

**New Kilpatrick
Sermon
14th July 2019
Hosea 11:1-11**

Spirit... within us and between us... because of us or despite us... with us or without us... we invite you to bring new life here... a new flow to our words... our worship... our imaginations... our relationship with you... come Spirit... and come now... Amen

'Twitter' seems to me the least appropriate name for what actually happens on that social media platform... Tweets... do they not... suggest something harmless... almost benign... a sound of no consequence... It would be a better place perhaps... if it was just that... simple... unassuming.....

But this week once more there has been a social media oxymoron... a twitter storm... as the very thing the Ambassador described in confidence... played out before our very eyes...

But it has led to an ambassador's resignation... A less than appropriate leadership response in the UK... to the less than appropriate twitter comments in the US... It infuriates when there is a lack of natural justice... and bullies get away with things...

I don't know how people sit with what has happened this week... other than once more roll our eyes... but generally... our western response to things... most ten times worse than this... tends to expect retributive justice... resignations... sackings... imprisonment... That's how we've defined justice... someone should be punished... and overflowing prisons are an example of that...

We quantify it... x amount of bad... deserves x amount of punishment... and for generations it appears to have held our society together... The rational quid pro quo system makes sense... and at one level works for our society...

You only have to go to the bible... to justify it... And if you only look at the early biblical passages... you'll find the examples of a punitive and retributive God...

The problem with that as faith people...we can often stop at the bit that suits us... We familiarise ourselves with only one part of the bible... when in truth the bible is far more complicated... nuanced... mature... offering an evolving relationship with faith...

If we wish to be faithful and prophetic in the world... and heavens this world need prophets more than anything at the moment... to restore a badly broken moral compass... we have to read on...

And we don't have to read on too far... to meet a God... who does not justify those who believe in retributive justice...

It's not that God has changed over these few biblical pages... so much as our experience of God changes... as our faith evolves...

Belief in a retributive God... suits the ego... especially if you believe God is on your side... But if the universe is shaped by such a retributive God... that tit for tat justice... then we are part of a very unsafe and dangerous universe... because it doesn't take long before we end up on the wrong side of that tit for tat...

The law will always trip us up... because the law is limited... narrow... and you may want to read the Sermon on the Mount or much of Romans or Galatians... to see the Bible's insights to that...

In actual fact... the Biblical notion of justice... and Hosea is one such illustration (along with Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel)... the Bible's notion of justice is quite different...

It is quite apparent... God's justice is actually restorative...

Let's paraphrase Hosea for the moment to see this... The Israelites have broken the covenant... again... They have wandered away from God... again... they have broken rules and laws and religion... again... They have been given a second chance... and a third... but they have failed in each... and Hosea chastises them for that...

He uses God's words against the nation... He lists the transgressions... and you can feel the displeasure... and disappointment... then continues... "And here's what God will do...

...God... will love you... more than ever"...

It is a startling moment every time it happens... and personally it is why this passage is my favourite in all the Bible... You deserve to be divorced from God... you deserve to be let

go... you deserve the punishment suitable to a thin-skinned... two-faced nation... and the prophet... reciting Gods words continues...

"But my heart will not let me do that... I am God and not human... I love you too much"...

God will love them into wholeness... God will pour out gratuitous... unbelievable... unaccountable... irrefutable love that you will finally be unable to resist... as the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr puts it...

God punishes us by loving us more... and it is there spread out across the Bible... for us to gasp... but despite that... we continue to naively and wrongly shape our society and our populist western world... imagining fear and anger and intimidation and threat and punishment will lead people into love...

Where has that ever worked... You don't lead people to the highest level of motivation and morality... by teaching them and offering them the lowest...

But such is our hardwired politics of retribution... we've even interpreted our own central story of salvation in such a way... and it has damaged our humanity... A Christ who came to pay the price of our sin... who died on a cross to take away our sin... and in substitutionary atonement... faced the wrath of God... instead of us... A salvation based on retribution...

But that is a modern twist on salvation... and is horrific... yet is more popular now than it ever has been... with hymns such as 'In Christ Alone' offering the words... *"And on that cross as Jesus died... the wrath of God was satisfied"...*

Where do the prophets speak like that?...

They do not... The prophets are busy screaming at us that God does not want sacrifices...

But the other way to interpret Jesus death... is to recognise a love that keeps on loving... regardless of what we have done... A love that says... there is nothing you can do to me that will stop me loving you... torturing... mocking... even crucifying me... but I will not stop loving you... My love is not a reward for believing in me... but unconditionally and unambiguously loves you regardless of what you do to me or anyone else... Restorative justice...

And if that can be our faith... if that can be our way of living towards each other... not with retribution which is so so popular in the world... but with restorative love... then my friends... I do not believe we would be anywhere close to the misaligned morals and narcissistic politics we experience in our western world...

But it is costly... far more than we are perhaps willing to give...

I was at an open day lecture by a criminologist at Stirling University that my daughter was attending... his comment was that the US and England interestingly tend towards a justice system that is more retributive... while Norway and increasingly Scotland... are closer to a restorative model... You may have seen reports about that this week... where reoffending is less than 20% because of that... while it is more than 50% otherwise... Norwegians spend 98,000 on a prisoner... The UK 40,000...

But it is costly too in how you support and partner the victim... and deal with anger and hurt and lives that have been broken... as an offender is restored... so we need to partner a victim back into community... It is expensive in more than just immediate economic ways...

But that's the faith dilemma... A biblical justice is one where someone is restored back into community... having received a sentence that helps achieve the purpose of punishment... which helps restore... and yet recognises the value of the victim... who is also to be loved back into community... from something we can't imagine experiencing...

It's easier to speak of wrath... of vengeance... quid pro quo... It feels like an equation we can resolve...

It is not the biblical response however... God knows... what we always need... criminal and victim alike... is love enough... in whatever form that might be... to restore both... Removing love and replacing it with wrath... be it on a cross... or twitter feed... leaves us where we are... and fails to offer the possibility of a different future...