

Bad Rulers and Worse Judges: A Sermon About Our Current Political Situation

Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17: 14-20

Psalm 50

Luke 18:1-8



As a country, we have been living for the last several years in a political situation that is as divisive as anything I can remember in my lifetime, and things have only become more divisive in the few months since the presidential election. The news media make comparisons to the Vietnam era and to the Watergate scandal, to the cultural and social divisions of the Civil Rights era. I do agree that we're living through that kind of division again. It's also true that on the different sides of whatever political divisions we're facing today, there seems to be a palpable disappointment in the leaders of our country, a kind of feeling among a lot of people that our leaders have failed. But also a loss of faith in the ability of politicians to make any difference.

Despite the angry divisions, there is at least one other commonality. All sides in the current divisions seem to share a common grievance, an outrage over injustice. All sides seem to think that their side has been the victim of outrageous injustices committed against them by the other side.

In this social context, I find this morning's lectionary

readings to have a kind of poignant relevance. The themes of good and bad rulers, and of justice and concern about injustice are common to all three lectionary readings.

The setting of the Deuteronomy passage is Moses's farewell speech to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the land of Canaan. In the speech, Moses gives instructions for appointing judges and kings. In both cases, the requirements are primarily negative. They explain what is not to be done. Judges are not to show partiality; they are not to take bribes. Positively, they are to care only about justice.

Negatively, kings are not to use their office as a way of personal gain. They are not to acquire lots of horses they are not to acquire many wives. They are not to acquire silver and gold. Finally, they are not to put themselves above those whom they rule. They may be kings, but they are still fellow Israelites.

As we read the description of what the king is not supposed to do, we cannot help but think of King Solomon, who did all the things the passage here forbids. He created a great military with lots of horses. He had hundreds of wives. He taxed his people in order to become wealthy. One way to read Deuteronomy is as saying, "Don't be like Solomon."

The Psalm continues with the theme of judges by portraying an out of the ordinary court-room scene. This trial is different because in this case, it is God who is the judge, and the defendants are the people of Israel. God judges the people with whom he has made a covenant, and he finds them wanting. The basic charge before the court is that the practice of the people is in conflict with what they claim to believe. On the one hand, they are externally pious. They are doing all the right liturgical things. They offer all the right sacrifices and burnt offerings. They know what color of vestments to wear during which liturgical season, and they always follow the rubrics. At the same time, the day to day life of the people

is filled with injustice. In the temple, the people put on a good show, but in their day to day lives, they keep company with adulterers, that is, they tolerate sexual infidelity. They are pleased to associate with thieves; that is, they tolerate economic injustice. Finally, they speak lies against their neighbor. They are guilty of slander.

To make matters worse, the ever so pious reduce God to their own moral level. They assume that because they perform the proper liturgical rituals that God will be happy with them, and he will not only overlook their acts of injustice, but that he will approve of them, that the God they pretend to worship is just like they are.

The third passage is another story of a trial, and, in this trial we encounter exactly the kind of unjust judge that Deuteronomy warns against. In Jesus' parable, he tells the story of a judge who fears neither God nor human beings. There is a widow – one of those poor Israelites about whom Deuteronomy warns that the judge should not show partiality – who is asking the judge for justice. However, Jesus surprises his hearers in two ways. First, the judge finally grants the widow's request, although certainly not for praiseworthy motives. At first he tries to ignore her, but in the end, he gives her what she wants because he gets tired of having to listening to her complain. Second, Jesus surprises his hearers by comparing God – the righteous judge of the Psalm – to such a dishonest Judge. Of course, Jesus's point is not that God is like the dishonest judge, someone who eventually gives in because he is tired of hearing us complain. Rather, Jesus tells us how God is like the judge by telling us that he is not like him. If even a dishonest judge will ultimately give justice, certainly the God who is just and cares about justice will give justice to his people who cry to him day and night. God will not allow the hopes of his people to be disappointed.

All three of the passages portray a contrast that is just as evident today as it was when the Bible was written – a

contrast between justice and injustice, a contrast between judges and kings whose job is supposed to be about serving people and bringing justice to those who have been denied it, but instead use their position to make themselves richer, who take bribes, who show partiality to their friends or family or those who grease their palms; who use their power and influence to line their own pockets.

In that light, it is interesting to look again at the Psalm and Jesus's parable. They do more than simply shake their heads at predictably corrupt politicians. Rather, they point out that there is another Judge and another Ruler besides the corrupt judges and politicians with whom we're all too familiar. According to the Psalm and according to the parable, justice is not simply an abstraction which sometimes is fulfilled, but more often is not. They suggest that behind the demands in Deuteronomy to follow justice, and only justice, there is another judge, and he is just because justice is who he is. This judge cannot be fooled by our pious temple worship if we steal from our brother or sister, gossip about and slander our neighbor or even our enemy, and compromise even so slightly our marital vows. This God hears the prayers of the victims. And both Jesus and the Psalmist promises that God will act.

I could end the sermon here, which would likely leave us hoping that someday God's justice would reign, but regretting that for now it too often does not. But that would be to leave the story before it's finished. And the gospel makes clear that this is not where the story ends.

