

# Good God, Good Church: Justice - 13th February 2022

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Preacher: Ruth Edmonds

[ 0 : 00 ] So, have you all got a piece of paper and a pen? Just have a hand on it. You're going to need it later, but not immediately. Yes, there is going to be a little bit of interaction. Mary's already told me about doing work on the Sabbath and how one should not be expected to do that.

I received that challenge, Mary. Well, but I think this is some work we're going to do this today. So please do take the exception. So, we've been talking about what it means to be a good church.

And sometimes that's been quite challenging because it is asking how can we be the best church we could possibly be in our area. And today we're going to talk about something which is a little bit difficult to think about and can make us all feel quite uncomfortable.

And that's justice and what it means to be a just church. So, I'm going to kind of touch on two things. So, the first one is I think that justice is what love looks like if you've got a body.

Because the soft words and the nice emotions and all the Valentine stuff that you can see is great. But when people are hurting and when people are starving, I think that love is more challenging than that.

[ 1 : 12 ] It doesn't just offer words or feelings. It does something to break down the systems that are making those people starve. I'm also going to touch on the idea that anger isn't always bad.

Sometimes anger is what we need when we're going to change things. And sometimes anger is what love looks like when it sees something that's just totally wrong and totally clocks it and sees it and understands it and fuels us to change things.

And that can be really important. So, why is this kind of a bit difficult to think about? I think when we picture love, we picture something big and soft and toothless and soothing.

It's kind of the nice mopping up at the end of the day. And justice, sometimes we picture justice as like the opposite. Sometimes we say that justice is overcome by mercy and love because we assume that mercy and love means letting people off from doing bad things without any consequences.

But I don't think that's what mercy means. In many ways, as Kathy will tell you in great detail, because she's an expert on this, sometimes you have to have consequences because that's the only way you can forgive yourself when you've done something wrong.

[ 2 : 29 ] Sometimes those consequences are helpful. So, today is going to be a bit tricky. Because talking about justice is hard because we're in this society which is made of huge systems that hurt people.

So, those are economic systems that make some people poor and some people rich. Prejudicial systems that make it difficult to go out and about. So, justice is hard because sometimes it reminds us of the hurt that we have caused other people without thinking about it.

Sometimes justice reminds us that we are all profiting from the lottery of life in some ways. and that some of us, especially people like me, have advantages that I didn't do anything to earn.

I was born into a family that gave me those advantages. Facing that stings a bit and sometimes you can be like, no, I don't want to deal with that today. It is costly. Sometimes it can feel like it takes the wind out of our achievements.

It can make people like me face the fact that there are other people who probably have earned the right to be in my position several times over and they haven't had any of the recognition I've had.

[ 3 : 37 ] And to make this even trickier because we love a difficult Sunday here, don't we? Especially today, everyone's told me they're tired so it's the perfect one. Today we're going to do a really tough Bible story.

I think it's one of the most difficult parables that Jesus told and before we watch it, I want to add a quick caveat which hopefully will make watching it a little bit less stressful which is I'm not going to talk about hell.

Okay? Today, heaven, hell is not one of the things that I'm going to talk about. You can get that from the story but honestly, I don't know what I think about hell or purgatory.

I definitely don't think God lets people be tortured for eternity. Honestly, that wouldn't be a God I'd want to worship. I'd have to get a different job. If I got to heaven and I discovered people were being tortured forever elsewhere, I'd have to say to God, thanks but no thanks.

This heaven is not for me. I want no part of a God that tortures people. And ultimately, I do believe that God gives everyone and everything an invitation no one can resist.

[ 4 : 41 ] I believe the Bible when it says, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow. But don't ask me for an exact date when that's going to happen. I think for some people, it might even happen after death.

And I know that from the Gospels, only God knows who's in or who's out. It's one of those terrifying questions people ask me on the train when I'm stupid enough to wear my dog collar. Is X, Y, Z in hell?

How could I possibly know? I find that very scary. It's a good reason not to wear it ever on the train. So when it comes to the specifics of is there a hell?

