appg christians in parliament

What difference does Christianity make to Social Justice?

by Dr Krish Kandiah OBE

Displaced people groups, ethnic groups facing genocide, refugees being treated with suspicion by the indigenous population, students being radicalised in a culture war, the execution of women for sexual deviancy, an environmental disaster so extensive that there are few survivors, the persecution, imprisonment and execution of those with faith: the Bible is full of accounts that portray terrible social injustice.

We see the impact of that social injustice on the lives of ordinary individuals: the woman who has run out of food, the disabled person who is forced to beg, the taxman who lines his own pocket and the politician who ignores the victim of violence by the side of the road. It is ordinary people who are also celebrated in the Bible's pages for alleviating suffering, advocating for the vulnerable and bringing about change.

The reason the Bible is filled with stories of individuals and communities who face oppression, exclusion, and injustice is not just to illustrate the brokenness of human society, but also to highlight God's unchanging heart for justice, his call to his people to live justly, and his plan to bring about ultimate justice.

God's Heart for Justice

God's heart for justice is rooted in his nature and in his actions. He is both just and the justifier. Justice is intrinsic to God's character and to his conduct:

> *"The heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice."* **Psalm 50:6**

> *"Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom."* **Psalm 45:6**

It is hard to ignore the prevalence of the language of justice in the Bible. In Hebrew there are two primary words for justice: *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט) and *tzedek* (צֶדֶק). The *first* refers to legal justice and ensuring that wrongdoing is corrected (Isaiah 30:18). *Tzedek*, on the other hand, speaks of justice as a way of being – in God's case – his goodness, mercy and restorative purpose. In other words, God's justice is both legal and social. While the first is about enacting punishment or retribution; the second is about restoring harmony and reflecting God's purposes in the world.

It is not surprising that those threads became blended into one word in English – justice is two sides of the same coin: social and legal justice perfectly demonstrated in God.

God's Call for Justice

> *"He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he."* **Deuteronomy 32:4**

For Christians, our understanding of right and wrong is not based on shifting cultural norms or majority votes. It is rooted in the very character of God.

Justice is not just a political issue or a social cause, it is an essential part of what it means to be human. We are created in the image of God. And justice is an essential attribute of that image. Justice is one of God's communicable attributes—an aspect of his nature that he calls us to embody in our own lives. We cannot be omnipotent like him, but we can reflect something of his justice. One prophet provides a clear and timeless command:

> *"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."* **Micah 6:8**

For Micah, justice is not merely a matter of personal morality, but a social calling that reflects God's

character in the world. The pursuit of justice is meant to be lived out both individually and collectively as God's people and is more important than the religious rites of sacrifice and temple worship. This call to justice compels us to take action, protect the vulnerable, to work to restore fairness and equity in the world, and to ensure that all people are treated with dignity and respect.

Jesus, the eternally begotten son of God and the perfect image of the invisible God, declared that his mission was to "proclaim good news to the poor... to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18). The gospels show us how he does this with more than just words. He continually associates with the ostracised, the socially unacceptable, the marginalized, the poor and oppressed. He challenges unjust systems and emphasizes that true justice is rooted in the love, mercy, and humility that Micah called for.

In Matthew 23, for instance, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders of His time for neglecting *"the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness."* Jesus highlights that justice is not about outward appearances or legalistic adherence to rules, but about a deep internal transformation that impacts how we treat others—especially those who are voiceless or oppressed.

> *"The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern."* **Proverbs 29:7**

The call to justice is not an optional extra for God's people—it is a command. The Old Testament is full of laws ensuring fair treatment for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner (Deuteronomy 24:17-22). The prophets constantly rebuke the people of God for neglecting the justice (Isaiah 1:17) they have been commanded to.

Justice is not just a command; it is also an act of worship. Isaiah 1 and Amos 5 remind us that God rejects religious gatherings and rituals when they are not accompanied by justice. Our Sunday services are meaningless if we ignore the needs of the most vulnerable Monday through Saturday.

> *"Social justice is not an optional extra for the mission of God's people; it is intrinsic to the very nature of God, who loves justice and calls us to reflect that love in the world."*[1] **Dr Chris Wright**

Historically, Christians who took this command seriously have transformed societies across the world. William Wilberforce dedicated his life to abolishing the transatlantic slave trade because he understood that justice mattered to God. Lord Shaftesbury fought for factory reforms and better working conditions for the poor because he believed justice was central to the gospel. Martin Luther King Jr. led the civil rights movement for racial justice, driven by a vision of the coming Kingdom of God. Toyohiko Kagawa in Japan, inspired by his faith, worked tirelessly for the rights of laborers, slum dwellers, and orphans, establishing cooperatives and social welfare programs. Festo Kivengere, a Ugandan bishop, fearlessly spoke out against the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin, advocating for reconciliation and justice in the face of persecution. Pandita Ramabai, a Christian reformer in India, fought for the education and rights of women, especially widows, establishing homes and schools that empowered the marginalized. Desmond Tutu in South Africa stood against apartheid, championing truth and reconciliation through the power of Christ's teachings on forgiveness and justice. The Church throughout history and around the world has a rich legacy of pursuing justice, and that same call remains today.

