

28th August 2022

Pentecost 11

Matthew 11

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Human beings have an instinct for Justice. It has been noted that the very first moral idea that small children develop is the sense of fairness; of being aggrieved if they are not treated fairly. From the earliest civilisations to the present day, societies have formulated systems of Law to regulate human behaviour and regulate our treatment of one another.

As Christian people, aware that Man is a fallen creature, we have no need to be reminded of why legal systems are needed. As it says in the Book of Genesis, 'The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.' [Gen.8:21] When I was teaching and we were doing the course on Ethics, I used to get my students to engage in a thought-experiment: what would happen if we had no laws and punishments? The result was obvious, that we should revert to the proverbial law of the jungle and the strongest and most violent would control affairs to suit themselves, and those with grievances would settle matters through revenge.

Therefore, instead, a civilised life can only be maintained by a social contract between the state and the citizen. If he has been wronged the citizen surrenders his right to revenge to the state. In return, the state takes up the cause of the wronged citizen and investigate the crime; arrests, prosecutes on the evidence; convicts and punishes, hopefully, the correct criminal. Justice is done and social harmony is restored; right has triumphed.

Of course, the legal system can go wrong in all sorts of ways, but in general it is better than everyone being a law unto himself or taking the law into one's own hands.

There is, though, a difference between what we call sin and what the state calls crime. Sin is a falling short of the goodness and glory of God; a failure to live according to our creation in the image of God. A crime, on the other hand, is an action judged illegal according to the laws the society within which we live; whatever is

against the Criminal Justice Act. Not all sins are crimes, of course, certainly not here in the UK and yet, not all crimes will be sins, necessarily, especially if the law is immoral.

We have long known that our sins have consequences for us, whether in this life or in the judgement to come. In the past, historically Christian societies thought that punishment in this world, accepted with repentance, would help to save the soul of the condemned from hell. As the great Dr Samuel Johnson once said, 'When a man knows he has but two weeks to live, it concentrates the mind wonderfully.' But think, therefore, about the purpose of punishment; what is it for?

In theory, the perfect punishment has six purposes. Protection: to protect the citizen from crime. Deterrence: the fear of it to deter the would-be criminal. Retribution: vengeance for the crime and carried out by the state. Restoration: paying back to society for the harm caused by the crime. Reform: hopefully changing the behaviour of the criminal. And lastly, Vindication: justifying the law in the first place, for what is the point of laws that are not imposed by punishments?

Such then, in theory, is how it must be, given the conditions of human existence, for outside the rule of law the quality of our life must decline. However, the gospel today leads you and me in a different direction; it directs us to focus our attention, not on life in this world only, but to think of an authority way beyond any human tribunal.

Living within the communion of the New Covenant, our life in Christ is to surpass all this; to surpass even the commandments of the Old Testament from Moses, which were not only to regulate the lives of the Children of Israel, but were also to make the nation a holy nation, the people of the Lord. But as St Paul says, the Old Law could not bring eternal life, that is, everlasting communion with God. He says in Galatians, 'For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law...' 'The Law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might

be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.' [Gal. 3:21-25]

There is one thing we can be sure of: from the parable we heard in today's gospel, that God's justice is not like human justice. We who have been baptised into Christ's death; we who partake of the communion sacrifice of Christ's self-offering for our sins, have been justified by faith. And through continual repentance whilst in this life, strive through prayer and fasting and by charity to all, even to those who wrong us, to attain unto life eternal in the kingdom of God.

God's justice is not like human justice, and God's kingdom is no earthly kingdom, as Christ at His interrogation told the civil authority, in the person of Pontius Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.' [Jn.18:36]

In today's parable the figure of the king represents the justice of God. Caught up in the law governing debts, the servant who owes ten thousand talents has an impossibly large amount to repay. The debt here, of course, is a figure, a parable, an analogy.

Our sins are like debts in this world, but they are not actual debts that we can somehow pay back to God. The Orthodox Church knows of no doctrine of Purgatory or anything like it, where we must endure punishments to purge the soul. Certainly our sins separate us from God; they put a vast distance between us and the kingdom. They are like a man trying to follow the directions of a compass but always wandering aside from the straight line, so that as he continues, he ends up further from his destination.

But God's justice is not like human justice; God does not 'claim His rights' as we do. But what does he say elsewhere? 'But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two... Love your

enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.’  
[Matt.5:39-44]

But what stirs the righteous indignation, the holy wrath of this king in the parable? It is when, in generosity of heart, having forgiven and passed over the debt he is owed, that the servant fails to do likewise and refuses to cancel the small debt of his fellow-servant. You see, God’s justice is not like human justice: Justice in the Kingdom of God is about becoming like the king, becoming merciful; becoming one who forgives because he has been forgiven. Without that we cannot enter the kingdom of God; without that we are unworthy of a place in the kingdom of God. We would be square pegs in round holes, as they say: we would not fit in.

Call to mind the parable of the workers in the vineyard: how the employer paid the first workers the same amount as those who came only at the eleventh hour. That is unfair; that is not justice, and is no way to organise industrial relations. But this is a parable of the kingdom of heaven and of the love of God that is poured out freely on all who respond to the call of the gospel. For in the final judgement it matters little how we are judged by the world or how they might attack us, or cancel us, or abuse us, or even criminalise us. The only judgement we need fear is the Last, for Christ is coming to judge the living and the dead.

What must concern us, rather, is that we strive to share in what St Peter calls, the divine nature (2 Pet.1:4). That is our prayer, that is our whole endeavour, when we partake of the communion sacrifice and share in the Holy Gifts: that sanctified in body as well as soul, we may come to acquire what St Gregory Palamas calls, the energies of God: His loving compassion for all, His righteous treatment of all, His forgiveness of all.