Is it just an eternity people can choose without God? Questions like that, don't ask me. I don't know the answers. No, actually, Matt has done a lot of thinking about this and he's got some very smart thoughts.

And he's the vicar, so it all rests on him anyway. Okay. So I think, you know, Matt's at the back. Any questions you've got are hell. He'd love to meet them at the end of the day. And he's got some talks on it on the website if you'd rather go that way.

[ 5 : 45 ] But for me, the question isn't really about what happens after death. It's about what we do right here, right now to prevent people living through hell on earth. I think when we have the first prayer, the only prayer that Jesus teaches us, it starts and the first thing it asks is how do we make your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven?

I think everything else comes from that. That's where we are. That's our focus. So let's focus on the hell on earth aspect of this story. Who is in the kingdom of God in the story I'm about to show you in their life on earth?

Where are the chasms? Where can people not see each other? Is it fair? Is any part of the story fair? Do any of the people in this story earn their lot in life? So with those questions in mind, let's watch the passage.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.

Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.

[ 7 : 02 ] In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this fire.

But Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things while Lazarus received bad things.

But now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been set in place so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.

He answered, Then I beg you, Father, send a Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them so that they will not also come to this place of torment.

Abraham replied, They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them. No, Father Abraham, he said, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.

[ 8 : 27 ] He said to him, If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead. Let's unpack that a little bit.

So what's happened here? This is one of a series of stories that Jesus is telling about the kingdom of God. And there's a huge reversal in it, one we might find troubling.

The rich man ends up in torment while the poor man is embraced. And I think the video here is really good because it shows Jesus embracing the poor man, which is perhaps an interesting take. Now, while many of us may not be homeowners, I suspect very few of us would identify with the conspicuous consumption and gated lifestyle of the rich man in the parable.

But I think it's also true that very few of us are in the position of poor Lazarus. We live in a country with an NHS, so there shouldn't be any people in this room for whom the best and easiest way of disinfecting sores is to have them licked by dogs, as it was for Lazarus.

Most people here do have some kind of roof over their head, so they're not sleeping in doorways. So when we listen to this parable, we do need to remember that we are more privileged than it might always be comfortable to think about.

[ 9 : 46 ] So how do we read this parable? What does it mean? Well, I think when we think about this parable in terms of how we should live now and how we bring about God's kingdom on earth, that can be a helpful way in.

And I think we see four things go wrong in the parable. First, the rich man doesn't see Lazarus clearly. Even after death, we see him shaking Lazarus.

He doesn't recognise Lazarus as a human being who's equally made in the image of God. Even if you take the parable literally and Lazarus is in heaven, the rich man in hell is still trying to give Lazarus orders to say, come, bring the water to me here.

And he doesn't actually speak to Lazarus, he tries to order Father Abraham to order Lazarus around. I think the second thing that goes wrong is that the rich man doesn't see himself and the advantages that he has very clearly.

He doesn't see a problem with feasting next to people who are starving or wearing rich clothes when others can barely afford to be covered and protected from the sun. The third thing I think goes wrong is that the rich man doesn't do anything about Lazarus.

[ 10 : 59 ] We see after death that he knows what Lazarus' name is. He probably passes him every day. But even if he doesn't think about it, he knows about the poverty that Lazarus is facing and the obstacles and he never does anything about it.

He ignores the problem. Or perhaps he doesn't think it's his problem to deal with. Anyway, he isn't motivated to do anything about it. Seeing people starving, seeing this man, the same man, starving every day doesn't make him angry or want to change things.

I think the fourth thing that goes wrong is that the rich man doesn't realise how important people like Lazarus, whose society steps all over, are to God. Or how clear it is through the words of all the prophets that God cares deeply about those who are most stepped on in society.

Whether those people are victims of an oppressive colonial state like Israel was under the Roman Empire. Or the widow left without anything to survive on. Or the leper separated from society.