God's Achievement of Justice

> *"For what the law was powerless to do... God did by sending his own Son... to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us."* **Romans 8:3-4**

1 Dr Chris Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative, 2006, p. 302

If God were indifferent to justice, Jesus would not have needed to die. But because God is just, sin had to be dealt with. God's meeting of justice is most profoundly seen in the way he reconciles his perfect justice with his boundless mercy at the cross.

Throughout Scripture, we see that God's justice is not only about punishment but also about restoration, protection, and equity. His justice is both retributive (holding wrongdoers accountable) and restorative (bringing healing and reconciliation).

The cross is both the ultimate act of love and the ultimate act of justice. If God will not ignore justice, even to save his only begotten, eternal Son we cannot expect God to ignore justice in our world today.

> *"When we look at the cross we see the justice, love, wisdom and power of God. It is not easy to decide which is the most luminously revealed, whether the justice of God in judging sin, or the love of God in bearing the judgment in our place, or the wisdom of God in perfectly combining the two, or the power of God in saving those who believe. For the cross is equally an act, and therefore a demonstration, of God's justice, love, wisdom and power."*[2] **John Stott**

This has profound implications for how we live. If Jesus' death was necessary to confront injustice at the cosmic level, then we must take injustice seriously at the human level. The Church is called to be a people who live in the shadow of the cross, working for justice as a sign that evil has been defeated.

God's Future for Justice

> *"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"* **Amos 5:24**

> *"He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."* **Revealation 21:5**

The world is deeply broken. No government, no policy, no leader will ever fully eradicate injustice. Sin is a reality, and true justice will only be achieved when Christ returns and establishes His perfect kingdom. However, that does not mean Christians—or Christian MPs and policymakers—should give up on pursuing justice now. On the contrary, we are called to use our authority and influence for the sake of those most in need.

The prophets spoke of a time when justice would roll down like a river. That vision of the future was supposed to motivate God's people to act.

The pursuit of justice is not a distraction from the gospel, but a demonstration of it. It is not a dilution of the gospel, but a declaration of it. However long it takes, we must keep moving towards justice.

> *"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice"*[3] **Martin Luther King Jr.**

> *"The mission of the church is to embody God's restorative justice—not just personal salvation, but a social justice that puts right what's wrong in the world, anticipating the new creation."*[4] **Professor NT Wright**

Our Challenge

Some Christians question whether the Church should actively pursue justice. They argue that justice is not central to the gospel, while others acknowledge its importance but do little to practice it. Even those who are tirelessly fighting for justice can grow weary and disheartened.

In contemporary Western political discourse, social

2 John Stott, "Cross of Christ" 20th Anniversary Edition, IVP, 2006, p.151

3 Martin Luther King used this phrase often, one of the most well-known instances was in a 1968 sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., just weeks before his assassination. He was echoing the words of 19th century abolitionist and Theodore Parker.

4 Professor NT Wright, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, 2008, p.225

justice also provokes debate. While some see it as an essential framework for addressing systemic inequalities related to race, gender, class, and economic disparity, others dismiss social justice as little more than an ideology associated with political correctness, identity politics, control and an uncomfortable emphasis on group rights over individual freedoms. We end up in danger of spending more time debating than responding to the needs of those around us and working towards a better world for all.

The real challenge for the church and for Christian policymakers is to lead the way in embodying a gospel that is both *proclaimed* and *demonstrated*—in word and in action, in truth and in love. The challenge is to be well-informed as well as well-intentioned. To be both disruptive and constructive. The challenge is to collaborate with those who have lived experience. To keep those made in God's image at the centre. To find common language, common ground and common cause. To take action, to bring change, to speak up for those with no voice, to keep going.

This has never been an easy task. Historically the church has often found itself at odds with cultural and political movements. In the early Church, for example, the gospel's message of justice, mercy, and love clashed with the Roman Empire's imperial and hierarchical structures. As Christianity spread, it continued to wrestle with social injustice and inequality. Over time, the Church has had to continually re-examine its stance on social issues, learning from past failures and missteps, as well as embracing new opportunities to live out the gospel in a world that often resists its radical call to justice.

Conclusion

The task is complex and ongoing, but in the face of enduring and new challenges, we must remain steadfast in our mission to embody God's justice. While perfect justice will not be fully realized until Christ's return, our work now is to anticipate and demonstrate this future justice with the opportunities we have been given.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the APPG.