

How Do We Seek Justice?

a chapel talk by Professor John Hare on 28 October 1999

How do we seek justice? Having spent a year teaching in India has heavily influenced my thinking on this. My salary was the equivalent of what is now 30 dollars a month, just less than a dollar a day. With that amount I supported myself, paying for all food, local travel and entertainment, though my accommodation and medical care was provided free. However, people who had much less than I did, and were in serious need surrounded me. My daughter Catherine, who is 19, is going to work for seven months in Zambia in a village in the countryside that is not on any maps we have been able to find. In Zambia, the per capita income is 380 dollars per year, again about a dollar a day. In the countryside where she will be working, the food starts to run out at the end of the dry season, which is about now. The parents have to make the choice that they get to eat, but their children do not get to eat. It is not uncommon that they lose a third of their children to malnutrition and disease. Moreover, in Zambia the rates of HIV infection are 30-50%, depending whether it is the country or the city. This means that the country is full of orphans, and while the family structure is very strong, often the families cannot feed their own children, let alone those who come to them from extended family. It strikes me, when I am sipping my latte at Woodland Mall, that there is something here that is grotesquely unjust.

So what is justice? I think Thomas Aquinas has a good definition that we can start from. We have tended recently to think of justice as having our rights, as though it was a relation between things, between me and my right. But Aquinas says, no; it is a relation between three things, between two people in relation with each other and thirdly the goods and services that at least one of them needs. One way to put this is that rights are always correlative to obligations or responsibilities. The question of justice is the question of whether the person in need and I are related in such a way that I ought to meet the need. I am starting this talk from Micah 6:8: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." In Micah, the context is one in which the people of Israel have not been doing

justice. God says that the rulers, 'tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones'. This is also the context for the passage on judgement from Matthew 25. I want to set aside two difficulties in this passage. First, it is not the teaching of Scripture as a whole that doing good to those in serious need gets you straight to heaven. And second, Jesus seems to be talking in the passage about the needs of those who are members of his family, and there is a question about whether that means Christians, or whether it applies also, in a Mother Theresa like way, to all those in need whether they are Christians or not. This does not matter too much in the present context because most of the Zambians my daughter will meet will be Christians. Setting that aside, the point is, I think, that when we serve those in need we are serving Christ. The justice relation is thus in fact a relation between four things: between me, the person in need, the goods and services that person needs, and Christ. Since I ought to serve Christ, I ought to serve those in need.

Now I want to ask you a question: Suppose you are going to Studio 28 for a movie, and it costs 7 dollars. It occurs to you, for 7 dollars I could keep one of those children in Zambia alive for a week. How do you justify going to the movie? We might ask the question, which is more important to Christ: my seeing the movie or that child's life? I am not standing in front of you as one who knows how to live at ease with this question. There are certain things to say. Maybe it is an important movie, full of beauty and truth. But what if it is Rocky VI? Maybe I need to see it to do my job well, as an interpreter of the culture; but perhaps Rocky I to V were enough for that? Maybe I am in danger of burning out if I do not get some relaxation and recreation. But is the movie really necessary for this? Maybe this is a good chance to have some time with my children. And I do think I can justify spending more on my own family, because I have been given special charge of them? But is this movie really the best way to spend time with my family? I think that when all this has been said, we will still be left with the sense that justice requires a lower standard of living than most of us currently live. I find this question a tormenting one, and it can lead to

self-hatred and hatred of the whole North American way of life. It is, of course, not just the movie, but the CD player, the new couch, the down jacket. The question can also lead to despair, because the extent of the need is so great and my resources are pitifully small.

I do not know how to answer this question, but there is something I have found helpful. It is to return to Micah 6:8 and see that the last requirement helps with the first. We are to walk humbly with our God. And God also does justice and loves kindness. To walk humbly with God is to give God the initiative in putting us into the situations and the relations in which our justice is to be done. I want to propose to you the principle of providential proximity. The word proximus, from which proximity comes, means 'next to' in Latin, and is the word for neighbor in the parable of the Good Samaritan. God put the Samaritan traveler next to, proximate to, the wounded man lying by the side of the road. When my daughter Catherine goes to her village in Zambia, I think that becomes, by extension, through her, my village. It is not that I have to face the needs of the entire world with my inadequate resources; God has providentially given me these needs, these people to serve. Perhaps you belong to a church that supports through the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee or the Mennonite Central Committee some particular villages in Bangladesh, where they have found their wells poisoned. By extension through them, these become your villages and their water your water. Perhaps you have been involved in one of your courses with a service learning component that puts you in touch with some pregnant teenagers at Park School. These become your neighbors. This principle means that you have to be paying very close attention to what God may be telling you. Most of the institutions around you will be trying to block the justice message. When you go to Woodland Mall, the retailers do not want this question I have been raising to enter into your mind while you are shopping. They want you to think about what you want, not about what others need. But I think God will not let you alone, and you need to be listening for him. Listen for who God is putting you next to. But also, remember that God loves

kindness, including kindness to you. Jesus' own life had celebration in it, as did the life God prescribed for the people of Israel. If you give God the initiative, you can trust him to have your good in mind as well as the good of those he sends you to serve.

I want to end with the story of one of my neighbors. He lives a block from me in Eastown. I will call him Joe. He was born when his mother was 13, and because she smoked and drank throughout the pregnancy, he was born with some cognitive damage. His mother agreed to let my wife be a mentor to her. I think an important reason was that my wife did not belong to the government, for Joe's mother does not trust the government. But it has been hard going. The mother went on to have four more children in rapid order, and the household now has eight children, three of school age. She grew up herself in an abusive household, and she has abused her children. My wife once saw a cigarette burn on Joe's leg. She contacted the child protective services. They asked her what would happen if, when they came, they found the evidence ambiguous and left. The answer is that Joe would be severely beaten. They advised taking no action, saying that negligence was much easier to prove than abuse. None of the children have gone to Headstart, and often do not go to school. This is because no one gets up in the morning, and there are no clean clothes. Does Joe deserve any of this? Does he have a real chance? What is it that he needs? Again, I don't have much of an answer, but something helpful. He needs people like my wife, and a whole team of people. People who can check on whether the kids get to school and help when they don't. People who can help get the kids shots and vaccinations and birth certificates. People who can show the mother alternative ways of living, and persevere with her through the rough going. It is not easy, and it will probably not be enough. But those people might be you.