Or people who've come over as strangers from a foreign land with nothing. So let's start with the first two problems and think about them in our lives. Seeing yourself and other people clearly.

[ 12 : 14 ] This is hard, right? Because you can only look through your own eyes. I can't just nick someone else's eyes and look through it and say, oh, that's what life's like for you. And even if I try to, I make a lot of assumptions.

And so working out where we fit in can be difficult. Sometimes we forget that and we think that everything we see is how everyone else sees it. But that's not true.

So this is where the pen and paper come in handy. Everyone, let's get it. This is going to be fun. No, it's not going to be that fun. I don't want to oversell it. But we're going to do a self-awareness exercise.

So it might be helpful if you put two columns in where the top one says adding points and the second column says taking away points. I think that will be helpful.

You can do it on your fingers, but I think that's probably easier. There are more pens and papers around if you haven't got one. So I'm going to read out some statements and if it applies to you, I'm either going to tell you to add a point in the add column or to take a point away in the takeaway column.

[ 13 : 22 ] We're only ever going to add or subtract one and that's what's going to make it bearable. Okay? So it should be okay. Okay, so everyone ready to go? So one, if you had the ability and the right qualifications, would you be hired for a job that asked for those qualifications?

Add one point if that's the case. If you've ever been on a family holiday, add one point.

If you were born in the UK, add one point. If you have ever felt like there were no reasonable pictures or characters that represent your racial group, gender group, sexual orientation group, socio-economic class or disability group anywhere in the media, put one point in the takeaway column.

If any of your parents or guardians were educated to degree level, add one point. If you feel comfortable walking home alone at night, add one point.

Or getting home alone. She's in the privilege quiz there. I forget about wheelchairs. How terrible is that? So if you can legally marry the person you love, regardless of where you live, add one point.

[ 14 : 57 ] If either you or your parents have ever gone through a divorce, take one point away. If you've ever been the only person of your race, gender, class or sexual orientation in a classroom or workplace setting or church, please take one point away.

If you felt you had access to healthy food growing up, add one point. If you feel comfortable being emotionally expressive or open, add one point.

Some of them you have to interpret a bit. If you feel comfortable being expressive about your emotions, add a point. If you can go anywhere in the country and find the right kinds of hair products or cosmetics that match your skin colour, add one point.

Even if you don't wear them. Okay. I can see a lot of men raising their eyebrows or plasters, you know, that are the right colour.

If you can access healthcare services and you think that the doctor will believe you if you tell them that there is something wrong with you, add one point. It is debatable.

[ 16 : 16 ] A lot of these are debatable. And, you know, I know with the cues at the moment, I mean, you have to interpret a lot of these. You have to do the best you can. Okay. I'm not going to tell you what the answers are. So, if you have ever been misdiagnosed as having a physical or mental illness or disability, take one point away.

So, if they've got a diagnosis, wrong. If you think, feel confident that your parents would be able to financially help or support you if you were going through hardship, add one point.

I know that some of you along the truth, you can take that one. You don't have to add that one if you haven't got any parents, obviously. So, if you would never think twice about calling the police when you get mugged, add one point.

If you get time off for your religious holidays like Christmas or Easter, add one point. If you have ever been bullied or made fun of on the basis of something you can't change, take one point away.

If there were more than 50 books in your house growing up, add one point. If you can't guess, go for no. Don't try and count them all. If you've ever been offered a job or work because of your association with a friend or family member or someone you know, add a point.

[ 17 : 41 ] If you're able to walk around or move around the world without fear of assault on a regular basis in the daytime, add a point. If your parents have ever worked nights or weekends to support your family, take one point away.

If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or worse violence, add a point. If the primary language spoken in your household growing up was not English, take one point away.

If you came from a supportive family environment, interpret that as best you can. add a point. If you have ever tried to change your speech or mannerisms to gain credibility, take one point away.

If you're embarrassed about your clothes or your house while growing up, take one point away. If when you make mistakes, you worry people will attribute that to your race or gender group or sexuality or class, take a point away.

