

LEARNING JUSTICE

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IN MARK'S GOSPEL, the following of Christ has a little in common with the game of snakes and ladders. Immediately the disciples do anything right—as Peter does in confessing Jesus as the Christ, or the women do when they take their stand at a distance from the cross—they slide. They deny Christ or keep silent about his resurrection.

This pattern is consoling. For it echoes our common experience in all that has to do with the gospel: in our understanding, living and proclaiming it. The productive or promising steps we take rarely lead us on to a smooth path forward. They are followed by stumbling, and the renewed search for a better way.

In my experience, snakes have abounded in learning and teaching justice. It never comes easily: the most promising of projects, the bluest of blueprints and the most perennial of philosophies, lead us almost inevitably down the mouth of the snake. I would like here to describe and to reflect upon some of the paths along which I have been led, and which I have commended to others, and to conclude by asking what it might mean for the Church to be a school of justice.

While I was at school, my first formal lessons on social justice were based on an outline of christian social principles, as these were enunciated in the papal encyclicals. The outline was sketchy, and as was inevitable in schooldays of the nineteen-fifties, my inner debating partner was a crudely understood Marxist. I heard the words which spoke of the rights to private property more clearly than those which qualified that right by reference to the common good. I saw and feared the abuses of human rights behind the Iron Curtain, while excusing those in countries with anti-communist governments. I perceived more clearly the dangers of government intervention in the economy than those consequent on allowing free play to the market. Thus, I learned about justice through a somewhat selective discussion and application of principles.

Only in the nineteen-sixties did the ways of teaching and learning change. The change was palpable in the range of new issues which then drew our attention—the atomic bomb, world hunger,

inequality, the civil war in Biafra, and Vietnam. It could be seen also in the natural affinity with the left rather than with the right which people found in following through such issues. But change was felt most deeply when we discovered that these issues are significant, not merely because they embody abstract principles of social justice, but because they are germane to spirituality. They provided material apt for spiritual reading, retreat conferences and for meditation, and they impinged centrally on our personal relationship with God. When teaching justice, we often moved from the discursive and argumentative mode, which gave most weight to principles and their application, to a rhetoric of commitment, in which the Kennedy brothers and other contemporary heroes were evoked, in order to awaken social awareness in the students. The ways of teaching echoed the discovery which teachers had made about justice.

Students, however, commonly failed to respond, for the struggles of these heroes were not their concern: they had found another agenda during the nineteen-sixties. Lack of effective communication bred frustration. As a result, the rhetoric of teaching sometimes moved away from inspirational homiletic to ethical prescription, and even to moral pressure. It was common to evoke guilt before the many social evils which we as students, as Christians or as human beings, were failing to remedy, and to express anger at the forces which kept the world the way it is. At worst, this teaching was manipulative, at best, flawed. It was an unfruitful way of handling frustration. I associate this mode of teaching with long services of reconciliation, at whose centre was an explicit and protracted examination of conscience, the 'Born Loser's Litany'. ('Lord for the times we have not done enough for the poor, have mercy . . . Lord for the times we have done too much for the poor, have mercy . . .' If the right hand don't get you, the left one will.)

This style of teaching, however, was not totally ineffective. Anger and guilt can lead to activity in social as well as in personal morality. But too often it was a negative commitment—students resolved never to hear about justice again. Or, they committed themselves to give things simply to allay their guilt. Issues of justice remained outside their lives.

When teachers reflected on the failure of their teaching, and on the ways in which the question of justice had become salient to themselves, they began to emphasize the importance of experience.

They persuaded themselves and others to undertake 'exposure experience', and built programmes in which students would have the opportunity to meet people who suffered relatively from deprivation or discrimination. The rhetoric of teaching now emphasized experience and shared reflection.

