

7. The Kingdom of God: The Heart of Justice

Two transformations at the heart of Christian life: the individual-spiritual-personal and the communal-social-political that are indissolubly linked. Chapter 6 dealt with the first transformation; this chapter covers the second: communal-social-political. The Bible's political criticism and passionate political advocacy are grounded in its understanding of a God of love and justice whose passion for our life together is the Kingdom of God.

A Neglected Emphasis: God's Passion for Justice

We often overlook the Bible's claim that God is passionate about justice and even resist seeing it.

- Christianity was the religion of the dominant culture from Constantine in 313CE until recently. Christianity and the dominant culture were wedded together so Christians seldom engaged in radical criticism of the social order. The Bible's political passion was domesticated.
- "God's justice" is misunderstood as God's deserved punishment of our sins, so we concentrate on God's loving forgiveness "God's mercy". However, in the Bible, the opposite of God's justice is human injustice. The key issue is the shape of our life together.
- In the U.S. individualism is our core cultural value. Although there are many positive to individualism, it obscures the enormous effect of social systems on our lives. Because of the notion (almost worship?) of the "self-made person", we think individuals get what they deserve.
- Thinking we are primarily the product of only our own effort ignores the web of relationships and circumstances that shape our lives. Seeing the social systems deeply affect people's lives is key to understanding the Bible's passion for justice.
- The test of the justice of systems is their impact on human lives: do they lead to human flourishing or to human suffering?

God's Passion for Justice in the Hebrew Bible

The political passion of the Bible goes back to Moses and the exodus (liberation from imperial Egypt) and continues in the prophets of Israel speaking against the oppression by the monarchies of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

"Ancient domination system"—powerful and wealthy aristocracies structure the political and economic systems in their own self-interest. World of Egypt and monarchy. Three features:

- **Politically oppressive.** Ordinary people had no voice.
- **Economically exploitive.** Economic systems purposefully constructed to concentrate the wealth in the wealthiest 1–5% of the population. Peasants (about 90% of the population) lived in poverty, life of subsistence, drastically lower quality of life and life expectancy.
- **Religiously legitimated.** This skewed social order was affirmed as the will of God.

God's Passion for Justice in the New Testament

Passion for God's justice and criticism of domination systems is centrally present all throughout the New Testament.

- **The Kingdom of God:**

Jesus' message centered in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' first words in the earliest gospel, Mark, are "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14) More than one meaning of Kingdom of God: power of God in Jesus; mystical—presence of God; community; kingdom at the end of history. Also, it has a political meaning.

The people to whom Jesus spoke lived in real kingdoms ruled by powerful and wealthy elites. The people heard an immediate contrast between kingdom of Herod or Caesar and Kingdom of God: what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not.

Kingdom of God was for the earth, not the afterlife. In the Lord's Prayer we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth*, as it already is in heaven." Jesus' primary audience was the peasant class. Wealthy elites in the cities; peasant underclass in rural areas, where Jesus spoke.

Lord's Prayer is pointedly about the urgent situations of peasant class. "Give us this day our daily bread" a real concern for those struggling to get food. "Forgive us our debts" (Matthew and *Didache*, an early Christian document) or "Forgive us our sins" (Luke). Even Luke follows that with "for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us". Usually, Christians today understand the "debts" to be "sins" but the people Jesus spoke to heard the literal meaning. Financial debt was a primary survival issue in peasant life. While the Lord's Prayer is not simply a prayer for a more just world, it is not less than that either.

Beatitudes (Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 and Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6) combine Kingdom of God, the poor, and food. Matthew's version is spiritualized version of Luke's ("poor in spirit" vs. "poor" and "hunger and thirst for righteousness" vs. "are hungry"). The coming of the Kingdom of God means food for the hungry. The Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were King.

- **Jesus is Lord:**

This most widespread affirmation has a political meaning as well as a religious meaning. A contrast from Caesar who was also called "lord". To affirm the lordship of Christ is to deny the lordship of Caesar.

Christ and Caesar were both also referred to as "son of God", "savior", "king of kings", & "lord of lords". The titles of Caesar properly belong to Jesus. The lordship of Christ versus the lordship of empire is the same contrast, the same opposition, that we see in the Kingdom of God vs. the kingdoms of this world.

- **Early Christian Perceptions of Empire:**

Early Christians had a very negative perception of the Roman Empire. "Beast from the Abyss", "the Great Harlot", "'R-o-m-a' = radix omnium malorum avaritia = root all evil (avarice) greed" (embodiment of greed in domination

systems is the root of all evil). Although Rome was actually better than most empires, its policies negatively impacted millions of lives: brutal wars of conquest, rich taxed the poor, peasants losing land to large landowners, migration of peasants to cities (life in midst of urban squalor).

- **The Political Meaning of the Cross:**

Jesus was executed by the empire-domination system of his day. Domination system says "no" to Jesus; God says "yes" to Jesus and his vision and "no" to the domination system. Cross embodies path of personal transformation and it indicts the domination systems of this world that are built on power and wealth

Meanings for Our Time

God's passion for justice is as strong in our time as in the time of Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and the New Testament. Broad definition of politics: the shape and shaping of human community, from neighborhood to nations and the world. Politics includes systems of government, economic systems, and conventional systems of beliefs and attitudes. Systems matter. God cares about justice because the God of the Bible cares about suffering. Suffering is primarily caused by unjust social systems.

