

GSM 17/11/13

Deuteronomy 24:10-22

Before we start on this passage, have you noticed how much of this series has been talking about money and possessions? It's interesting isn't it – when the church looks at Christian living it tends to look at things like worship, clean living and matters of sexuality. Although we've only done some of the chapters of Deuteronomy and not all, what's been clear to me is that God puts a far higher priority on matters of money and justice than we normally do.

This morning is another example. It talks of the responsibility of those with money and power to those that don't have money or power. The passage assumes that the Israelites society will be *unequal*, and in that it speaks directly into the state of our country today. For all that David Cameron and George Osbourne like to say that “we're all in this together”, the reality is more stark – the economic troubles are hitting some more than others. Our society has become very unequal. A public figure recently said “We live in a profoundly unequal society. More than almost any developed nation, ours is a country in which your parentage dictates your progress. Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege in England than in any comparable country. For those of us who believe in social justice, this is morally indefensible.” Guesses as to who said that?

[\[picture of Michael Gove\]](#)

So, people in society should be working together to make things more equal, right? Right, but they're not. You've heard me quote from any number of newspaper articles written in the wake of the 2012 London riots – here's one that actually pre-dates them by 2 years. The article was called “Money only makes you happy if you have more than your neighbours”.

This is what it said:

“Dr Chris Boyce, of University of Warwick's psychology department said the study found that relentless pursuit of economic growth would produce a wealthier society but not a happier one. "Making everybody in society richer will not necessarily

increase overall happiness because it is only having a higher income than other people that matters," he said.

Dr Boyce said there was a danger for people to chase the cash at the expense of building strong relationships with family and friends. "If people are putting income and ranking first then other things may get sacrificed such as family and friends," he said.

Dr Boyce said the study raises questions about whether the relentless pursuit of economic growth was a good thing for the nation.

He said more money needed to be put into mental health services in a bid to improve happiness levels."

So, however much we hate inequality in society, it's unlikely that we'll do much about it if we want to always get on over our neighbours. We need help to address this issue. And this passage has plenty to say about God's prescription for dealing with inequality in society. What we'll look at this morning is:-

- Two key principles;
- How we apply them; and
- Why.

Firstly, a bit of background. The people of Israel are about to enter the promised land. In that land there will be those with power and money. Now, this is many centuries BC, so we're not in the realm of people getting lots of money through banking or heavy industry. Whether or not you have power and money usually comes down to whether or not you have **land**. If you had land, you had the means of growing food for yourself and selling to others. You also in a good year had some spare cash which you could lend to others in need. Without any banks the only way of getting a loan was negotiating terms with someone who had spare cash. He would dictate what you needed to provide in terms of security for the loan. That's the situation Moses is speaking into here.

So, Moses lays out two key principles. Firstly, throughout the people of God are instructed to respect and protect the **dignity** of the poor and powerless. So, verses 10 and 11. When you take security from a neighbour, and you take security from him in the form of a pledge, something you hold on to in order to make sure the loan is repaid, then you have power over that person. But he still has dignity – don't barge into his house as if you own it. Wait outside – the fact that you have more money than him does not mean in any respect that he is to be accorded any less dignity than you. Look also at verses 19 to 22 which describes what came to be known as “gleaning”. When you are collecting crops on your land leave some to be harvested by those who have no other means of getting food. Note that the process isn't – gather in the crops and then give some away. God's instructions preserve the dignity of those who are to be fed from the land in enabling them to get what they need by working for it. They are not to be the recipients of charity – instead, they are to have some part in the farming effort, so that they feel that they have contributed to their own feeding.

The concept of human dignity is written throughout the pages of the Bible and it's a key aspect of social justice. There's a tendency when we have wealth to see those who are struggling to survive as in some way to blame, or in some way less worthy than us. You have worked hard for your wealth. These people don't appear to be working at all. That certainly seems to be the theme in many of the TV programmes I've seen recently. But the Bible completely drives a coach and horses through that view. All humans are created in God's image, whether that's someone earning millions in a hedge fund in Mayfair or someone scrabbling a living on a rubbish tip in the Philippines. When God created man he gave him the greatest dignity he could have – of bearing the image of God. Psalm 8 says

“When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?

⁵ You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.

⁶You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet”.

Man is given great dignity by God. What’s clear from the creation story is that man’s ability to work is key to his dignity. Genesis 2:15 states that “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”. Could God not have given man everything he needs? Of course, but he leaves the tending of the garden to man. Man is to work – it is his God-given role. That’s one of the reasons that unemployment is a spiritual problem as well as economic and social problem – it undermines the instructions given to man by God. The ability to work and provide for yourself and your family is key to human dignity. So Moses says, give the poor the means of working to provide for himself and those in his care.

