

The Promotion of Justice & the Service of Faith

Patrick McCormick

The topic for our panel this afternoon brings together two critical and inseparable elements of Loyola's mission statement, "the promotion of justice & the service of faith;" and I am here to suggest that these elements are, for Catholics and all students of the Bible, two distinct and equally important sides of the same coin. For all believers whose faith is grounded in and shaped by the Scriptures faith and justice belong together. True faith demands work for justice, and real work on behalf of justice requires that we struggle with fundamental questions of faith.

The Faith that does Justice

As Peggy Steinfels has pointed out, the 32nd Congregation of the Jesuits, the writings of Fr. Kolvenbach, and the documents of the Second Vatican Council – especially the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – repeatedly drive home the point that genuine faith demands work for justice.

But this is not a new insight for readers of the Scriptures. Indeed, the God who is revealed in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament repeatedly rejects every notion of worship or sacrifice that is indifferent to or supportive of injustice, condemns as empty and false any sort of faith that does not commit itself to justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed, and demands a faith that does justice and a sacrifice that looses the shackles of the oppressed and indebted poor.

The God who appears to Moses in the un-sacrifice of the burning bush (which consumes nothing, certainly not the fatted calves of the Pharaoh's ruling class) distinguishes herself from all the gods of empire who attend to the petitions and offerings of high priests and rulers – for she is kept awake by the cries of slaves, peasants and widows weeping for their murdered children, and she will not rest until her servants Moses and Aaron set these captives free. Here is a God who can only be worshiped and honored by working for the liberation of slaves. Here is a faith that must do justice if it is to avoid becoming idolatrous.

Indeed, the first demand the God makes upon the slaveholder Pharaoh is that the Hebrews be allowed to worship their new God – the God of slaves and widows and foreigners. And this demand enrages the Pharaoh *because* it is a demand to allow a *revolutionary* faith, a faith that recognizes the humanity and divinity of slaves and peasants and aliens, and a faith that will – indeed must – call for their liberation. The Pharaoh knows how dangerous this faith would be and seeks to crush the Hebrews with even more slave labor.

Once the Hebrews have been liberated and arrived in the Promised Land, the faith they are to practice there is the true worship of this God of the slaves, peasants, foreigners & widows. And they cannot offer such worship to this radically different God with the same old sacrifices and holocausts that supported the slave states and empires around them. Real worship of this new God demands that they "remember" this God, and that this memory be enacted in their treatment of the widows and strangers and slaves around them. Time and time again the God of slaves reminds the

Hebrews (and us) that real worship demands refraining from injustice against the weak and working for liberation for the oppressed. Anything else, no matter how lovely the fatted calf or how fine the altar, is idolatry – anything else is the worship of the gods of empire.

In the New Testament Jesus begins his public ministry in Luke 4 by taking up this message. First we are told that the messiah or Christ has been anointed (like Moses) to take up the work of liberation and justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Like the God of the slaves revealed in the burning bush, the Messiah is revealed as one who has heard the cries of the suffering and has been sent to come to their aid. And this same Jesus also tells his disciples that the God of the Scriptures desires mercy, not sacrifice – that real worship or love of God demands compassion for the neighbor.

Paul takes up this theme in 1 Corinthians when we learn that those who come to the Christian “sacrifice” of the Lord’s table without sharing their food with the poor have offered invalid worship and have failed to recognize the resurrected body of Christ. Here Paul is reaffirming for us that justice is a theological question, and that those who do not practice justice are idolaters, for they do not recognize or worship the true God. This is the theme we see over and over and over in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, the prophets, Jesus and Paul – the only faith that means anything, the only true worship of the God revealed in the burning bush is the practice of liberating justice. Anything else is idolatry. Real faith demands work for justice. The service of faith is achieved through the promotion of justice.

The Justice built by Faith

But the promotion of justice also requires the service of faith. The battlefield of human history is littered with failed attempts to liberate the oppressed, or with successful attempts that ended with the reinvention of slave states as bad or worse than their predecessors. Just as the children of abusers all too often grow up to become abusers, so the armies of rebellious slaves have all too often been transformed into the legions of new Pharaohs and Caesars. In the 20th century Stalinist Leninism and Hitler’s fascism began as populist movements seeking to liberate the masses from cruel oppressors – but ended as tyrannies that exceeded their former masters in cruelty and inhumanity. And in dozens of developing nations the forces of liberation seeking to throw off the chains of European colonialism were all too often transformed into dictatorships that robbed and oppressed their peoples in new and savage ways.