This emphasis on experience, too, was easily bent when taken into programmes of formation or education. It was easy to value a programme because it allowed the students or the institution to be seen to do something for the poor, rather than for the students to learn and explore an unfamiliar world, and to make unexpected friendships. Moreover, of young people exposed to such programmes, some were overwhelmed by the experience, while the enthusiasm of the response of others appeared in retrospect to have been generated by the desire to avoid difficult relationships closer to home. But on the whole, the emphasis has proved helpful. It has led back to the desire to analyze more rigorously the causes of poverty and of injustice, and the christian response to them. The style of teaching has again become discursive. We have, it seems, returned to the beginning.

But not quite to the beginning of my history. For these turnings of the path reflect a persistent attempt to find a correct perspective from which to teach and to speak of justice. The perspective is one of identification with the poor and unjustly treated. While this identification does not control the ways in which issues of justice are resolved, the search for it recognizes that empathy and solidarity with the poor are salient for reflection upon justice and upon situations where it is at issue.

The changing emphases in teaching are illuminated when we set each step within the search for a proper perspective. In Australia, at least, the discursive teaching with which I began itself concealed important changes which had taken place in the context of teaching.

The Church in Australia had been founded by immigrants, who to some extent were discriminated against in employment, and were forced to establish and maintain a separate school system. Because in their daily lives they experienced injustice in small ways, justice was learned and taught within the context of a community whose members felt themselves a little marginal to the wider society. If Catholics attacked Marxism, it was not simply as a threat to the established order, but as a fraudulent rival in the effort to build a more just society. Within this context, charity and

justice were betrothed. The St Vincent de Paul Society and the other charitable organizations expressed a lively concern for justice, and a commitment to those who were victims both of their own failings and of the defects of the social order.

By the nineteen-sixties, however, Catholics had become indistinguishable economically and politically from the rest of Australian society. Their experience no longer associated them with victims of injustice. Marxism was a threat to gains made, as much as rival agent of social change and of the redress of injustice. As a result, the principles of social justice could be seen now no longer as a charter for radical change but as defensive ordinance protecting Catholics' position within society. Charity to the less fortunate was divorced from considerations of justice; the issues of justice which most engaged Catholics were those which did not entail friendship with the victims of injustice—abortion, the refinements of public funding of independent schools and disarmament, for example. The legal mind, divorced from the compassionate heart, often ran to ideology.

It is against this background that the new ways of teaching and learning justice should be seen. The change in emphasis, from the inculcation of principles to the example given by attractive defenders of civil rights, marked an attempt to identify with those unjustly treated by appealing to the literary imagination. Moreover, the vivid appeal to vicarious experience was incorporated into spirituality. This development was valuable. But the larger strategy failed to realize the high hopes held for it, because the imagination working in this way easily evokes sympathy, but does not lead easily to commitment. The response is easily flawed by sentimentality, as was the case with the reaction to Dickens's work in the nineteenth century. Identification with the poor and unjustly treated needs a deeper earthing.

Appeals to anger and guilt also proved ineffective, because these wellsprings of activity are so powerful that they concentrate our attention on ourselves, and block identification with other people. Even where they led to action, they did not encourage a deep sense of fellow-feeling, so that the activity was often marked by resentment, or proved evanescent.

Finally, providing people with the opportunity to enter into personal relationships with the poor and unjustly treated has seemed effective, because it allows identification. Even here, however, the path is neither direct nor sure. For it is easy to divert

our attention from identification with people to our own needs or those of the institutions which we represent. Anxious attempts to evaluate the success of our programmes, to monitor and to control their outcome, or to further their effectiveness through complex programmes of formation, are likely to turn attention away from the people with whom we live. Then the vision of justice, as seen from the side of its victims, has no space to grow. This emphasis on identification also indicates that education for justice is primarily for adults, since the proper concern of young people is to understand themselves better. This is an appropriate goal, but when it is predominant, it is hard to balance with a respect for the dignity of the people whom they meet.

But where people can take advantage of the opportunity to identify with the poor, they find themselves led to ask hard questions about justice from a more assured standpoint. What, then, is the character of this identification with the poor, and why is it sought so tenaciously as a basis from which to reflect upon questions of justice?