- **Consciousness-Raising in the Church:**

Unjust social systems shape and affect our lives and other people's lives. Racism, sexism, and homophobia are some examples. Systems affect how we think and perceive ourselves and others.

Systems also affect the material conditions of life. How our economic system affects the lives of people is one of the most important justice issues today. The wealthy elites in our time, as in ancient times, use their power and wealth to structure the economic system in their own narrow self-interest. (The issue is not capitalism vs. socialism, but the particular ways our capitalist system is structured.)

Use of book "Wealth and Democracy" by Kevin Phillips, a Republican, to illustrate this. Phillips' argument:

- Amount of wealth owned by richest 1% is increasing dramatically; and
- Growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few threatens American democracy.

Greater concentration of wealth is not because of individual hard work and effort nor is it a natural, necessary result of a free-enterprise system. Rather, the ever-widening gap is a product of the way our economic system is structured that favors the very wealthy. The very wealthy as a group (there are exceptions) use their political influence to structure tax policy in their own self-interest.

This is a touchy subject for many of us (especially if we are financially comfortable). The issue is not the individual goodness or virtue of the wealthy or the poor. The issue is a systems issue: the structuring of the economic system and whose interests it serves. How are we going to use our wealth and influence? Will we use it to bring about change or to support policies in the narrow self-interest of a few? We need more people like Joanna and Joseph of Arimathea during Jesus's

day: financially comfortable people disenchanted with systemic injustice and committed to the Kingdom of God.

- **Advocacy of God's Justice:**

Taking the political passion of the Bible seriously would mean advocacy of "progressive politics", "a politics of compassion", or "the politics of the Kingdom." A politics suspicious of the ways wealthy and powerful classes use their power and a politics concerned with compassion for "the least of these." Vision of God's passion for the earth: a justice marked by enough bread and freedom from debt, worry, and sorrow.

- **Specific Examples:**

Some examples we may or may not agree with Borg, but still worth thinking about and wrestling with.

- *Health Care:* Taking seriously God's passion for the marginalized would mean enacting a system of health care for the uninsured. The notion that we cannot afford it is ludicrous. The recent tax cut cost more than extending health care to everybody would as did establishing the Department of Homeland Security and the Iraq War. It seems that fear is a more powerful political motive in our society than compassion.
- *The Environment:* Concern for the environment and the non-human world is important both for the long-term self-interest of human beings and because of the biblical understanding of creation. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24:1). We don't own the earth, but stewards who manage that which belongs to somebody else. However, we have treated the earth as it does belong to us and look for only its use for us. God loves the whole creation, not just human beings.
- *Economic Justice:* We not only treat the earth as if it belongs to us as a species, but as if it belongs to some of us much more than to others. A just distribution of God's earth does not mean absolutely equal. Differentials can remain, but it does mean that everybody is to have the material essentials of life, even if some have more. Today, the gap between rich and poor in our nation and in the world is widening dramatically.
- *The Use of Imperial Power:* The United States is the imperial power of the world: military and economic superpower. We can use our power to control the world in our own self-interest, to structure the system so that it serves us, to impose our will on the world. Or we can use it to build up; use our power with the world's well-being in mind rather than primarily our own.

The Iraq War was started because we felt that our security was threatened. This is contrary to all accepted Christian teachings on war (whether Christian pacifism or the "just war" theory). Imperial power and loss of wisdom often go together. It is very difficult for a superpower to be wise, gentle, and compassionate.

Conclusion

We are called to be politically engaged spiritually, combining the two transformations of personal and political at the center of the Christian vision of life as we see it in the Bible and in Jesus. Two vocal groups in Christianity today ("conservatives" and "liberals") emphasize only one of the transformations. The message of Jesus, and the Bible as a whole, is about BOTH transformations. What we see in Jesus and the Bible answers our deepest personal longing, to be born again, and the world's greatest need, the Kingdom of God.

Questions

1. Why are justice issues described in the Bible often overlooked or thought of as too controversial to talk about in most churches?
2. What were the problems of "ancient domination systems" such as Egypt, the Hebrew monarchies, and Rome that the people like Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, other prophets, and Jesus spoke against? Which of those problems apply today?
3. The "Kingdom of God" has many meanings. What is the political meaning of "Kingdom of God" described by Borg? Do you agree with Borg about that meaning? If yes, why? If not, why not?
4. How does the New Testament's view of empire affect how we view what our country is doing today?
5. In this chapter Borg emphasizes the effect of the system on what happens to us. How much do you feel the system plays a role in what happens to us and how much do feel individual effort and actions play a role in what happens to us?
6. Who or what is the object of God's justice or special favor in the Bible? How does that make you feel? Why?
7. Why is it "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God"? How does Borg's discussion about our American political system (in the broad sense of "politics") affect the meaning of this statement of Jesus in Mark 10:25?
8. What do you think the New Testament community would say about the marriage of the dominant culture and national power with Christianity?
9. Borg gives some "hot-button issues" as examples in the advocacy of God's justice. What ones do you agree with him and what ones do you not agree with him? How does your understanding of Christian teachings or experience of Christian actions affect your response to those "hot-button issues"?
10. Is it appropriate to include the Bible's sense of justice in political debates? Why do you feel that way?