

September 25, 2011

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21A)

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Matthew 21:23-32

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

Doing the Right Thing

I was in England for a meeting at Lambeth Palace this past week while the State of Georgia killed a man called Troy Davis in each of our names and on our behalf. He was killed in spite of an international campaign appealing for clemency. The court of public opinion in England could not understand how there was not reasonable doubt in this case. Seven out of nine witnesses recanted their testimony alleging that their original words were coerced. One of two who did not recant was the prime alternative suspect for the crime of murdering a police officer called Mark McPhail. The British press across the political spectrum expressed everything from concern to disgust. Not all of the commentary was inalterably opposed to the death penalty in itself, but they all found moral disquiet about this execution, many connecting this one with Texas Governor Rick Perry's boast that he has not lost a minute of sleep over the more than 200 prisoners killed in his State alone while he has served as Governor. The more sober press also acknowledged the judicial review that called the alleged new evidence 'smoke and mirrors' and the pleas of Officer McPhail's family for "justice".

I am opposed to the death penalty being part of our law for many reasons, some of which will become clear. I wish those who reviewed the evidence had been able to be more overt and clear, leaving less room for doubt in this case. I'm certain that any human system is fallible. But all of that said, I know that every conceivable option of due and proper process, including the court of public opinion, was followed in this case. I'm saddened by the whole thing but not inclined to second guess the legal system. I pray that we will return to being a country willing to take this option off the table when we think about justice.

In the days and weeks to come, not many of us will be called upon to make moral decisions. Our choices might not have the attendant publicity or scrutiny of the kind that judges and members of the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles have endured this past week. We will however be called upon to make some judgments that have enormous consequence for others, and others of no apparent consequence to others but of massive consequence to our own souls. We will have to ask ourselves 'what is the right thing to do?' when we are confronted with a disobedient child, a street person asking for money, or for that matter our parish asking for a financial commitment. What is the right thing to do about an employee taking advantage of the system or deciding whether or not we should confer with our partner about an attractive purchase before making it, or whether to have a second helping of ice cream when we have been trying to lose weight? You get the idea; we are faced with all kinds of decisions that in one way or another become *moral* decisions because ultimately they are about how we value

ourselves and each other and what we consider to be *just*. The degree that we have sorted out the idea of justice for ourselves, is the degree to which our decisions will be fairly straightforward.

I, for one, am not persuaded that such motives as revenge or recompense comprise justice. And so, while I recognize the social contract by which I agree to the process by which we formulate laws I will continue to resist laws that seem to be about revenge or recompense as fundamental to 'justice'. I was and am extremely uncomfortable with our President's proclamation at the killing of Osama bin Ladin that "justice has been done." It was a lot of things I support such as necessity in war, a form of self-defense and so on, but such killing is not in accord with the ultimate purposes of God and so cannot be considered 'just'.

Doing the right thing is rarely as simple a matter of obeying the rules. Most of the time when we have to make a moral calculation in a broken world, the rules are going to serve as a guide. Obviously there are and should be a consequence when we break the law, but I'm talking about those times when what is legal is not necessarily right and what is right is not necessarily addressed by the law. Some of you will have heard of Michael Sandel, an immensely popular teacher of philosophy at Harvard. He has written an immensely readable book called *Justice*, with the telling subtitle: *What's the Right Thing To Do?*¹ He sees the main principles of justice over history revolve around the ideas of maximizing the welfare of the most people possible; the idea of justice as the extension of freedom (called upon both by those who would give the idea of 'free markets' all kind of power and by those who would manage markets in order to extend 'freedom' to many); and last the idea of justice as virtue, an end in itself for fullness of life. He doesn't address the question of capital punishment directly but we can see how all these ideas of justice come into play. One person says 'the world is better off with that murderer dead'. Another says, 'with that murderer dead the rest of society need not live in fear of him' and others say that in a virtuous society there is no room for the killing of prisoners and justice requires a different response from anything that is fundamentally utilitarian.

Ezekiel and Jesus both point us toward this last way of thinking about justice and so determining what is the right thing to do when we have to make a moral decision. Ezekiel is sorting out and overturning the idea that the 'innocent suffer the guilty' (as my first headmaster used to say when punishing the whole class for some infraction I had perpetrated). He is saying that everyone is a responsible agent before God able to choose life or death, because everyone is a beloved creature of God who takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. More than that, God requires that we remember what really matters, turn again, repent and live.

Jesus dodges a debate with the chief priests and elders about authority and who has power and who does not to define right and wrong. Instead he tells a story making clear that it is not our intentions that make us good, but our actions. More than that, it is not just any actions that constitute the right thing to do, but those that contribute to the

¹ Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009)

'way of righteousness' or 'right relationship', actions that recognize that a human being is 'an end in itself',² or put another way, actions that come from something that seems 'self-authenticating' like the authority of John.

So how might this sense of justice make a difference in the day to day choices we will make this week? It might mean that however we respond to that disobedient child we treat her or him with the same seriousness that we expect them to treat us which rules out corporal punishment. Acting for right relationship when a street person asks for money might mean not expecting gratitude if we give something and looking them in the eye if we are to say 'no', and suspending judgment on them or their circumstance as we recognize our own power in that exchange. Clearly, doing the right thing when your parish asks for a financial commitment is to say 'yes' with alacrity and generosity, (!) but righteousness means that you might end up taking a look at all of your priorities and where money creates anxiety for you, how that affects your choices and decisions and how living into the gospel might mean shifting them around. It will be incidental that we discover again that it is in giving that we receive as we live into grace. With our challenging employee right relationship could mean giving notice and helping that person find something more suited to her or his skills; or it might mean saying things that you don't want to say and having a conversation that you really don't want to have, in order to respect the dignity of that person's humanity. That decision about ice cream is about your own worth, value, dignity and the witness you bear. You get the idea.

When seeking to do the right thing, beware the self righteousness of reasons, rules, rationales, justifications, arguments and anything else that looks and smells as though we are justifying some choice in order to bring about another good such as our own satisfaction. Instead, trust the way that seems the most obviously to do with love even if it is not the most palatable choice on the face of it. When you intuit the way of righteousness, then be like the prostitutes and tax collectors and change your mind and believe. You will know what to do and will not be far from the Kingdom of God.

What choices do you have before you this week? In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...

² See Sandel on Kant's 'categorical imperative', *Justice* pp119-123