In his book *Holy Terror* Bruce Lincoln points out just how often religions of rebellion and revolution become religions committed to protecting the status quo, the empire, the ruling class. So many revolutions and wars of liberation have failed to achieve justice *because* their leaders and people did not change their basic beliefs about persons and communities. Throwing off the oppressor without rejecting the tyrants view of slaves and foreigners simply leads to different forms of slavery and tyranny. For there to be a genuine revolution for justice, there must be a transformation in how we think about one another, our neighbor, the alien, the slave. We must change the way we believe, and what our image of God and of the human person and community is.

This is why the liberation of the Hebrews demanded not just that they throw off their Egyptian taskmasters, but that they discard the very notion of slavery. To do this it was not enough for God to take the Hebrews out of Egypt. God had to take Egypt out of the Hebrews. And the beginning of that transformation was to teach them a new faith. (Remember – the first step was to teach the Hebrews a new practice of worship.) But this transformation also meant they had to learn how to eat differently (sharing food with one another), work differently (building the ark as free people), own differently (having their own land), and rule differently (having no king).

The process of liberation, the process of justice is a delicate, fragile work, always capable of disintegrating, and always requiring the support of a new faith, a new way of thinking and believing. To make the Hebrews free God had to offer them a new faith. To stay free, they had to keep that faith, and not succumb to the temptations of idolatry – which is worship of those gods who allow us to see our neighbor as an enemy, a slave, a demon or a foreigner.

The work of justice in the Promised Land depended on keeping the faith in Yahweh alive, the faith that recognized the sanctity of every person, the faith that hears the cries of the poor, the faith sees the face of God in the face of the widow, orphan and alien. The Hebrew Prophets did not just challenge the injustice of the rich and kings like modern day muckrakers. They were not merely political and economic critics. Instead, they were theologians who demanded that Hebrews remember and reground themselves in the true faith, a faith that saw every person as fashioned in the image of God, a faith that commanded justice for the widow, orphan and alien. A faith that rejected the false worship of the corrupt and rich. For these prophets there were fundamental beliefs that undergirded the work of liberation and justice, and without this faith the society would slide back into tyranny and chaos.

Today we must, like the prophets, work for justice by rendering the service of faith, by attending to and addressing fundamental questions of belief. At a Catholic and Jesuit university the work on behalf of justice must be supported by a willingness to name and face basic questions about the human person, redemption and the human community. There are fundamental questions of belief being contested in our world, and the struggle for justice must be based on sound answers to these questions. There are also a variety of secular and sectarian creeds being offered as responses to these questions, and we must examine and critique and dialogue with these creeds.

At a Catholic and Jesuit university service of the faith does not mean proselytizing students, staff or faculty. But it could mean scouring the rich tapestry of the Catholic, Christian and Biblical traditions in search of resources with which to answer the fundamental questions facing our society. It could also, as was the case in the time of Aquinas, mean bringing these traditions into a rich dialogue with science, culture, politics, philosophy and economics – allowing these disciplines to inform and challenge our Catholic tradition, while offering probing and challenging questions of our own.

In our own culture I can think of three faith questions begging to be addressed, questions that must be answered if we are to have a just world. First, is violence or force redemptive for the human community? When the most religious developed nation in

the world is also the country with an arms budget larger than the next two dozen countries it seems reasonable to ask whether the God we place our trust in is Jesus or Mars. Second, as the lawyer asks Jesus – who is to count as my neighbor? In a society where the gap between rich and poor is greater than in any other industrialized country, where we put more people behind walls than any other society, where we let nearly 50 million go without access to basic health care, and where the grandchildren of immigrants cry for a wall to lock out foreigners, it seems important to ask whether we believe that other human beings are “bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.” Third, how much is enough? This is a heretical question in a consumer society that depends on no one ever being satisfied. But it is also a critical question in a nation where we spend more time shopping than playing with our children. And it is a fundamental question when the competition for resources can lead us to rely on force and violence to secure what we want – not what we need. We will have no justice unless we answer these questions, and believe our answers.

Justice and Faith

For over a generation Catholic and Jesuit colleges have affirmed that real faith must work for justice. At the same time real justice requires authentic faith, meaning that the labor for justice must be guided by sound beliefs regarding the nature of the human person and community and by a commitment to the sacred and transcendent within and beyond all of us. Authentic faith demands justice. Real justice depends upon authentic faith.