To find out how the story ends we need to look at another trial. The gospels all end with the story of some rulers and judges who were sent by central casting to play the roles for the unjust judges that Deuteronomy warns about. At the end of Luke's gospel, Pontius Pilate is the unjust judge who shows partiality and does not dispense justice. Herod is the king who mocks the innocent one who comes before him. And the

Jewish religious leaders act out the Psalm perfectly. They have the external formalities of proper worship down pat, yet in the end, they joined forces with a thief by paying Judas a bribe to betray Jesus, and they slandered the innocent by condemning Jesus as a blasphemer and by charging him with treason against Caesar. The gospels all conclude with the story of a trial that is a betrayal of justice by a coalition of unjust judges, rulers, and religious leaders. The supreme irony is that the charge posted to Jesus' cross reads "The King of the Jews." The real paradox is that the one on the cross was the real King of Israel. The One Truly Just Judge died in a case of miscarriage of justice by false judges, kings, and religious leaders.

The trial does not end there, of course. As we all know, the gospel stories conclude by telling us that Jesus did not stay dead. The same Judge who makes his case in the Psalm makes his case in the gospels by raising Jesus from the dead. The God of Israel whom Jesus addressed as Father raised his Son and so pronounced the final verdict. What appears to be a trial of Jesus turns out to be the trial of the unjust judges. God is now the judge, but this time he calls the accusers to the stand. However, not simply Pilate and Herod and the Chief Priests, but everybody is found guilty. The Roman Soldiers. The crowd who cried "crucify him." Certainly Judas who betrayed him. But also Peter who promised he would not deny him and did. All of the other disciples who fled.

But this trial has a surprising outcome. Although the resurrection reverses the verdict of the unjust judges, this does not result, as we might expect, in their condemnation. The death and resurrection of Jesus pronounce a peculiar verdict on those who crucified him and abandoned him. On the cross, Jesus prayed for his killers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 24:34) After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples who denied and abandoned him and his first words to them were "Peace be with

you.” When they were understandably frightened, he did not reprimand them for their lack of faith but spoke the words “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself!” (Luke 24:36-37)

If nothing else, the gospel story of the supreme miscarriage of justice that is turned on its head by the resurrection should force us to rethink our own normal understanding of politics and justice. How might the gospel story of Jesus’ trial speak to our own confused cultural and political situation today?

First, it should be clear that the Bible has no illusions about the fallibility of human rulers or political leaders. The Old Testament history is a history of good kings and bad kings, but mostly bad and the book of 2 Kings ends in judgment with the entire nation of Israel taken into captivity along with their bad kings. The New Testament also speaks of mostly bad rulers: the Herods and Pontius Pilate; the book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul in Rome on the verge of being executed by Caesar. For the last several decades, American Christians of whatever political stripe, have placed too much faith in politicians. If we knew our Bibles, we would not be surprised. As the Psalmist writes, “Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.” (Psalm 146:3)

The cross and resurrection of Jesus relativize the claims of the unjust judges who condemn the innocent, who slander the weak, who take bribes. God demands justice of rulers, but there should be no surprise when injustice happens instead. We should neither place too much hope in worldly saviors, nor be surprised when they disappoint.

At the same time, the cross and resurrection mean that God will vindicate his elect who cry for justice day and night, but his way of doing so is not through straightforward defeat of the wicked. The cross means that God overcomes injustice by

going through it and taking that injustice on himself. The doctrine of the incarnation means that God become human takes the full weight of human injustice on himself in the cross and overcomes it by triumphing over death through life.

How then might Christians survive during this period of moral and political confusion, of rampant injustice and bad or incompetent rulers and politicians? I would suggest that there are three characteristic Christian virtues that are rooted in the message of the cross and resurrection: patience, forgiveness, and hope.

First, Christians are called to patience. Martyrdom comes from the Greek word for "witness," and a martyr is the classic model of Christian sainthood. Christians are by definition, cultural outsiders. We serve another king, and walking in the path of the cross means at least the possibility of suffering. St. Paul writes about his own apostleship "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (2 Cor. 4:8-10) To be a martyr means to be a witness by suffering injustice with patience.

Second, Christians are called to forgive. That Jesus bore the judgment of those who condemned him means that there is hope for forgiveness even for those who are guilty of condemning the innocent. Otherwise, what hope would there be for any of us? It is not just Pilate and the Jewish leaders who came under judgment when Jesus was crucified, but even Peter who denied Jesus, and the disciples who deserted him. That Jesus appeared to those same disciples who had deserted him with words of peace means that injustice and our own failures are overcome by forgiveness. Because we ourselves have been forgiven, we can forgive even those who deny us justice.

Finally, Christians are called to hope. The resurrection of

Jesus Christ means that there is another judge, and this judge has conquered the ultimate injustice of death. The Christian religion is not the opiate of the people, as Karl Marx claimed; rather, Jesus' resurrection is an assurance that justice has a transcendent basis, and God's justice will ultimately prevail. At the same time, such hope is not only eschatological, reserved for the last judgment. While we may be disappointed in unjust judges and corrupt politicians, hope means we also should expect and be pleasantly surprised by glimpses of grace in unexpected places. Pontius Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders were certainly disappointments, but no one expected Joseph of Arimathea.

So we have patience, forgiveness, and hope. This is how the church is called to endure, not only in these confusing times, but in all times. In the words of St. Paul: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." (Rom. 15:13) Amen.