Cardinal Virtues: Justice

Justice is one of the four cardinal virtues which the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas borrowed from the Greek philosopher Aristotle and incorporated into Christian theology.

Justice comes in a range of forms. Distributive justice is about who gets what. Procedural justice is about whether people are treated fairly. Retributive justice is about punishing those who do wrong. Restorative justice is about putting right what is wrong in the world. When you think of God as judge, which kind of justice comes most readily to mind?

In the UK, the Ministry of Justice is responsible for courts, prisons, the probation service and attendance centres: the focus is almost exclusively on retributive justice. All too often evangelicals have thought of God’s justice primarily in such terms, focusing on his wrath against sin, which could only be satisfied by Christ making satisfaction for us through his death on the cross. One criticism of this view is that it makes God’s justice something to be feared rather than welcomed, and it can privatise our faith to such an extent that we lack a proper degree concern for the victims of injustice in our world. What do you think? How important or helpful is this view of the atonement? Do Christians sometimes have too narrow a view of what justice entails?

Tear Fund was set up to expand the faith of evangelicals beyond a narrow, unhealthy focus on personal salvation. They tap into God’s concern for justice in their 14-point Charter for Justice for churches:

1. We commit to living a life of justice, seeking to do justice in the world through the ways we live and act, and by challenging systems of injustice to reduce inequality around us.

***Economic justice:***

2. We commit to supporting entrepreneurship and the positive role of business to bring dignity, livelihoods, and foster a flourishing society.

3. We commit to being responsible consumers, asking the questions of how the people and places involved in our food, clothes and purchases are treated, choosing to buy ethically and calling on corporations to provide fair wages and just working conditions.

4. We commit to calling on governments and corporations to cancel the debts of economically marginalised countries and pursue trade practices that are built on fairness and equity.

***Racial justice:***

5. We commit to eliminating racial disparities through launching or engaging with programmes in areas such as education, economic marginalisation, healthcare, employment, political representation and others.

6. We commit to fostering reconciliation where there are racial and ethnic divisions within our church and society.

7. We commit to calling on governments to eradicate policies that perpetuate racism through public and private institutions, and prevent the introduction of new policies to the same effect.

***Climate justice:***

8. We commit to preaching and teaching on the biblical basis for God’s love for the whole of creation, and our duty to respond to the climate crisis.

9. We commit to investigating and reducing our plastic use and carbon footprint in any church buildings we own or use, and encouraging our members to do the same at home.

10. We commit to calling on governments to take action and follow through on their promises to tackle the climate crisis, and move to a greener economy that brings justice and helps reduce inequality.

***Gender justice:***

11. We commit to promoting a liberating biblical understanding of the inherent worth and dignity of both men and women, and to practising the full equality and participation of women and men in all aspects of the church and society.

12. We commit to challenging and condemning all forms of gender-based violence in the church and society, and to providing and advocating for the adequate provision of counselling and pastoral care, healthcare, and criminal justice for survivors of gender-based violence.

***Religious justice:***

13. We commit to standing in prayer with our Christian sisters and brothers who are experiencing persecution, and with all those oppressed because of their religious beliefs. We commit to championing the freedom, peace and reconciliation that Christ modelled.

14. We commit to calling on governments to eradicate policies that allow for the mistreatment and marginalisation of individuals and communities because of their religious beliefs, and to prevent the introduction of new policies to the same effect.

Tear Fund have provided Bible studies on this theme on their website: [the\_well\_justic\_charter\_bible\_studies\_aw.pdf (tearfund.org)](https://www.tearfund.org/-/media/tearfund/files/campaigns/charter/the_well_justic_charter_bible_studies_aw.pdf)

How do you respond to this? Do aspects of this Charter challenge you in any way, and how should we respond as a church?

When we look at the book of Judges, we may identify with Arthur Cundall’s comment in the Tyndale Commentary ‘The English title is apt to be misleading, since it conveys the idea of a group of men whose principal task was in the legal sphere, arbitrating in disputes among men. A cursory reading of Judges will show that this was, in fact, a subsidiary function of its leading characters. The clue to the connotation of the Hebrew may be found in 2:16, “And the Lord raised up judges, which saved them out of the hand of those that spoiled them” (RV).’ In point of fact, the only judge who exercised a judicial function was a woman (4:4-5)! The Judges delivered and rescued God’s people when they were oppressed.

God’s priorities for those who dispense justice are set out in Psalm 82:3-4. So when God says he loves justice (Isaiah 61.8), that does not mean he loves judicial proceedings or passing judgment on people. Psalm 146:5-9 celebrates the distributive, procedural and restorative aspects of God’s judgment. Are there aspects of God’s justice for which you want to praise or thank him, maybe because you have experienced them yourself?

The word often translated ‘righteousness’ in the New Testament is translated as ‘justice’ in Acts 17:31 (NIV); Acts 24:25 (NRSV); Hebrews 11:33; Revelation 19:11 (NIV). The import of two of Jesus’ well-known sayings can beJu changed if we replace ‘righteousness’ with ‘justice’: what difference does it make if it is those who hunger and thirst for justice who are filled (Matthew 5:6), and what difference could it make if we made it our priority to seek God’s kingdom and his justice (Matthew 6:33)?

O Jesus, King of the poor,

shield this night

those who are imprisoned without charge,

those who have 'disappeared'.

Cast a halo of your presence around those

who groan in sorrow or pain.

Protect those whose livelihoods are threatened.

Encourage those forbidden to worship.

Encompass your little ones

gone hungry to sleep,

cold and fitfully waking.

Guide your witnesses for peace.

Safeguard your workers for justice.

Encircle us with your power, compass us with your grace, embrace your dying ones, support your weary ones, calm your frightened ones —

and as the sun scatters the mist on the hills,

bring us to a new dawn,

when all shall freely

sit at table in your kingdom,

rejoicing in a God who saves them.

Kate McIlhagga, from *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*