

## IS GOD UNJUST?

Reading: Ezekiel 18:1-4 and 25-32.

If we're thinking about having any sort of Christian faith, the first question must be, "Is God there? Does He exist?" And the next question must surely be, "Is he a good God? Is He fair? Does He care about me?" That's a question most Christians ask at some stage. After all, it doesn't necessarily follow that if there is a God, He is on our side. The gods of the Greeks and the Romans were a fickle, temperamental bunch; in fact, all of the religions I know of from older times had fierce gods whom it was very difficult to please. "King Lear" has a marvellous pair of lines: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport!"

The Bible of course claims that God is just and wanting to be good to us. And yet it is no good simply to assert this blindly when there is so much injustice in the world. It is interesting that God allowed the Bible to contain lots of passages which question whether He is just: we need to ask the question.

We get a good look at it from God's point of view in the reading from "Ezekiel". The old saying ran, "The fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" ie the sins of one generation cause problems for their descendants. That's unfair, the people say, and God agrees and replies, "Well, I'm changing that. I'm making people individually responsible to me." And yet in verses 25 and 29 the people still say that God is not fair. Doesn't it sound like a child talking to his parents: whatever they say or do, "It's not fair!" In the end the parents probably realise that it's no use trying to reason with the child in that frame of mind. No wonder God sometimes just turns round and says, "I'm God." It sounds as if He is pulling rank and just saying, "I'm bigger than you, and I can do

what I like,” but like the exasperated parents He’s really saying, “Am I, your God, duty-bound to prove myself to your satisfaction?” We can get very uppity with God, can’t we!

Of course, too, the Bible does not claim that this world is just; God, yes, but not this world. In the Old Testament we do see God’s justice threading its way through the Bible, with one people, the Jews, seeing God’s favour or punishment depending on their obedience to Him. In the New Testament, however, we see God’s justice being deferred much more - not entirely, but much more - to the next life; we are still answerable to God, but there is not the instant blip on the head that there was in the Old Testament. God’s plan is to see more justice on earth, but ultimately that justice will only be achieved in the next life. When Jesus is asked about a tower that collapsed in his day killing several people: “Were they killed because of their sins?” He says it’s got nothing to do with that ie don’t look at things that happen to people in this life as being rewards for good behaviour or punishment for bad. And yet people still say to us today, “She/he hasn’t done anything to deserve this!”

Jesus tells another story in the New Testament about God’s apparent unfairness: a farmer hires workers at different times of day, and yet he pays them all the same wage, the ones who’d only worked an hour the same as the ones who’d slogged away all day. Is the truth of it that we’re happy for God to be merciful to us, but we want Him to be strict to other people? “Thank you, God, for forgiving my sin, but don’t forgive that person because he’s a much worse sinner than me.” No wonder that we start claiming that God is unfair if we expect to understand everything now, if we wrongly assume that everything that happens - every car accident and illness - is God’s judgment on us, if we can’t balance justice and mercy, and if we have different standards for ourselves and for others.

In “Micah” we’re told to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.” God is asking us to copy Him, in holding justice and mercy together.

So is God unjust? It will often appear so, and we must ask the question. In the end, though, we need to be like the child who will question and will complain and won’t understand but who sees his parents’ kindness and love in so many ways that he is prepared to trust them when he doesn’t understand.

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