The second principle that comes out here loud and strong is that of **justice**. Now some bits of this passage are obviously about justice. Verses 14 and 15 – don’t take advantage of workers who can’t stick up for themselves. Verse 16 – don’t persecute someone because of his family or where he comes from. Verse 17 – don’t make justice selective, for some and not others.

But when it comes to lending to people, the instructions are all about giving up some of your rights. If you’re holding something as security that the person needs to keep warm at night, pass it back at night. Now, of course, this therefore means that it’s up to you to get it back from the person the next morning, but then you have to give it back the next evening. Doesn’t really work, does it? It’s basically an unsecured loan. You’re giving up some certainty that you’re going to get repaid. You’re being asked to give up your rights to help others. That feels more about generosity than justice.

When it comes to verses 19 to 22, it’s the same thing. You have worked hard to plant crops to the corners of your field to ensure as much of a harvest as you can get. You have tended your olive groves to ensure that each olive tree produces lots of olives. You have pruned your vines and been vigilant against disease destroying the grapes or wild animals taking them. At harvest time why shouldn’t you ensure that all the crops are gathered in, all the olives are collected, or all the grapes picked? What is described in these verses seems perverse – you are meant to be **inefficient** in your harvesting in favour of people who have planted nothing, tended nothing and pruned nothing. It feels very much like what God is

calling the Israelites to is an act of great generosity, in giving up some of the harvest that rightly belonged to the farmer.

It's not generosity that God is calling the Israelites to. It's **justice**. This is what Chris Wright says in his commentary on this passage:-

“To harvest in such a way as to leave no gleanings would be to **deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice**. ... The sense is therefore, “Do not pick the forgotten sheaf, the remaining olives and grapes, *they belong to* the alien, orphan and widow.” The remainder of the harvest is *theirs*; they have every right to do the final harvesting themselves. This means that the landless are not to be totally dependent on handouts from the landowners after every scrap of the crop has been harvested by them. Rather, they are to have the opportunity to work for their own benefit in the fields of God's land. Those who do not, for various reasons, have a share in the *ownership* of the land are still to be given the chance to share in the *blessing* of the land as the bounty of the true landowner.”

This undermines any notion that dealing with the poor from our wealth is a matter of generosity alone. Yes, we are called to be generous, but generosity comes in when justice has been satisfied. We may be familiar with the concept in the Bible of giving a tithe, a tenth of our income away – well, the tithe was to be given from *what was collected* – here God is instructing the Israelites to limit what is collected. It's a two-stage process – satisfy justice, then do your giving.

So, dignity and justice. But how do we apply this today? We don't exist as a nation of farmers and gatherers. We exist as a nation of nurses, teachers, doctors, civil servants, students and so on. We can lend money to people but not many of us would be lending at the level when we start taking security – we leave that to the banks. We need this teaching more than ever given the social injustice in our society and in others around the globe. God's people need to be taking a lead in bringing justice and dignity to the poor and powerless. But how?

I think that's a really interesting question, so I'm going to suggest something. I have three examples as to what it looks like, but there's one of me and lots of you. I know that many of

you know about Fairtrade a lot more than I do. I know that many of you are a lot more creative than I am in devising new ways to bring dignity and justice to the poor and powerless. So here's my Email – simongsm@live.co.uk – and what I am going to suggest is for those of you who have ideas to Email them to me. Those of you in small groups will be discussing this passage – please think through practical ways we can apply this today, and Email them to me. I'll collate them and put them in a document to be uploaded on the website alongside the sermon.

But here are a few ideas. None are exactly what this passage is talking of. Firstly, many of you will know that we for the past few months have been supporting the Tower Hamlets foodbank. That's I guess the nearest we get to gleaning at the moment – we gather food and gather some for others as well. Foodbank's a good thing – if I didn't think so I wouldn't be co-ordinating the efforts here – but it doesn't however tick the dignity box very well: one of the most difficult things for foodbank clients is going for a handout of food. They play no part in its gathering in the way that gleaning process anticipated.