If you had a job during your school and college years, take one point away. if you've ever travelled outside the UK, add one point.

[ 19 : 12 ] If you ever studied the culture or history of your ancestors in primary school, add a point. if you feel you can buy new clothes or go out to dinner, add a point.

If one of your parents was ever laid off or unemployed not by choice, take one point away. And if you've ever felt uncomfortable about a joke about your race, ethnicity, class, gender, appearance or sexual orientation but felt you couldn't say anything, take one point away.

And that's the end of the quiz. Yay! Now we've got to add them up. Okay, so remember that some of them are takeaway points so don't add those. But yes, okay, so if you kind of add them up in your own time, don't worry, we're not going to do a show of hands at this point.

The lowest possible score is minus 13 and the highest possible score is 23. So basically, if you're over five, you're in the top half. You might not even recognise some of those things that led you to add a point as advantages.

For example, you might assume that if you get mugged, the first thing everyone does is call the police or you might assume that you might not realise that some people are constantly afraid of being beaten up when they're walking around the streets in day, even in nice neighbourhoods.

[ 20 : 47 ] You might assume everyone's been outside the UK or been on holiday or you may assume that the doctor would always believe you if you said that you were in pain. It does depend on the doctor but statistically, this happens worse to some people than others.

Now you may have found your results surprising, you may not. Generally speaking, people who score quite highly, like me, 10 or over, find it surprising and people who score a bit lower find it less surprising because they know all these things happen because they deal with them every day.

And these privileges, these assumptions that you can call the police if you're assaulted, that if you're miscarrying your baby and you say I'm in pain, the doctor will believe you, those assumptions seem so obvious to people like me who have those advantages that we might not recognise that that's not true for everyone.

And I realise that we're all very different, we've all got different advantages but broadly speaking, in Burntwood, what are the privileges that we here have, on average, that other people haven't got?

And what are the areas that we're blind to and not seeing Lazarus starving at our gates? Where are we being the privileged and blind rich man who doesn't see Lazarus and his pain and his privilege?

[ 22 : 08 ] So locally, it is Racial Justice Sunday and I'm going to talk about two big areas where people are suffering. We don't always see their suffering. So the first one won't be a surprise to you.

I know you've talked about it for about 20 years and that's gender-based violence. You may not know this, though probably, if you've been in this church for a while because there are some amazing advocates in this community, you probably do know that the area around here is one of the worst in the country for domestic violence.

I don't know why that is. I think sometimes when you're in a semi-rural area and you can hear less clearly if someone's being attacked, then that can be a bit more difficult.

I guess more can happen behind closed doors when we're more spread out. But that's a huge problem. So what can we do about that? Well, I guess first we need to be able to see it.

I mean, how do you see past someone's closed doors? How do you offer them space to talk? That's a huge question. So I guess that starts with seeing the small things. For example, noticing if your mate keeps picking on their other half in public.

[ 23 : 19 ] It's not joking around to make someone feel small all the time. That can ruin their life. Generally, people also don't say that they're being abused if they're not. So if someone starts to tell you I'm being abused, always believe them as a starting point and work from there.

We're going to come back to that, but I'm just going to talk a little bit about the other big problem in our local area. The other big problem in our local area is racism. Now, of course, I'm not saying this is the only area in the country where this is a particular issue.

In fact, there are other areas, Dorset, where this is much worse. But the statistics show that our area does have a problem. And this is really hard to think about because when we say the word racism, white people like me tend to think, oh no, I'm not racist.

You're talking about people like the Ku Klux Klan. Of course I'm not a member of the Ku Klux Klan. How can you call me racist? But racism is bigger than that. It's no one's fault. We're all born into this whole set of thought structures that let white people profit from the expectation that people who are not white will just give in when they're challenged, submit, not occupy space, don't demand emotional energy.

It's feeling you probably don't need to apologize to worry about not apologizing to not white people. Or if they don't lie down and take it when something happens to them, it's assuming that they are aggressive.

