesus, that same Spirit motivated William Wilderforce and that same Spirit motivated Martin Luther King.

That same Spirit motivated Mother Teresa. The same Spirit motivated and continues to motivate millions, literally millions, of others, past and present, to both talk and walk the way of Jesus Christ. And that same Spirit longs to dwell in every single one of us. You see, as the Spirit dwells in us, so we draw nearer.

And as we draw nearer to God, then we long for his kingdom to come and live like the kingdom is about to come more and more and more. not because we have to, but we just want to.

You see, as we draw nearer to God the Father, things change. In our solar system, we have this system of planets and some are closer to the sun than others.

[11 : 30] Mercury is really, really, really hot. Pluto is really, really, really, really cold. And the reason why Pluto is really, really cold is that it's a great distance from the source of heat, from the sun.

Mercury is really, really hot because it's so close to the sun. Our spiritual temperature changes when we draw near to God.

And things change. And when we are filled with the Spirit, contrary to what some would have us believe, life doesn't get smaller, it becomes bigger. It becomes fuller, deeper, wider, richer, far more meaningful as we live in expectation of this kingdom that is coming where we will be raised for eternity and there will be no more suffering.

And we can now begin to live now and see that change now in our lives. Does anybody like popcorn?

Sorry, I haven't got any. I'm not offering you. Have you ever wondered what makes popcorn pop? Inside every kernel there's moisture.

[12:39] And when you heat the moisture, the moisture turns to steam. As it turns to steam, so you get pressure and it expands and presses against the shell until the shell can no longer withstand that pressure.

at which point there is this explosion of deliverance as that which is inside can no longer be held hostage to that which is outside.

Now there's an image of what it is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. whenever you yearn for things to be right in the world, whenever you cry out of that question why is there this suffering, whenever you get angry for a just cause, whenever you feel that something inside that things aren't right here, you shouldn't be surprised.

It's the image of God that's been there since you were born. When the Holy Spirit meets with that and begins to set work on that, life gets bigger.

It gets bigger and bigger and bigger such that we no longer need to be controlled and defined and determined by our external circumstances but can dare to live differently by a different dream, a different picture and just start to do something about it.

[14:16] So as we think about this series What Would Jesus Do? WWJD it's a good question to ask but I've read a book recently where I think there's an even better question for us to ask.

It was a book whilst I was on sabbatical I had the privilege of being able to read loads of books and one of the ones that really stuck with me was a book that was published in January this year by John Mark Comer called Practicing the Way.

Some of you may have already read it. I think we might even do a series on it sometime in the next 12 months as a church but Practicing the Way is a book John Mark Comer wrote about discipleship. One of the bits that really stuck in my mind is where he talks precisely about this question what would Jesus do or WWJD and he says it's a good thing to put those letters somewhere whether it's on a wristband a t-shirt or a post-it note or whatever to remind yourself of that important question in discipleship what would Jesus do?

But he says there's an even better abbreviation and it's not WWJD but WWJD IHWM Now he does say that perhaps that's a bit of a mouthful but the point is he said the problem with WWJD what would Jesus do is that Jesus was a first century Jewish rabbi whereas WWJD IHWM asks the question what would Jesus do if he was me?

[16:05] Now maybe there's just a subtle difference but it's an important one because when we talk about Jesus we're not talking about somebody who simply just lived 2,000 years ago he did but he also lives now and the question if we really really really want to get close up and personal and meaningful about this is that to ask the question what does it mean to pursue justice to pursue the kingdom where you are in a way that only you can in the life context that you find yourself in right now given the network of relationships that you have that will be unique to you given the resources that you have and don't have that again will be unique to you and given the opportunities that will be unique to you so as we come to pray now let's just join in a few moments of silence as we just hold that question before him

Jesus what would you do if you were me right now let's pray together Lord we thank you that your kingdom is an invitation to each and every one of us thank you that that is an invitation for us to get involved in the most exciting movement that history has ever known and to make a difference in the lives of others thank you that that is an invitation that in the midst of all of that we get to know you as our friend our saviour as the living Lord in a profoundly personal way Lord as we do so we ask that your Holy Spirit would come upon us would fill us ever more each and every day

Lord let us never be satisfied that we have been filled enough but may we continue to pursue your presence in our lives and as we draw nearer to you Lord would you swell up within our hearts that

passion to serve you through others so Lord we take a moment of stillness now and we ask that in this stillness you would reveal to each one of us something of what you would have us do in our lives now Lord help us to think of the network of friendships relationships whether that be friends family neighbours or colleagues help us help us to see those situations in which we can do practical things

Lord open our hearts and our minds to those causes that you would have us engage whether that involves campaigning writing letters Lord maybe there is a specific way in which you would have us serve you maybe there is a particular cause that you would lay on our hearts to pray for Lord we ask that now and in the time to come you would open us up to those opportunities and that you would embolden us to do everything we can with our time and our energy in service of your kingdom may we not rest until that kingdom comes in all its fullness in Jesus name
Amen eth how about in ■