
The Justice of God

1 Kings 21.1-21, Luke 7.36-8.3

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 13, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The strangest thing about freedom in America is not how invisible it is to a foreigner or how cherished it is by those who live here but how frequently it's portrayed as being under threat. Unlike almost all the countries of the world, America went through the twentieth century without being invaded or living under totalitarian government and left the century with the same constitution with which it entered it. And yet nowhere else is public discourse so saturated with the rhetoric of freedom being in daily peril. When one party looks like being elected, the right of abortion on demand is on the point of being snatched away. When another party looks like being elected the right to bear arms is in dire jeopardy. When America is attacked by an unknown force the President assumes the attack comes from parties who "hate our freedoms."

One feature of American life that fascinates me is the degree to which the law in general – and the constitution in particular, and what might be called the amphitheatre of the Supreme Court – have become the focal point of our culture. We've come to believe that the best place to discover right and wrong, to identify good and bad, and to resolve ambiguity, is legal judgment and the law court. I wouldn't mind guessing that of all the mini-series broadcast on network television over a regular month, more than half include some kind of pivotal courtroom scene. The wonderful dimension of this is the remarkable statement of hope that our diverse culture really can function harmoniously and that rules can emerge to govern this flourishing effectively. The risk is that the attention given to getting the rules right can distract from the fact that a healthy society is always primarily about relationships and only secondarily about rules.

The question that arises is, whether it's ever possible to reach a point that could be called justice. For all the drama and excitement of electing a new President to occupy the White House every four years, it sometimes seems the most significant job a President gets to do is to appoint new members of the Supreme Court. And no one for a moment thinks the President will be impartial. Everyone assumes the President will want to stack the court with like-minded judges. It makes you wonder whether anyone really believes in justice, or if we've all settled for the manipulation of the legal system to get the results we want. But that shouldn't make us cynical. After all, a flawed legal system is a whole lot better than no legal system at all. As Martin Luther King said, "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important."

And that brings us to the story of Naboth's vineyard, read this morning to us from the First Book of Kings. This is a salutary story of what happens when there's no justice and the powerful get to crush those who stand in their way. Ahab is king of the northern territory of the land of Israel. Beside his palace lies a vineyard, and Ahab wants to purchase it. But Naboth adheres to the ancient property laws of Israel, by which land cannot be transferred from one household to another. So he refuses. Ahab sulks on his bed. But his wife Jezebel says, "What kind of a king are you?" She sends instructions to the nobles in Jezreel, instructing them to have Naboth lynched. The nobles obey Jezebel's instructions to the letter, and in no time the vineyard belongs to Ahab.

On the face of it, the story of Naboth's vineyard is a precise illustration of Martin Luther King's point. If there's no law, or at least no law-enforcement, there's nothing to keep someone from lynching me, and that does seem pretty important. In a society where the king and queen have unbridled power, justice is an early casualty. Of course the kingdom of Israel was not, in fact, a lawless society. There *was* a law, and that law was the covenant made between God and Moses at Mount Sinai, a covenant designed to help Israel keep the freedom God had given her by bringing her out of the land of Egypt. And because Israel was always in danger of ignoring or forgetting the covenant, God sent prophets to remind the people of their story and restore their faithfulness. One of those prophets was Elijah. Elijah pays a visit to Ahab as he's sitting in the vineyard that so recently belonged to Naboth. And Elijah speaks God's justice to Ahab as only an Old Testament prophet can: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood."

So the bad guy doesn't get away with it. But this is a rather depressing portrayal of justice. It's depressing for several reasons. Number one, justice appears to have no preventative power. It can't stop people doing terrible things to one another – only punish them for doing so. Number two, it seems that any system of law-enforcement is only as effective as the force that lies behind it. And that makes justice little more than a grand word for the exercise of power. Number three, justice doesn't do the one thing that Naboth's family really want and need it to do – and that is, restore the life of Naboth himself. Justice can identify the transgression, justice can pass sentence, justice can ensure punishment, justice can stop the wrongdoing: yet justice can't heal, can't restore, can't reconcile, can't genuinely make anything better.

But there's a lot more going on in this story than a gruesome tale of ruthless oppression and its just deserts. Let's look for a moment at what this story is really about. It's really an Israelite horror show.

In the first place, look at the way Ahab rehearses all the sins of the Old Testament. Like David with Bathsheba, Ahab takes what is not his and arranges the death of the one who stands in his path. Like Cain with Abel, Ahab attacks his brother out of jealousy and impatience. Like Adam with Eve, Ahab takes the fruit of the vineyard when it is evidently God's will for him not to do so. The story of Naboth's vineyard is all of Israel's sins in one go.

Then, look at how this story represents Israel choosing slavery over freedom. The vineyard is a frequent metaphor for Israel. But we only hear the term "vegetable patch" on one other occasion in the Old Testament, and then (in Deuteronomy) it refers to Egypt. So Ahab's desire to turn Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable patch is a symbol of Ahab's intent to take Israel back to the conditions of slavery in Egypt. When Ahab kills Naboth and takes possession of the vineyard, what we're supposed to recognize is an ironic echo of exactly what Israel did under Joshua in driving out the Canaanites and taking possession of the Promised Land.