[ 24 : 42 ] It's very hard to see racism as a white person because it means admitting that society is advantaging people like me. But locally, racism is a problem.

So, for example, not white people are six times more likely to be stopped and searched by the local police. So as a reference point, in London, it's only four times. Here, it's six times.

And that's not just because black people are more likely to have drugs or knives. That's not true. Statistically, white people are more likely to carry drugs and knives. So if this was fair, then white people would be slightly more likely to be stopped and searched.

So you can see how unjust that is. And I guess in our local hospital area, one of the big problems that's come out recently is really shocking, actually, is that people who are not white and say, I'm in pain when I'm giving birth, they often refused any painkillers.

And that is a local problem. They're told, no, you must just have a really low pain threshold. Normal people don't need painkillers at that point.

[ 25 : 48 ] These things are happening here in our local police stations and our local hospitals. So racism is a problem locally and it's causing people pain and sometimes it's killing them.

So these two massive, huge problems, domestic violence, racism, how do we deal with them? It's almost impossible as one person to deal with them. But I think you have to start by caring about those problems.

You have to be emotionally invested in dealing with them. We all need to be invested in supporting our local non-white people who are going through a lot and also supporting anyone who might be beaten up by their intimate partner at home.

So where do we start? Let's start with something small because that's such a huge problem it's very difficult to think about. So what do we do when our mates make an off-color joke? That might not seem like a big deal.

I mean, jokes aren't beating people up, right? They're not causing people pain. But I think some of these jokes really normalise the idea that things like hitting your wife are okay.

[ 26 : 52 ] Like, I don't know, some of you are in the local Facebook group Spotted Burntwood and recently there was a joke which went something like this. I think it went, how do you fix a noisy dishwasher?

Because I've tried chocolates and wine. What's next? I saw that one and I think that's quite menacing, isn't it? What's next? But in an area where lots of people are being beaten up at home, it isn't okay to laugh along because these jokes make the idea that making your partner shut up, making your partner emotionally dependent on you, hitting your partner, not encouraging your partner to have an independent life more normal.

So being silent when people are making jokes about making their wife do things or stopping their wife complaining is kind of contributing to this atmosphere where that's okay. Now, calling out your mates or colleagues when they make a joke that's about women or a bit racist can seem really scary and you can worry that you're just going to throw relationships away and I think that's why because sometimes you think, oh no, I've heard a racist joke and now I need to announce why racism is bad.

On average, people know that racism is bad. They know that sexism is bad. So I think the easiest way to do that, especially to call out things that are pretty simple and intended as humour, is just to say, that's not cool.

It's not hard. You can just say, that's not cool. Or, did we really just get there? How did we get there? And to be honest, that's not cool is probably the easiest and most effective response because it just says, that's not okay.

[ 28 : 25 ] And you may say, why am I talking about sexist and racist jokes when we're talking about Lazarus dying in the streets? Well, we live in a very complicated society and we don't make the rules of the society and we're just one person and we're born into all these rules and we can't help it.

But unfortunately, in our society, if you aren't white, if you are a woman, if you're gay, if you come from another country, you are more likely to get attacked on our streets, less likely to get help from the police, less likely to be believed by the doctor if you say you're in pain.

So we live in a society where if you're white and straight and from this country, like most of us, there are some ways in which you're going to be a bit like the rich man. But we don't want to be like the rich man and ignore the problem of Lazarus dying in pain without any food.

We want to be part of God's kingdom on earth, so we need to look at ourselves and our society clearly and do the best we can to stop the racism, sexism, classism and homophobia which is hurting so many people in such a huge way.

And sometimes, just saying no to slightly off-colour jokes can be an important starting point because that joke, when people laugh at it, creates an atmosphere which says, this is okay, it's okay to hit your wife.

[ 29 : 42 ] And if you say, no it's not, then you can make people feel a bit safer. And it may also, if you're the kind of person who says, oh that's not cool, someone might look at you and think, you're someone I could talk to and I don't have anyone I can talk to so I really need someone to talk to.