It is easier to describe identification negatively than positively. The identification with the poor and the deprived which I have described should not be seen too readily as equivalent to the adoption of their cause. Although the latter flows naturally from identification, when considered in isolation, it does not provide a secure basis for reflecting on justice from within the christian context. For we can be led to identify with causes out of hatred, resentment or strong anger, as well as out of love, and these strong negative feelings are likely to control and to pervert the results of our reflection, especially if we do not recognize their nature.

The identification with the poor and deprived which acts as a safe basis for reflection is that of friendship. We care for and value their company as people, and our discovery of value in the most unexpected places makes us sensitive to the injustices which they suffer, and to the claim made by their cause. Friendship leads us to see the world from their perspective, and so to identify with their cause. While anger is a proper response to the ill-treatment of friends, it follows from the friendship which leads us to take their cause. Moreover friendship leads us to identify with our friends' best interests. Room is left for the differences which ought to exist among friends about the nature of our best interests. Identification with a cause is not identification with all the things that people associate with their cause. To seek justice is to seek

together for our real interests.

My insistence that identification with the poor is based on friendship may seem romantic and self-indulgent, and to blunt the hard edge that reflection on justice should have. This impression is qualified when we reflect on the way in which we have come to friendship. We do not do so by condescension and by remaining where we are comfortable, but by meeting others on their own home ground, where we do not know the local rules or the conventions that govern their daily lives. We enter their lives as children in an adult's world. In our unfamiliarity and inadequacy, we rely on people who can guide us, so that friendship can grow as we are accepted and welcomed. We do not identify with the poor by an act of the will or to satisfy our needs, but because we are allowed and shown by them how to identify. In a world that appears strange to us, we are enabled to see our common humanity as others consent to reveal it to us.

To describe this process as one of friendship does not imply sentimentality. The relationship is not one that is made in heaven. Both parties are thoroughly earth-bound. And the difference of background and lot usually means that the shifts and betrayals, by which we all live, become more apparent to us in the lives of the poor and unjustly treated than they do in those of our familiars. Moreover, because for the poor, the temptation to lie, cheat and to use people has to do with survival, and not merely with ways of securing relative advantage, we soon become aware of these things in our relationships. This discovery of sin running nakedly in a strange world, in turn, reveals to us the ways, more hidden from us, in which we sin, and would sin were we in the same circumstances. So the relationship comes to be built on a shared weakness and knowledge of failure, not on romantic expectations. This conviction that we meet as sinners, who are yet allowed to be companions, always leaves us hesitant in our identification with any cause. Even in our causes, we are associated as sinners with other sinners, so that any unqualified commitment to causes as distinct from people, is excluded. Even if the cause were perfectly just, our support would distort it!

It is difficult to articulate the precise connection between this identification with the poor and reflection about justice. But clearly, identification does not substitute for discursive teaching, for argument about the rights and wrongs of particular situations, or for reflection on more general principles of justice. Identification with

the poor so as to see the world from the perspective of the victim does not yield an intuitive understanding of the demands of justice within particular situations. It only gives us a position from which we may trust ourselves to reflect; it is one of the conditions for proper teaching and learning, but does not provide the content of such learning.

Nevertheless, it is essential, at least for christian reflection. For identification with the poor, in the sense of the victim, the one less privileged than ourselves and marginal to our world, is the epistemological key to the gospel. In Mark's gospel, for example, the disciples are always taken away from the safe centres of their lives to the borders, in their search for Christ. God shows himself at the borders, and those borders are embodied centrally in people who are marginal to society. So, God's call draws John, and later Jesus, into the desert; Jesus is followed by the crowds into a lonely place; the disciples reluctantly follow Jesus to Jerusalem. All these are places where life is difficult, and in which the disciples are not at home. To follow Jesus and to understand his way demands walking on ground unfamiliar to us.

