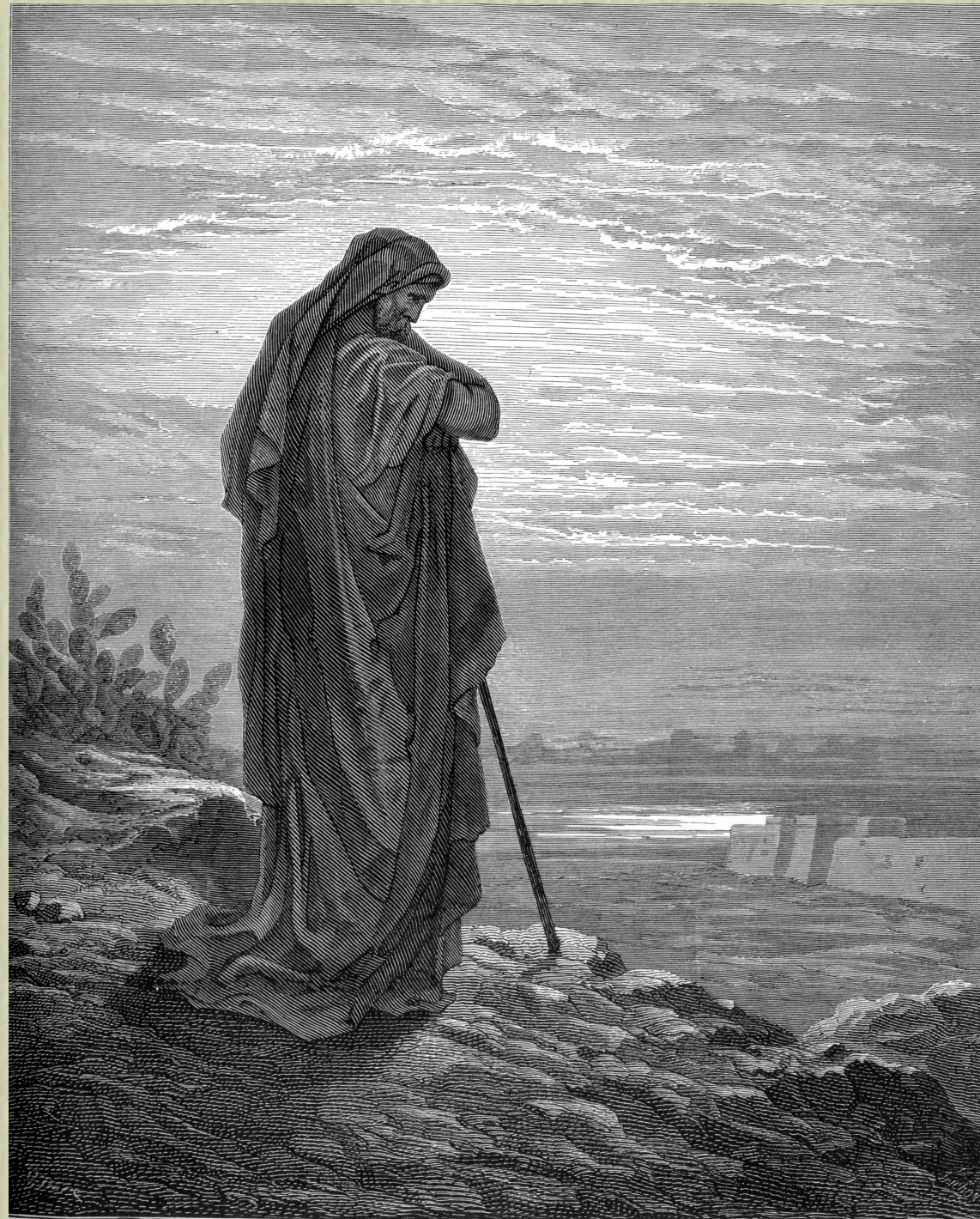


09. Justice in the Old Testament



Laudato Si' n. 36

‘Caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation. But the cost of the damage caused by such selfish lack of concern is much greater than the economic benefits to be obtained. Where certain species are destroyed or seriously harmed, the values involved are incalculable. We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration.’

Justice

Judgments are just when they are in accordance with the truth:
with the way things really are

in the legislative, judicial, and executive arms of government

in communities

in our personal lives

This is hugely important, and concerns every aspect of our lives

Justice

The word for justice in the Greek Bible (both Old and New Testaments) is **dikaïosynê**, from the Greek **dikê** which speaks of right order in nature and in society.

It can be translated '**righteousness**' (right-wise-ness'
'wise as to what is right')

Something is 'just' when it is right:
when it is in accordance with divinely established order.

I. Justice is fundamental in our faith tradition

‘Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s’(Deuteronomy 1:16-17).

‘Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.’
(Proverbs 31:9).

‘Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky’(Psalm 85:10-11)

1. Liberated ('redeemed') from slavery: The Exodus

Exodus 3:7-8

'YHWH said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

Exodus 3:11-12

Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you".

