

# Divine Justice... Good News?

by Rev Allister Lane

16<sup>th</sup> December 2018

## Luke 3: 7 -18

I wish I had more time this morning to explore what this reading at the start of Luke's Gospel says to us. (I really want to tell you a story)

It's wild stuff...right?

Name-calling...dire warnings...threats...

And it's described at the end as 'good news'! Really? Why...?

In it all there is a strong theme of anticipation.

John is proclaiming something that is going to happen soon – in doing so he stands in a long prophetic tradition, running right through the Old Testament.

What is John anticipation...? Divine justice.

God is going to put things right.

Let's be clear, divine justice is helping the vulnerable, but it is also punishing the wrongdoers.

And so John is anticipating this divine judgement, warning people to repent by taking action and do the right thing before it's too late!

We see this dual understanding of justice in our own context: we know it's important to help and care for the victims of crime; it's also important to see that offenders are held accountable for their crimes.

And yet...

The arrival of Jesus introduces a radical new understanding of divine justice.

To appreciate this new understanding, I need to read to you from the prophet Isaiah.

Chapter 61...

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God; (Is 61: 1-2)

Sound familiar?

Where else in the Bible do we hear this passage of Isaiah read...?

By Jesus, in the fourth chapter of Luke (when he stands in the local synagogue and identifies himself as the anticipated Messiah).

The fascinating thing Jesus does (at the start of his public ministry) is stop short of the full reading of Isaiah's prophecy.

“He has sent me ... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” And he stops (and sits down).

There is no natural break in the Isaiah passage there.

Jesus makes a new ending, and does not continue reading: “and the day of vengeance of our God”

Why not?

He says he has come to bring freedom to the oppressed (that’s the good news), but not bring vengeance (the bad news).

Does Jesus not say this because he doesn’t want to be offensive?

No way – Jesus knew how to be offensive!

One minister I heard describes the new understanding of divine justice: Jesus stops there because he came not to bring the vengeance of God, but to *bear* the vengeance of God.

He did not come to bring judgement – he came to bear judgement.  
He came to take the punishment we deserve.

On the cross Jesus takes the punishment that is ours – the judgement came down on *him*.

This is a radical new understanding of divine justice.

And it means Jesus can stand by us (even when we fail) because he has done what is necessary to put things right.

This understanding of divine justice which Jesus came to bring, is truly ‘good news’.

Let me tell you a story.

This is by Adrian Plass, and expresses the understanding of divine justice we see Jesus bring.

Little Gargi did not know a great deal about anything. No one had ever taken the trouble to teach her.

Once, a lady with a kind voice had told her it was important to know what it means to be “normal”. After that, Gargi used to whisper the word to herself over and over again, wondering what it meant.

“Normal, normal, normal – what is normal?”

She certainly did not know anything about living in a real house with a mother and father and brothers and sisters, because she had never had any of those things. She did know that she lived in a city called Dhaka, and she had heard that Dhaka was just one little part of a huge country called Bangladesh, but she had never seen the endless, flat plains that some of the women talked about.

She had spent the whole of her eight years in the dirty narrow streets of the crowded city slums, and most of each day had been taken up with struggling to get together enough money to make sure that she ate something before night came.

When she was about six, she had found out that grown-up men would give her money if she let them do things to her body that she did not understand. Gargi hated it. Quite often the men would hurt her very much, and none of them cared about her afterwards. The worst ones just threw her way into the gutter, as if she was some dirty, damaged little doll.

For quite a long time now she had been feeling very ill, and she had a misty sort of feeling that it was connected with the things those men did. Her breathing didn't seem to work very well and her head throbbed and her body felt sore

One night the mucky little girl in her ragged dress lay down to sleep on one of the ash-heaps that had been her only bed and pillow for as long as she could remember.

In the middle of the night, sleep turned to something else, and Gargi never again woke to the streets of Dhaka.

Instead she found herself on the side of a grassy hill beneath a quite different sky, one that shone like a huge upside-down silver bowl. At the top of the hill in the distance, Gargi could see a city that shone in the light of the evening sun as if it were made of some very precious metal. It was as different from the city she had known for her eight years as any city could be. She so wanted to be there.

At the bottom of the hill was another place, but this was shrouded in black smoke, and completely hidden from the gold rays of the sun.

Where did she belong?

A man walked past, on his way up the hill.

"Where do I belong, please?" she asked.

He stopped and looked down at her.

"Have you repented of your sins?"

"No."

"Have you made a personal commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ?"

"No."

The man jerked his thumb in the direction of the bottom of the hill and continued on his way without looking back.

Gargi watched him for a moment and then started to walk slowly down towards the dark city. Another man approached her. He was an older person with kind eyes.

"Where do I belong?"

This man asked exactly the same questions as the first one, but tears came into his eyes when he heard the answers. He was still shaking his head sadly as he pointed down the hill and turned to continue on his way, looking back often and still dabbing at his eyes, but never stopping.

At the bottom of the hill, Gargi entered the gloom of the smoke-shrouded city. Searching for a place to be and not knowing what else to do, she chose an ash-heap, higher and hotter than any she had known in Dhaka, and lay down, wondering if this was a place where you were supposed to go to sleep.

Suddenly there was a disturbance. It was a man's voice shouting and calling.

"Okay, where is she? Where is that girl? Where has she gone?"

Gargi, where are you?

Honestly, what is the matter with my own silly, silly people? How could they be so ... ? They'll be the death of me – well, they've already been that, haven't they?

Gargi! Goodness gracious, fancy me having to come all the way down here!  
Gargi, sweetheart, where have you put yourself? Look, I'm not going back without you, so – ah, there you are! Thank goodness...!"

"Do I belong here?"

"Certainly not! Of course not. You're in the wrong place. You belong with me at the top of the hill. Do you want to come with me?"

"Are you allowed to let me?"

The man said slowly: "I can do just whatever I like. "

"Any more questions?"

Gargi looked up into the man's face. Was he cross? No, his eyes were twinkling. As well as being tall and strong he was somehow very gentle looking. He reminded her a little bit of the kind lady.

"Please, I would like to come, but could you tell me – what is normal?"

For a small silent moment the man looked down as if he was going to cry. Then he leaned down and in one swift, powerful movement hoisted the small figure way above his head and onto his shoulders.

"Hold onto my hair, pretty little miss," he said, laughing as he began to stride up the hill. "I'll show you normal."