

“JUSTICE!”
Psalm 146:1-10

The demonstrations last week in Genoa, as heads of government were meeting to discuss the economic business of the world – demonstrations that were just the latest in a long line of violent and non-violent protests – are a stark reminder to us of the frustration that many people feel with the way in which our world is run. The film by John Pilger, *The New Rulers of the World*, which was screened on ITV the previous week (an oasis of proper television reporting in a desert of utter populist rubbish on all five channels at the moment) was also a powerful indictment of the current inability or, more likely, unwillingness of the powerful and influential in business and government to do anything at all to eradicate the appalling inequality and injustice that is everywhere apparent in our world today.

And, if you listen to the news bulletins and read the newspapers, it doesn't take long to see that what is happening in our world now is really only a hi-tech re-run of the cycle of injustice, oppression and prejudice that has marked the progress of so-called civilisation since history began. From time to time someone will have a go at tackling the injustice that is so evident in our world – and whatever else you might think of people like Adam Smith, Karl Marx and J M Keynes, they were at least starting from the point of trying to engage with what they saw as being wrong with the world – but their solutions either moulder in the theoretical works they write or become corrupted as they try to put them into practice. All such attempts at justice turn out to be ephemeral and ultimately fruitless. Very often the reactions they provoke end up being worse than the original – as we see in the case of people like Stalin and Hitler and Somoza and Mugabe.

And yet people are still taken in by them, aren't they? Men and women still put their trust in the rich and the powerful and the influential. We still think we should give them one last chance, that the development of democracy or market economics or humanitarian concern – so much more advanced now than it used to be, now that we are “coming of age” – will mean that finally there will be justice and equity and righteousness for all. Even if you were naïve enough to believe that before, John Pilger's film would have put the last nail in the coffin of that utopian dream. George Adam Smith, the biblical scholar (not to be confused with Adam Smith the economic theorist) wrote: “*To trust in fleeting power is madness; to trust in the Eternal King is wisdom and blessedness.*” And he wrote those words in his comments on the Psalm we've just read, *Psalm 146*.

This Psalm is saying that there is no point putting your “*trust in princes*” (v3). By “*princes*” here we are to understand “influential”, those who hold the reigns of power in economic and political terms. They are mere mortals and cannot really bring about salvation. Once they die, their ideas and ideals die with them.

Another will come along and try to impose his (usually his, rather than her) way. You don't need a degree in history to see how true that is. In the book of *I Maccabees* (one of the books in the Apocrypha, which are not considered to be inspired in quite the same way as the Old and New Testaments) we read these words about the Greek ruler Antiochus in 2:62,63: "*Do not fear a wicked man's words: all his success will end in filth and worms. Today he may be high in honour, but tomorrow there will be no trace of him, because he will have returned to the dust and all his schemes will have come to nothing.*" To trust in such a person is, indeed, "*madness*". It's folly to expect that the next person who comes along promising peace and justice is going to be any more successful than the last – or, indeed, any of his predecessors.

So what are we to do? This seems a very depressing prospect for us and for our world. In fact, it's more depressing for the rest of the world than for us, because we do very well out of the continuing injustice that ruins the lives of most of the population of the developing world. On whom can we rely for righteousness to prevail? Where can we turn to find a foundation for our faith and our action? Well, those who put their trust in princes are the fools, but the blessed are those who rely on God.

"*Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,*" writes the Psalmist. Look at the **God of history**, the God who chose and equipped and helped Jacob. Although mortal men and women down through the centuries have come and gone, although they have tried and failed, God has kept faith with his people, God has shown himself to be reliable, steadfast, unchanging. His righteousness has triumphed so often and in so many ways. The Bible is part of the record of that faithfulness, and in its pages we read of the ways in which he continually brought about his purposes for humankind. But since the time of the Bible, through the twenty centuries since John put the final full stop at the end of *Revelation* and the councils of the church gathered the books together, history has continued to bear testimony to the ways in which God has been at work, overruling the excesses of his misguided followers, toppling the wicked from their thrones and pedestals, establishing pockets of righteousness and justice, by his Holy Spirit keeping alive the possibility of change in the hearts and minds of his people.

But he's not to be thought of simply as the God of history, he is also the **God of the individual**. Now, please don't misunderstand me and assume that the God of the individual is also the God of *individualism*, that pernicious and divisive philosophy that is currently in vogue in western politics – every person, every country for himself or herself or itself. What I mean is what the Psalmist says here in the second part of v5 – "*whose hope is in the LORD his God.*" It's all very well looking back at this great God whose influence can be traced down through the centuries and dynasties. But he is a God who engages with each person as well. For him to have any effect in your life, you need to acknowledge him as your Lord. This is not some disembodied ideal, some philosophy to which to give your assent and

accept in a purely theoretical way. This is a call to rely on a personal God, a God who is real and who relates to his people, a God who was so desperate to engage with the men and women of this world that he actually came into the world as a human being himself, in the person of Jesus Christ.

