

Love and Justice

Mark 11:15-19

INTRODUCTION

In one of Robert Bolt's plays, *A Man For All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More is beheaded for protesting against the cruelty and dishonesty of King Henry VIII. Another character named "Common Man" appears in the play, portraying several "safe" roles. In the last speech of the drama, following More's death, Common Man comes to the center of the stage and says:

I'm breathing . . . Are you breathing too? It's nice, isn't it? It isn't difficult to keep alive, friends—just don't make trouble—or if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that's expected. Well, I don't need to tell you that. Good night. If we should bump into one another, recognize me.

We all recognize the Common Man in ourselves. We don't want to make trouble, we don't want to get involved. It is so much easier to go along with the status quo. But something else stirs within us, also. There is a sense of justice that arouses our anger when we see tyranny and oppression. "Unfair!" we cry. The will to be a person of integrity and defend those who are the victims of injustice is one of our greatest strengths. It is also an essential part of authentic Christian discipleship.



*Men of Justice, by Honore Daumier. Drawing, 19th century.
(Translation of legend: "You lost your case, it's true . . . but
you had the pleasure of hearing me plead it.")*

COMMENTARY

We cannot fully appreciate the prophetic nature of Jesus' ministry apart from his Old Testament heritage. As previously noted, all the major prophets of the Hebrew tradition vigorously protested against the suffering caused by the injustice of the society in which they lived. More often than not, the "love of money" was the root of the problem. We have already discussed one of the passages in Isaiah where God demands justice for the poor: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bond of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isaiah 58:6-7) In the eighth century B C. the prophet Amos was stirred by the oppression which was undermining the society in which he lived: "They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes— they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted . . . you cows of Bashan . . . who oppress the poor, who crush the needy . . . you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate . . . let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 2:6-7;4:1;5:12,24) A century later, Jeremiah took up the refrain, "Wicked men are found among my people . . . their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things?" (Jer. 5:26-29)

Against this background it is easier to experience the impact of the sermon Jesus preached in Nazareth soon after his baptism. (Luke 4:16-30) He began by reading a passage from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim

the acceptable year of the Lord.” (Isaiah 61:1-2) Following the reading, Jesus began his sermon with the words, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The people of the village heard this as a Messianic claim and reacted with contempt and hostility. Then they were “filled with wrath” when Jesus used two illustrations from the Hebrew tradition of prophets who were not honored by their own people. In their anger, they put him out of the city and tried to throw him down a precipice to his death, but he managed to escape from them.

It is important to include this incident in the picture of Jesus’ life and ministry. We often correctly think of him as a “gentle” person who was filled with compassion for those who were suffering. But he was also a powerful prophetic figure who protested against injustice and acted to set at liberty those who were oppressed. The outstanding example of this side of his nature occurs near the end of his life when he cleansed the temple.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for what turned out to be the last week of his life, he began to act out in symbolic ways his ideas about the rule of God and about his own Messianic ministry. The first of these symbolic acts occurred when he rode into the city on a donkey while the people shouted, “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Mark 11:1-10) This whole affair was carefully planned by Jesus to symbolize the true nature of his mission. The prophet Zechariah had predicted the entry of the Messiah into Jerusalem as one who would not come as a triumphant military hero, but as a man of peace, not riding on a war-horse or chariot, but on a donkey. (Zech. 9:9) By deliberately acting out this prophecy, Jesus proclaimed in the very heart and home of Israel that he was the Messiah, but a Messiah without arms or army, a Messiah humbly following the road of the “Suffering Servant” of the Lord.

When Jesus arrived at the temple he found that the spirit of worship had been replaced by commercialism and materialism. The court of the Gentiles, the only court the Gentiles could

enter, had been entirely secularized. Sacrificial animals were sold there, including doves for offerings by the poor, and foreign money was exchanged for coins acceptable in temple offerings. How could anyone be expected to pray there? Moreover, a great deal of dishonesty accompanied the whole process. According to John, Jesus used a whip of cords as he "began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons." Citing Isaiah (56:6-8) and Jeremiah (7:11), Jesus protested the greed and commercialism which had turned the house of prayer into a den of robbers.

Some interpreters believe that Jesus was acting "in the sheer force of his heart's anger" because of the desecration of holy things. Men and women had lost the sense of the presence of God in the very house of God. This is part of the explanation, but the anger was accompanied by a deliberate desire to symbolize the Messiah's coming to purge the religion of Israel of its materialism and commercialism. Was he acting out the words of Malachi? "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple but who can endure the day of his coming for he is like a refiner's fire . . . he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord." (Malachi 3:1-3)

The cleansing of the temple sealed the fate of Jesus. It was a direct challenge and threat to the religious leaders. Through this event Jesus challenged their prestige and leadership, and threatened their material security. These wealthy priestly families, who depended on the income from the temple, were infuriated and joined forces with the other enemies of Jesus. They were afraid to arrest him during the day because of his popularity with the crowds, but they resolved to find a way to destroy him.

The incident tells us a great deal about the nature of the Christian life. The compassionate love which is universally accepted as an attribute of the Christ-centered life is not enough. Compassion must be accompanied by the "tough love" which

protests against injustice and oppression. According to Henri Nouwen, "You are Christian only so long as you constantly pose critical questions to the society you live in, so long as you emphasize the need of conversion both for yourself and for the world, so long as you in no way let yourself become established in a situation of seeming calm. so long as you stay unsatisfied with the status quo and keep saying that a new world is yet to come." This means that we not only bind up the wounds of those who have been hurt by "the system." We also do what we can to change the system so that others will not be hurt. It is important to know that a ministry devoted to seeking justice for the oppressed will not be popular and may even be dangerous. Jesus warned us to count the cost before leaving everything to follow him.

One of the striking things about the temple-cleansing incident is that it reminds us of the way in which so much injustice is grounded in economics. Our lives are determined more by economic factors than most of us realize. Our money is very important to us. The love of money is strong even in those of us who believe that we have no problem with it. By taking seriously the biblical teaching on the importance of economic factors in our lives, we could alleviate much of the world's suffering!

There are two ways in which we can do this, both symbolized in this incident. First, the way we *protest* against injustice is important. Jesus is the model for us in this regard. He took vigorous action to protest about the situation and to change the conditions which created the injustice. Second, the way we *participate* in the system is also important. One of the striking things about this event is that the sellers *and* buyers were driven from the temple. It is not only a matter of being honest in the way we make our money. We need to recognize that through our purchasing and investing we may be supporting and perpetuating a dishonest system, thus contributing to the suffering of others.