This unfamiliar ground, moreover, is embodied in people who are marginal to society. When groups of people are brought together in the gospel, it is the outsider who is praised as having access to inside knowledge. The man from the wrong side of the lake wants to follow Jesus after being cured, and alone of all Jesus's beneficiaries is told to proclaim the gospel. The roman centurion, rather than those learned in the Law, recognizes Jesus in his death; children understand more than adults; women are faithful beyond men in following Jesus. Insiders get things wrong; outsiders have a privileged access. When outsiders become insiders, as does Peter when he identifies Jesus as the Christ, they are then most at risk. So, Peter's confession is followed immediately by his rebuke of Jesus for taking the outsider's path to execution, and Jesus's response that Peter himself has placed himself outside the gospel in his thought.

Thus, outsiders have a privileged perspective on the gospel, and we understand the gospel best as outsiders. The gospel invites us to move beyond the safe centre of our lives to their margins—to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. In the course of the journey, we are also invited to enter imaginatively the world of the outsider, the leper, the pagan, the Samaritan, the prostitute and the tax-collector, and to see Christ from their perspective. The 'preferential

option for the poor' and identification with the victim so that we consider questions of justice from that perspective, then, is part of a broader movement to the margins. It represents living out discipleship in practical terms. Moreover, as the gospel as a whole must be understood from the margins, so must the gospel of justice be preached and heard from the point of view of the victim and from the perspective of the poor. The emphasis in our day upon the preferential option for the poor is no more than the attempt to embody in our lives the patterns of hearing and proclaiming the gospel.

If the condition of speaking and hearing the gospel is to go to the margins of our lives, and if the condition of reflecting properly on justice from a christian perspective is to do so from the perspective of the outsider who is a victim of the order of society, then we have a further test of christian discourse about justice. We are familiar with one such test: we correctly say that christian thought about justice that is inspired by materialist philosophies, and incorporates christian faith into a structure given from outside, yields ideology rather than an expression of faith. It fails in respect of orthodoxy. But may we not also say that christian reflection on issues which touch the lives of the poor and of victims, that does not come out of identification with particular poor people or individual victims, is also ideological? It fails in respect of orthopraxis. This test, of course, cannot be applied with any precision, and to use it as a tool for discriminating between proper and improper christian reflection, would be to claim an insider's privileges. But it perhaps does explain why so much writing about justice, while authoritative in its theological reference and logical in its arguments, seems ultimately doubtfully christian. The conditions under which a 'fit' between the gospel and the writer's reflection about justice can be established are not given, for the author's perspective is not right.

So far I have spoken from the point of view of the individual Christian, about the learning of justice and the identification with the poor. Clearly, however, it needs also to be placed within the broader context of the life of the Church. I shall conclude by reflecting on the qualities of the Church in which identification with the poor and unjustly treated grounds reflection on issues of justice. Rather than speaking in a general way, I would like to describe the Church as I found it at the cambodian border when working briefly with the refugees there.

Although part of the Thai Church, the Church at the border was predominantly western for it was composed of volunteers who worked with the agencies devoted to the care of refugees. Few of the refugees were Christian, and indeed, there was no organized Church in Cambodia. The focus of the community was the weekend Mass, when people came together in an upper room near the market to celebrate the evening Eucharist. There were also occasional prayer services. The boundaries of the community were fluid—many Christians of other denominations found support within these celebrations, while many Catholics found support in the interdenominational services conducted by evangelical groups. Many Catholics, too, stood apart from the Church, having earlier rejected it as un-idealistic. Here, allegiance to the Church was clearly by choice, and many volunteers said repeatedly that they found a source of encouragement in their commitment to refugees, and of illumination in reflecting on the dilemmas which they faced in their commitment.

This community of dedicated volunteers illustrates some qualities of a Church in which the teaching and learning of justice are taken seriously. First, it was paradoxically a mature community—paradoxically, because as was the case in fighter squadrons during the 1939 war, the volunteers were for the most part young. But their experience soon brought them to a maturity that lay precisely in their being free to reflect in the light of the gospel on their own lives and on the way the world is ordered. Christian maturity appeared, not as a realism based on compromise, but as living out the perplexities and ambiguities of daily life within a radical commitment to the poor. Nor did maturity have much to do with easy coping. The volunteers commonly lived at the edge of their resources, and were drawn together by their weakness. The heroism of the gospel, and the surprisingly good sense that its oddest claims made, illuminated the details of a demanding daily life. This readiness to hear the gospel and its claims—even when it convicted the hearer of weakness and of sinfulness—precisely as good news, seemed the mark of maturity. The learning of justice here had little to do with anger or guilt, but came out of an identification with the refugees.