OK, but why rely on him, why put your trust in him to demonstrate the kind of justice that human lords have been unable to maintain? Well, as always there are sound reasons given for that choice. To start with, God is described as “*the Maker of heaven and earth*”. As we’ve seen many times before, that certainly makes him the most knowledgeable and influential ruler, far more so than any earthly lord or prince. In fact, he made each of them – every head of government, every captain of industry, every dictator, every commissioner and commissar owes his or her very existence to God.

And, on top of that, he is described as one who “*remains faithful for ever*”. We’re not talking about some fly-by-night rabble-rouser, some tin-pot dictator whose continuing power depends on the hold he keeps on the loyalty of those who shore up his regime. God is not in power at the mercy of the electorate or of the rise and fall of share indexes on Wall Street or in Tokyo or London. He will be there tomorrow, next week, next year, for ever – so he has a broader and more effective perspective. He’s not there to make a quick profit, to dispose of a potentially troublesome ethnic group, to extend his empire – business or media or political – and then disappear. He is there to dispense justice, to proclaim righteousness, to bring about his purposes for the good of all creation.

So he does all the things which we would like the powerful and influential to do, but which they will not do because of their innate selfishness or sectarianism or nationalism or greed. We’d love all people to work together to look after creation, to steward the resources that God has given us, but it’s not in the national interest of the United States of America. We’d love all countries to have a level playing field as regards participation in the economic development of the world, but it’s not in the economic interests of those of us who enjoy cheap and readily available food. We’d love it for everyone to be able to enjoy the same kind of healthcare and education that we do, but it would affect the profits of drug companies and arms manufactures and sportswear firms and clothing companies and burger vendors – and, more particularly their shareholders – some of whom are sitting here this morning.

God doesn’t have the same perspective that we do. He “*upholds the cause of the oppressed*” because he doesn’t have to worry about his image, about being thought an idealistic freak, an irritant to MPs, trustees and company directors. He doesn’t care whether he is labelled a liberal or a communist or a fool, because he knows that someone needs to speak out for the exploited and the afraid and the enslaved. He “*gives food to the hungry*” because he’s not scared that it’s going to mean he has less or that his profits will fall.

He “*sets prisoners free*” because he knows what liberty is all about. He knows because his Son died on the cross to make it available to all who were prepared to ask for it. He “*gives sight to the blind*”, healing and restoring and renewing, because he doesn’t need to use the provision of healthcare as a bargaining chip, a political lever to ensure that he gets what he wants when there’s a vote at some inter-governmental conference. He reaches out to “*lift up those who are bowed down*”, giving hope and respect and dignity to those who feel they have been trampled underfoot in the stampede towards more so-called efficient economies, who feel overlooked and left out in world bedazzled by power and wealth and appearance, who seem to have no place in a society where those who shout the loudest and look the smartest are the ones who are heard.

This God, the just and faithful God, “*loves the righteous*”. Whereas worldly rulers find the righteous irritating and annoying, with their petitions and protests and unorthodox lifestyles, with their refusal to buy into the culture of individualism and consumerism and indebtedness, God loves them. God wants to bless them for their stand and their courage. And he reaches out, too, to protect the economically disadvantaged, the refugee, the orphan, the widow. Whereas western society relegates them to bottom of the heap because they’re different or unproductive or a drain on the state, God sustains them, shows them love and compassion. They’ll pop up as an issue when there’s an election, but once they’ve served their political purpose all those promises and plans of the rulers of this world will “*come to nothing*”.

And through all of this, God is “*frustrating the ways of the wicked*”. They don’t have it all their own way, however much they might like to think so. The political and commercial empires that have been built soon fade into nothing. The great names that are accorded so much respect are erased from our memories. Their plans turn to dust – and all the things we’d like them to do, all those fine words about equality and righteousness and ethics, turn out to be so much hot air. Except when God does them.

There’s no point whatsoever trusting in the rulers of the world. They can never really deliver and waiting for them to do so is frustrating and ultimately doomed to disappointment. They are, as Robin Day famously said to John Nott, “*here today and gone tomorrow politicians*” or leaders or executives. If you really want to know blessing, happiness, satisfaction, fulfilment, then put your trust in God – the eternal God who created this world, who keeps his word – and sealed that through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus. As Peterson translates the last verse of this Psalm: “*God’s in charge – always. Zion’s God is God for good! Hallelujah!*”