

John the Baptist (July 14,2024)

That's not fair! Most of us, at some point when we were very young, said just those words. When we were somewhat older and more acquainted with the way of the world, we probably said to someone at some time, life's not fair. What is not fair, what is unjust has been with us from the beginning. Although even a small injustice stings, too many are caught up in larger moments of what is unjust, sometime grievously unjust. Speaking the truth is often what brings furious opposition, even violence upon the one who brings forth the truth.

Amos spoke the truth and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, conspires against him so that Jeroboam the king would threaten Amos and tell him to flee for his life.

John spoke the truth to Herod and it inspired in Herodias a deep and violent hatred against himself. Herod's arrest of John saved him from Herodias' desire to kill him – but only for awhile. Too often evil, injustice, finds a way in, a willing someone, to accomplish its purpose.

Today in the gospel, we hear of a dance. A dance deliberately sensual before a group of men gathered for a banquet to honor King Herod on his birthday. Although it is highly unlikely the young woman was his daughter, she probably was his grandniece. It would have been most unlikely and highly inappropriate for any female relative of King Herod to dance before male guests. But dance she did. Herod drunk with lust and wine makes a foolish promise and offer. He offers whatever she wants, then again offers, with exaggerated extravagance,

whatever she wants – up to half his kingdom. Which of course he could not give and which obviously, he does not imagine that she would dare ask for that.

She does ask for something he does not want to give – but it is too late to rescind his promise. She wants the head of John the Baptist on a platter. John the Baptizer will be beheaded to save Herod from looking weak and foolish by failing to keep his stupidly given promise. He is torn between his perplexed interest in John's words that intrigued him, and his unwillingness to fail before his guests. The scripture says he liked to “listen” to John. It is a bit sickening to think of Herod going down into the prison to listen to what John might say to him; Herod being both drawn to and put off by John, enjoying the intrigue of it even as John suffers the conditions of prison.

In the Greek, what we heard as “feared him” in regard to how Herod reacts to John. It would be more accurately translated from the Greek as “was in awe of him” and explains a bit better why Herod kept John alive – although imprisoned. Nonetheless, desire for approval in the eyes of his “courtiers, officers, and leaders of Galilee is stronger than his desire to keep John alive. *Justice and injustice so often can hang on no more than a few words thoughtlessly spoken.* John will die a grisly and lonely death, lonely but not alone for God is present. John is killed while above him in the banquet others are eating, drinking, and enjoying themselves.

Justice, seldom discussed in the ordinary flow of daily living, is thought of as a lofty ideal - distant from the nitty gritty of day-to-day reality. Justice may be spoken of cynically, or with indifference, or as unattainable and so pursued only by the hopelessly optimistic or foolish. Worse, although justice is required and

possible, it may be discarded for the sake of expediency - to gain something seemingly more desirable. Pilate said to Jesus, “what is truth?” With a shrug of the shoulders, it seems the question frequently asked now is, “what is justice?” - asked with the same avoidance of responsibility.

Throughout the scriptures justice is of keen interest to God. Before Aristotle, before Plato, the prophets speak of justice frequently in the stories of God’s people in conflict with neighbors, within their own society, and person to person. Much is said of injustice and the need for justice.

God is spoken of as a just God; justice and mercy are attributes of God. Human beings also have an intrinsic desire for justice – a gift from God to humanity, that we should desire justice. Observe and listen to children in their interactions. Even the littlest ones. They have a keen sense of justice, among themselves, and observe closely if adults are just. It may weaken over time as in adulthood we make one compromise after the other, but there remains in the heart a need and a desire for justice, whether for ourselves or for others.

The prophet speaks for the Lord God: Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”; Micah, “...What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” These words speak directly to our heart and conscience.

It so easy to act without justice, to breeze by what we know to be just for the sake of our convenience. Injustice, no matter how small, is still injustice. Like all sin, it builds upon itself and spreads, one injustice allowing for another.

We know that justice is not always sharply defined – on the playground or in the courtroom. Judgement, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are a part of the justice we are to strive for. From Deuteronomy 16:20, “Justice, justice you shall pursue...” God’s people are commanded to pursue the establishment of a just society – something they must do together. Something that we must continue to do together - for the love of God.

Justice done pleases the heart, pleases the soul. There is profound satisfaction when justice prevails in matters large and small. What then are we doing to further justice in our home? In our community, and in the world? Justice begins in the heart and in the home. Be just in all your relationships - with your children, your spouse, all your family, and in your dealings with others.

An injustice is remembered a long time. You may remember one you experienced not just last year or a few years ago, but even one from your childhood. Justice done is also remembered for a long time and brings great effect with it. “When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers.” Proverbs 21:15

Strive to be just in all things large and small, in your home, in your work, in the community – and in the church. For the love of God, let justice roll down like waters.... Amen.