Secondly, the life of the border Church revealed the fluid boundaries of the Church. The Church here existed for her mission—to encourage the following of Christ, and so to point to and enact God's love in Christ. Here, that involved helping people

live and work more effectively with the refugees, and to see in the lives of those with whom they lived, and also in their own lives, a meaning which transcended any hopes which the daily situation could comfortably inspire. The Church was true to Christ when, through her, people found that meaning in God's love, as it was embodied in the life, death and presence of Christ; she was also true when, through her, others found meaning in the search for God, in the discovery of transcendence, or in the recognition of an inalienable human dignity. The Church allowed people to articulate the meaning of their lives at a range of levels and with differing degrees of explicitness. Because the commitment which volunteers had made to the refugees was such a telling parable of the gospel, the forms of church allegiance by which they expressed their commitment seemed in some respects unimportant. But, on the other hand, because in the gospel alone did the experience at the border find an articulation which made adequate sense of the death and diminution everywhere to be found, life within the community that proclaimed the gospel became the more precious. So a Church, in which concern for the faith that does justice becomes a central thrust, will be marked paradoxically both by a blurring of the boundaries that divide Catholics from others, and by a deeper commitment to seek Christ within the church community.

Thirdly, although the relationship between volunteers and refugees was close, of itself it did not answer the larger questions of justice, but raised them the more insistently. The volunteers' day-to-day commitment was justified by the needs and simple presence of the refugees; when they looked beyond the individual refugees, however, to the faceless millions who had been uprooted, killed or diminished by the actions of their own governments over the last thirty years, their own work appeared deeply ambiguous, since the agencies to which they belonged were used by many governments and groups to implement policies that did not appear to have the interests of the refugees at heart. The larger questions of justice and of policy were inescapable, and demanded an informed and steady mind to negotiate.

To inform themselves about the larger questions of justice, people drew on a wide range of material. In evaluating the material, the criterion that I suggested earlier was often implicitly used. Writing, even of the most abstract kind, that appeared to come out of friendship with the poor and unjustly treated was

more helpful than that written from a more detached theological or geopolitical perspective. This was true of church statements as well as of other writing: the pope's statements in Bangkok which incorporated the experience of those working closely with refugees were highly valued. The diversity of opinion and humility in the face of commitment within a very complex situation, which were found at the border, will be characteristic of any Church devoted to the learning and teaching of justice. Certitude rarely commends itself there.

Fourthly, the experience of the border Church showed how facile it is to insist on building justice within the Church as a *precondition* of a practical concern for justice in the world outside the Church. For the corruption and hardness which the volunteers saw all around corresponded all too faithfully to the weakness and corruptibility which they found in themselves. The Church was clearly recognized as the Church of sinners called to follow Christ. From such a perspective, the sinfulness at all levels in the Church that expresses itself in injustice is expected; it is deplored because it obscures God's compassion and delight at being with people; but it does not interfere with the desire to live out the gospel in identification with the poor and unjustly treated. To be so preoccupied with injustice in the Church that one is deterred from identifying with those suffering incomparably more severely from injustice, as are the refugees in Thailand or Central America, is to place altogether too much weight on the internal structures of the Church, and to see her primarily as pope, curia and hierarchy. The diverse ways in which the Spirit animates the people of God are obscured. The proper centre of balance of the Church lies outside herself.

In conclusion, the learning of justice is as difficult as Socrates made out; it is perhaps more difficult, because our interlocutors will always have unexpected lines. But the socratic hopes that justice can be taught and learned come also out of the gospel. The locus of such learning is shifted in the gospel from the argumentative mind to the informed heart.