

Social Services Sunday
St. Paul's, Milford
Sunday 26 July 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

The church sets today aside as Social Services Sunday to remind us of - and to call us to pray for - the work of our social service agencies. In the case of this diocese we are referring to the 'big three': the Auckland City Mission, the Selwyn Foundation and the Anglican Trust for Women and Children. However, there are other groups at work. One of them is Seasons, the grief and loss programme. On top of that there are many local parish-based care programmes. The work of these agencies is well-known to you. The Selwyn Foundation supports our Selwyn Centre as well as running all those retirement villages. We all know of the City Mission and today we support their work through our One Can: Two Can appeal. Seasons of course is well known here. Megan Bowden is the coordinator for Seasons for the whole of the North Shore. It's important that we should recognise the work that's being done, to support it, to learn about it. And to be honest we should be very proud of it.

But today is more than that really. Today puts in front of us the truth that social service – caring for others – is right at the heart of the Christian faith, right at the heart of the Gospel, right at the core of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Today we have a selection of readings that make this very clear.

The Book of Micah, hard to find, easy to miss, it's very short, includes those powerful words:

*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?*

In the same way, in the same prophetic tradition, the prophet Amos proclaimed:

*Let justice roll down like waters
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Words we should memorise and keep in front of us day by day.

Words that have been used by powerful speakers like Martin Luther King. In his famous 'I have a dream' speech:

*I have a dream that my four little children will live in a nation where they
will be judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their
character.*

Earlier on he had declared:

No, no, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Then we have the reading from the Epistle of James; that very different epistle. Full of practical religion. Full of works rather than faith. It nearly missed being included in the New Testament. Dismissed by the Reformer Martin Luther in the 16th century as an 'epistle of straw', but nevertheless a valuable corrective: *Faith by itself if it has no works is dead*. You will remember that just before that he wrote:

If a brother or sister lacks food and one of you says, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill" and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, then what's the good of that?

The Reformers were very concerned to make the point that doing things, good things, isn't enough. You won't find salvation that way. They're reacting against the medieval distortions. Paying a sum of money to gain salvation. Making a monetary contribution to the church and thereby diminishing the time you were to suffer in Purgatory for remission of your sins. And so they taught faith not works. Have faith, that's more important.

But James reminds us to keep the balance. Believing and Behaving. Faith and Works. Spirituality and Practical Deeds. Both/and, rather than either/or.

Moving on, let's not forget today's psalm. The key verse:

*May the king defend the cause of the poor among the people:
save the children of the needy and crush the oppressor.*

Notice that it's not a command to the religious leaders (although they're not excused) but an appeal to the king, to the rulers, the leaders of the state, that each of them: *may judge your people rightly and uphold the poor with justice*.

The prophets, the psalmists, the wisdom writers, had a very wide agenda. They spoke not only to the church, but to the state. They didn't carve life up into compartments, one labelled 'religious' and the other 'secular'. And they didn't only speak in high falutin' words, but sometimes addressed down to earth issues. Take this verse from Proverbs:

*A false balance is an abomination to the Lord,
but an accurate weight is his delight.*

In other words, don't fiddle with the scales!

The Book of Leviticus widens it even further:

You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin (the ephah and the hin were units of dry measuring). I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances and observe them. I am the LORD.

And immediately before that some teaching about refugees and aliens and new citizens:

When an alien resides with you in your land you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

All of this brings to mind some words, very familiar words, about the sort of society we should be looking for.

The measure of a civilisation is how it treats its weakest members.

The funny thing about those words is that nobody knows who first used them. Pope John Paul II, Dr Samuel Johnson, Mahatma Gandhi and Dietrich Bonhoeffer all used similar words and all expressed similar sentiments. But maybe that adds to their significance.

Finally, the teaching of Jesus; the sheep and the goats.

When I was hungry, when I was thirsty, when I was sick, did you visit me, feed me? When I was in prison, when I was naked, when I was a stranger.

Some of our hymns today reflect on these words.

But for the moment let's skip the details. Just notice that there are two situations, two scenarios.

The people, the nations, gathered before the Lord.

To the first lot he says, *I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink and so on.*

But they reply, *When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food? When did that happen?*

Aha, replies the king, just as you did it to the least of my brethren you did it to me.

But to the second lot the Lord says, *I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink ... but you gave me nothing.*

They explained, *but we didn't see you in need. If we had then we'd have helped you.*

And the Lord replied, *Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least in the kingdom you did not do it to me.*

So they were cast into eternal damnation.

The second group failed because they showed no compassion.

The first group failed because they did not see that in helping their neighbour they were in fact helping their Lord.

Summed up in one verse in the middle of the passage:

Just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family you did it to me.

That is the core to this passage. That's what drives the City Mission; that's what drives our social services. Seeing Christ in others. Seeing Christ in that beggar, that person queuing up at the food bank, that child turning up at school with an empty stomach. Not always easy. Not always easy to make the connection. But try we must.