So it's a way of signalling I'm safe. That, and seeing yourself and the advantages you have in life clearly and other people and the advantages they may not enjoy clearly and doing something about it and remembering that doing something about it is not just important here but it's important to God is I think, what justice is about for me.

The second thing I want to say, so if you see these things clearly you can see that not everyone has the same advantages of you. So for example, let's assume you're judging this race and there's this one person who's running along this nice smooth path and they're going pretty fast because it's a nice smooth path and then you've got this other person who is doing tough mudder.

They're waist deep in mud. Now, if you're judging this race and you say they're going through the same thing we can treat them the same then you would assume that if the guy on the flat plane wins then, you know, that's fair.

Because I want to say that this guy who's wading through the mud which is all up to here you know, he might need a few allowances made for him because it's much harder to run through mud than it is to run on a racetrack.



[ 31 : 08 ] Perhaps the one running through the mud might be ten times stronger and still lose. And I think, you know, not just treating everyone the same, that's not good enough.

I think that's kind of clear if you think about other disadvantages in life. For example, if you said, I'm going to make this really fair, I'm just going to put everything on writing, then that wouldn't be fair for someone who can't read or who's blind.

It wouldn't be just. Sometimes if someone has extra obstacles like this waist-high mud or being blind or dealing with racism or sexism, then we don't do anyone any favours by saying I don't see colour, I don't see your gender.

We don't do any favours by saying you're all going through the same thing, I'm going to treat you the same. We only make it easier for people like me who have less obstacles in front of them if we do that. That's why it's really important to see things clearly and not to pretend you can't see colour or disability or gender because then you don't do the things that those people need to be able to get to the places they need to get to, to take part.

So for example, if I had a table and I put a chair out for everyone and I invite a cafe, that wouldn't be any good to her. She doesn't want a chair, she needs space. When I look at Christ, God present in the human world, and I look at how the world couldn't bear him because he was God and he refused to be powerful in the way that I'm powerful.

[ 32 : 39 ] He didn't uphold sexist imperial power structures which the world has created and recreated for itself since the beginning of time, which make some people powerful by trampling on other people.

Jesus as God offered us a different understanding of what power is, of what a good life is, of what a Messiah is by riding a donkey, not a mighty stallion, of eating with the poor when he had invitations to dine with the cream of society, of being born in a stable, not a palace.

And we, the people of earth, couldn't bear our God to look at our power structures and say, I don't want any of that because we didn't understand it. So we killed our God in one of the most painful ways imaginable.

God's love and power was not trampling, not coercive like the power we see in the forces which make people who are not white, who are not male, who are not straight, who are disabled, afraid of being beaten up on the streets or unable to rely on police or doctors or nurses.

It was not trampling or coercive like the power we see wielded in the world today. God's power was vulnerable which means it can seem to be blotted out by the kind of power that hurts people in the world.

[ 33 : 54 ] And yet, this vulnerable power modeled by God made human in solidarity with the poorest and the weakest is our calling. It's not the right kind of power because it will protect us from knives or guns.

It won't make us rich and it won't make other people do what we tell them to do. It's right because that's the power that God offers in God's life and God's creation is the only way out of all the violent structures and systems of oppression that we as humans make to make us less like God.

So, I believe the most important thing people can do as Christians is to try and follow Christ's example as we saw in the video. To refuse to accept the easy structures which lead the rich in this world to trample on those who are poor and weak.

That's not to say we should seek to suffer like Christ did but we should place our trust in the idea that God will keep us somehow and use that as a way to have the strength to say no to the easy routes in society to the off-collar jokes that involve marginalising other people as best we can.

To use Christ's example to stay alive to the violence of injustice to see the sick are cared for and the hungry are fed as best we can in spite of all the voices that tell us you don't have to do that that's not your job.

[ 35 : 14 ] Okay 21 minutes you can use an inch to time because Peter has never yet the way he rires and is always his will be ill or eliminated people in to least that he rires And he I obviously he know about a he rires