The Five Marks of Mission – sermon 4

**To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation**

Amos 5: 21-24 and Luke 4:14-21

Its lovely to be near a school playground at playtime. The children, released from incarceration, zoom around the playground in noisy exhilaration and shouts of joy and freedom. But soon, especially if you are a playground supervisor, you will hear a shrill “its not FAIR”.

How true that is! Throughout our lives, Its Not Fair. Thats life. Its not fair. Today you will be pleased to know there is only one more in this series. The fourth mark of mission of the church is to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation. Quite a task and quite a mouthful! It doesn’t seem Fair!

But WHY should this be a mark of mission?

Isn’t it enough to proclaim the gospel and to know that the power of the redeeming work of the Holy Spirit will change people? Lots of evangelicals believe that and in honesty, so did I. Only God can change hearts and make people right with Him, fit for life with Him. Isn’t that the most important mark of mission?

Or what about the opposite view which says that if you give a person or a family somewhere decent to live they will become decent people? Isn’t that what we need in our society? I have witnessed the slum clearances in East Manchester and the new concrete jungles that replaced them. The people are much the same...only God can change the heart.

Isn’t there a middle way? Of course, you say. You can’t tell a starving man about Jesus. Or rather you can but he cannot hear you and cannot respond. Same if he is trapped in an unjust system or denied access to education because he’s black. First give him food, fight for justice for him, then he can hear about Jesus. Of course, you say. Common sense and its been done by aid agencies for ages. But what about when the whole system is wrong?

We need to pause and look at some of the things Jesus said. Remember, he lived in a country under an oppressive Roman rule whose purpose was the enrichment of Rome.

I have long been puzzled by Jesus’ proclamation early in his public ministry. It was the same as John the Baptist. ‘The Kingdom of God is near’. Why did Jesus preach this, the same as John even when he was there and baptised by John? The answer is obvious. The Kingdom is near but it hadn’t come at that point. The next question follows. Has the kingdom come? When? What makes the difference? The difference is His resurrection. The bodily resurrection of Jesus into our world, his creation.

We know we are citizens of His Kingdom. We are those who believe the old order of sin and death has been broken by Jesus. We believe we have entered into eternal life by faith that Jesus bore our sins on the cross. Death was the consequence for him but he rose victorious over the old order of sin and death. Thats when the Kingdom came. What happened? Everything and nothing. Jesus has done everything that was needed to be done to secure our salvation and his Kingdom, but until he returns to claim his crown in the new heaven and earth we live in those famous inbetween times. BUT we have our citizenship AND the Holy Spirit living and working in us. So we live as ambassadors for Jesus in word and action. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus victory and salvation and working in the world according to the new order of things.

Working for our God and Lord so our lives and our world reflects the character of the King. So, at last, I hear you say we have come to the point. We work for justice for He is a God of Justice, we work for peace because He is the Prince of Peace, we work for reconciliation because we have been reconciled with our creator and so on in health, education and food and water.

Theologian Tom Wright says, ‘I don’t know how our work for justice for the poor or remission of world debt or for mitigation of climate crisis will appear in the New world, BUT I know that Gods new world of Justice, of Joy, of Hope for the whole earth was launched when Jesus came out of the tomb that Easter morning. AND I know that he calls his followers to live IN Him and by the power of the Holy Spirit to be new creation people here and now.’

Precisely because Jesus rose from the dead in this world, Gods new world has ALREADY broken into our world. Christian work for justice in the here and now whether in debt relief or ecological responsibility and all the other justice related activities is Kingdom work, hand in hand with proclaiming the good news of Jesus. In fact its part of the same telling.

All very interesting. Hmm I hear you say. Another thought to keep you interested: I have struggled to try and understand why we have been so apparently unsuccessful in our proclamation of the Gospel. I am sure its got a lot to do with whether we are regarded as relevant or not.

Maybe our apparent silence over justice issues has something to do with this. (Our neighbours could say Why bother about Jesus? Christians don’t speak out on issues that worry me) Think back to that playground. Life isn’t fair. But we all know it could be better. So many structures in our society are inherently unfair. Its wrong that where you live and go to school affects your life chances, even your chance of staying out of prison. I could go on. Justice is not about law enforcement or more bobbies on the beat. Justice is about equality. All people are born equal and carry the image of their creator and need an equal chance to live well and to seek and find salvation in Jesus. You can’t if the bond of oppression, if the struggle to survive, is so burdensome. No-one is more equal than others and yet our society is riddled with haves and have nots. The haves have the power to maintain the status quo and yet in many cases WE are the haves. Or again, God loved the world so much he sent his son to give us all a new start. Not just those of us who have been blessed to hear of and receive His love, but all people, those who we may think don’t deserve his love and those so burdened and entrapped that they cannot see or receive him. If we lift some of those burdens they will have the chance to see and can choose. So it seems to me essential that we are not silent on issues of justice, that we are active in the world to reduce suffering, oppression, injustice and slavery of all sorts. As Caroline reminded us last week, we are His hands and feet. What does this mean for us here and now?

Caroline gave a clue in suggesting we look around and see what interests us and moves us. We are all different and what moves me may not move you but I would hope you may see the justice of each issue and be able to support and pray for that issue as well as your own. The choice is distressingly huge. So, take your pick. Here are some choices- the tip of the iceberg: Human trafficking to feed the sex trade or underfunded schools. Postcode lotteries for health or Black Lives Matter. Aggressive advertising for more Stuff or easy access to online gambling. UK immigration and asylum rules and refugee holding centres or UK prison conditions. Delays in our criminal justice system or environmental greenwash. Affordable housing or Fair Trade. Access to clean water or homelessness. I think the Church should be involved in all these and more. As a hand, foot, nose or mouth what will you help change?