And on top of that notice how in this story injustice is portrayed in the disordering of relationships. First, the relationship with the land. Naboth understands his own land to be like the Promised Land, a gift in trust from God that can't be sold on. Ahab by contrast sees land as a transferable commodity. Second, the relationship with the king. Israel saw the monarchy as a gift of trust to help the people embody the will of God. Ahab saw the throne as a mechanism for him to acquire anything he wanted by force. Third, the following of instructions. Elijah has already been shown to follow God's orders to the letter. When in this story the nobles of Jezreel follow the behest of the Gentile Queen Jezebel to the letter, we're being shown that she has become their God. Israel has completely lost the plot.

So this is what the story of Naboth's vineyard is comprehensively showing us. Justice unravels when we lose sight of who we are in relation to God, and, once justice has had a great fall, it's a tall order to put it back together again. I wonder if you yourself have been close enough to an experience of justice or injustice to feel the profound pain of this story. Maybe you've been the victim of cruelty or crime and no legal attempt to make amends can ever truly address the repercussions and the damage. Maybe you yourself have done something seriously wrong and don't know how you can ever restore the relationships and the trust. Maybe you have been close to someone who's been some part of this spiral of justice and injustice, and you've seen how lives can be wrecked as if visited by a tornado, and how seldom the criminal justice system really makes things better.

There really is only one thing that can make things better. There really is only one thing that can make any difference in a situation where you can't bring Naboth back. There really is only one thing that can prevent an act of merciless force and the crushing of an innocent life turn into a spiral of retribution, a vendetta of vindictiveness and a cascade of vigilante revenge. And that single thing is forgiveness.

Today there are plenty of dispossessed Naboths and plenty of unjust Ahabs on which to focus our reflections. When we see Naboth die we tend to push forgiveness back till later. We're outraged by the lynching. We're full of horror about the way Ahab treats land and law and liberty. We're worried about seeming naïve or soft or being powerless to stop Ahab and Jezebel doing it all over again to someone else. In short, we push forgiveness aside because we think it will get in the way of justice. So we charge in with our own version of justice. And we get so consumed with that version of justice that we never get round to the forgiveness part. And in the process we forget the gospel just as much as Ahab forgot the covenant.

Put the Naboth story alongside today's gospel reading for a moment. Jesus is in the house of Simon the Pharisee. A woman comes in whom everyone knows to be a sinner. She bathes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Simon is furious. Jesus turns the tables on Simon. He points out the multiple ways in which Simon has been rude to him. Jesus says there's only one thing to be done with wrongdoing, whether it's a sin of commission done to another, like the woman's, or a sin of omission done to oneself, like Simon's. And that's forgiveness.

Forgiveness shouldn't be the last thing Christians have to say in the face of injustice. It should be the first thing. Forgiveness says, "You can hurt me, but you can't take away my allegiance to Christ. You can be cruel to me, but you can't make me become like you. You can crush me, but you can't put yourself outside the mercy of God."

Why do we forgive? Because we don't want to turn into creatures of bitterness locked up in the past, and we don't want to be given over to a hatred that lets those who've hurt us continue to dominate our lives. Why do we forgive? Because unlike Simon we know we're sinners too and we can't withhold from others the forgiveness we so desperately need for ourselves. That's why in the Lord's Prayer we say "Forgive us ... as we forgive those..." Why do we forgive? Because Jesus in his cross and resurrection has released the most powerful energy in the universe and we want to be part of it and be filled with it. Why do we forgive? Because we know that every form of justice, all the systems for setting things straight, have failed. Why do we forgive? *Because Jesus is dying for us to forgive.* Jesus is dying for us to stop our shame and secrecy and beg for forgiveness. Jesus is dying for us to end our enmity and hard-heartedness and offer the hand of mercy. Jesus is dying for us to forgive. Why do we forgive? *Because forgiveness is the justice of God.*

Forgiveness is the justice of God. That's why a society that has forgotten how to forgive can never be truly just. Because the best that justice can do is to set the stage for forgiveness. Justice can't make things right. Even forgiveness can't make things right on its own – it takes repentance, it takes reconciliation, it takes making amends, it takes healing. But all of these start with forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't the end of the process. It's the beginning. Forgiveness is the Christian word for justice.

The lesson of Naboth's vineyard is that in the end there's only one kind of injustice. All Ahab's sins come down to one. The fundamental injustice is that Ahab fails to honor God. Ahab forgets who God is and what God is really like. Failing to honor God is, in the end, the real injustice from which all other kinds come. And here's the Christian version of that injustice. We forget that God's character is fundamentally about forgiveness. Because when Christ entered the story of the vineyard, he didn't become a better version of Ahab. He became Naboth. He was condemned on trumped up charges. He was lynched. But his justice was to pray, "Father, forgive." And his resurrection showed that God's forgiveness really does make things better in a way that our justice cannot.

If only we were a people known by everyone for forgiveness. But we're not. We're known for being obsessed with the law. If only what we were renowned for was forgiveness. That's what Jesus is dying for. Because forgiveness is the justice of God.