The second example I came across was during half term when I was listening to the programme *The Bottom Line* on Radio 4, when Evan Davies was interviewing some business leaders, one of whom was John Timpson, of the Timpson shoe repair and key cutting shops. He explained how around 10% of his workforce is recruited from ex-prisoners. Evan Davis expressed some surprise that people would hand over their house keys to a convicted burglar, or that the business would allow a thief to take charge of the cash register. John Timpson said that they had had some bad experiences but overall the benefit to society of giving ex-convicts a job outweighed the risks. Around where I work Timpsons has no real competitors in terms of shoe repair and key cutting but if they did then this approach would very definitely cause me to give me business to Timpsons. It's risky, but allows those who would otherwise be excluded from the workplace to recover their dignity.

The third example is an organisation that Jo and I know well called Opportunity International. It's a Christian microfinance charity whose website describes their motivation as the call of Jesus Christ to love and serve the poor, and I've got a little presentation to show you on it.

<http://vimeo.com/78150204>

Maybe some of those examples help give an idea of what implementing this passage looks like. But let's share our knowledge and let's be creative. Let's find other ways of implementing this. Email me. Let's share our thoughts.

I suppose you might very well say – why? We're in a different sort of society than the one then. Now we have social security, we have safety nets that they didn't have. Besides, this is the Old Testament, and we have the New Testament. Well, yes, we do have safety nets now. But could I suggest that the state doesn't have as its prime aim dignity and justice? We need to get involved as our means allow in this area to implement God's plans. We can't outsource that to others.

God commands us to get involved for the same reason we commands the Israelites 3,000 years ago to get involved. Verse 18 and 22 – remember what you were and how God rescued you. God says – you were powerless, you were disenfranchised, you were poor, and God rescued you. You have received grace and mercy when you needed it – now show the same grace and mercy to others. You were undignified and were given dignity in being set free – now show that dignity to others. You were deprived justice until God forced the Egyptians hand – now show justice to others.

We should reflect on what we are or what we were without God. In the letter to the disobedient church in Laodicea, the Spirit writes: “you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked”. Without God we are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. We are utterly shameful, disgraceful, and lacking any dignity. We may not realise it, because look, here we are wearing nice clothes, with a nice smile, but before God, left to our own devices, we are without any dignity whatsoever and in utter shame. Dwell on that for a moment. What does it mean to be in utter shame? Have you ever felt shame for what you have done or what you are? Have you been caught doing something and felt the guilt like a heavy weight? That's usually because we are found out by someone in authority over us or someone we love. Now imagine what it means to be found out by the ultimate authority, the perfect God, whose love is the one love we crave? Have we realised how shameful that is?

Adam and Eve realised. They disobeyed God, and realised that they were naked – undignified. They hid. But God intervened. It says in Genesis 3 that he made them

garments of skin to clothe their nakedness and help them recover their dignity. To make them garments of skin, an animal had to die. The people to whom Moses was speaking in Deuteronomy 24 had experienced God intervening when they lacked justice as slaves. God visited the plagues on the Egyptians to get them to let the Israelites to go, culminating in the death of the firstborn sons of all households. But the angel of death passed over the Israelites households if there was the blood of a lamb on their doorposts. To rescue the Israelites, a lamb had to die.

At the beginning of Jesus's ministry he went to the synagogue in Nazareth. This is what Luke 4 says:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus says – that's what I'm about. Rescuing God's people. Freeing prisoners, setting people free, bringing good news to the poor. Bringing dignity and justice. But to do this, a lamb had to die. In Revelation 7 there is the fulfilment of Jesus's words in Nazareth. There is a picture of a great multitude of people before Jesus's throne. Revelation 7:14 says “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; **they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb**”.

When the Israelites were rescued from the Egyptians, a normal lamb had to die. When we were rescued from the supernatural powers of evil and their hold on our lives, Jesus, the Lamb of God, had to die. Why should we take steps to bring dignity to others? Because Jesus became cosmically undignified to bring us dignity. To allow us to stand before his throne in glory he became on the cross wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. Out of his wretchedness he made us pure and white. Why should we do what we can to bring justice to those in need? Because Jesus suffered injustice to bring us to God, so that we read in the Bible that justice now demands that God accepts Jesus's sacrifice as the payment for all the things we do wrong. We know that we have been rescued by God so we seek a rescue for others. Unless we know how low and wretched we are without Jesus, we won't know how amazing our rescue is. Unless we know how much it cost God to bring us to him, we won't know how amazing our rescue is. But if we grasp those things – if we understand where we have been rescued from and the height, depth and breadth of God's love that sent Jesus to die in our place then our hearts change and we extend a little of the same grace to others. That's the fuel in our tank. So, verse 18 – remember you were slaves and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why God commands us to reach out to others.

Pray

When he shall come with trumpet sound
O may I then in Him be found
Dressed in his righteousness alone
Faultless to stand before the throne