Exodus 3:13-14

Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses,

“I will be who I will be.” I will be with you

Exodus 3:15

God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘YHWH has sent me to you.

Exodus 6:6-7

‘I am YHWH and I will free you from slavery.
I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.’

2. Creation is meant to be a paradise. Human beings created in God's image to care for the 'garden of YHWH.'

'God said, "Let us make human beings in our own image and likeness and let them rule over [shepherd, be responsible for] creation' (Genesis 1:26).

'YHWH God formed human beings from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and YHWH God planted a garden in Eden, and there he put the human beings he had made' (Genesis 2:7-8).

'God saw everything that he had made, and, indeed, it was very good' (Genesis 1:31).

3. BUT human beings kept choosing slavery (sin)

‘No one living is righteous before you’(Psalm 143:2).

‘How can a human being be righteous before God?

How can one born of woman be pure?

If even the moon is not bright

and the stars are not pure in his sight,

how much less a human being’(Job 25:4-6).

4. Israel: chosen for a Mission: live justly and take this justice to the nations

A conviction that God's commitment is to the whole human race,
and that God is just ('righteous') and so God will always be faithful
to this commitment.

'This is my commitment to you, Abraham:
you will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations'(Genesis 17:4).

To Isaac: 'I will be with you, and will bless you'(Genesis 26:3).

To Jacob: 'I will be with you'(Genesis 31:3).

'Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God.
God heard their groaning
and remembered his commitment to Abraham'(Exodus 2:23-24).

To Moses: 'I will be with you'(Exodus 3:12).

Exodus 3:15

God said to Moses: ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites,
‘YHWH, the God of your ancestors,
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob,
has sent me to you.’

To Joshua: ‘I will be with you’(Deuteronomy 31:23 (also Joshua 1:5; 3:7).

To Gideon: ‘I will be with you’(Judges 6:16).

To David: ‘Nathan said to David: Do all that you have in mind,
for God is with you’(1Chronicles 17:2)

To David's heir: 'David said to his son Solomon:

Be strong and of good courage, and act.

Do not be afraid or dismayed;

for YHWH God, my God, is **with you**.

He will not fail you or forsake you'(1Chronicles 28:20).

To Israel: 'When you pass through the waters, I will be **with you**;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you'(Isaiah 43:2).

The promised Messiah: 'The young woman is with child

and will bear a son, and you will name him

Immanu el. [with-us God]'(Isaiah 7:14)

Living justly

Burned into the psyche of the ancient people of Israel was their sense of identity as a people who were once slaves residing in Egypt. Their God looked on them with compassion and led them out from slavery to freedom and to their own land. Among their core moral principles, therefore, was that they should not oppress a foreigner residing among them, nor neglect the poor.

As part of the Covenant Code, at the heart of the Constitution of ancient Israel, we read: ‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry’ (Exodus 22:21-23).

Obviously, not everyone was faithful to this imperative, especially among those who wielded political and economic power. Again and again the prophets spoke out against this failure, especially when it was supported by legislation and administration that made it hard, if not impossible, for the poor to find redress. Amos proclaimed:

‘Thus says the Lord: I will not revoke my punishment on Israel, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way’ (Amos 2:6-7).

Religious cult, too, is phoney when it disregards justice and has no regard for the poor:

‘I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream’(Amos 5:21-24).

Isaiah is just as vehement in denouncing the lack of compassion and the failure of justice:

‘Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!’(Isaiah 5:8).

‘Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!’(Isaiah 10:1-2).

What God wants of his people is ‘to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke’(Isaiah 58:6).

Propaganda with no concern for truth was then, as it still is, an instrument used by those with the power to further their own agenda and hide the lack of justice in their governing of the people.

Isaiah denounced leaders who ‘conceive lying words, and utter them in a sincere way. Justice is pushed aside and honesty is made to stand at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square and honesty cannot find a place’(Isaiah 59:13-14).

In the period just before the Babylonian destruction of Judah, Jeremiah criticised king Jehoiakim for not following the example of his father, Josiah:

‘Woe to him who builds his house by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, “I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,” and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and act with justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence’ (Jeremiah 22:13-17).

II. God is just = faithful to who God is / truthful

We may fail to live justly (according to the divine order)
but God remains just.

Laudato Si' n. 245

‘God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward.’

‘In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”, for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.’

“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (*Psalms* 33:6). This tells us that the world came about as the result of a decision, not from chaos or chance, and this exalts it all the more. The creating word expresses a free choice ... Creation is of the order of love. God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things: “For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made” (*Wis* 11:24). Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection ... Consequently, we can ascend from created things to the greatness of God and to his loving mercy.’

‘I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel’ (Amos 9:14).

‘The favours of YHWH are not all past.

His kindnesses are not exhausted.

Every morning they are renewed.

Great is God’s faithfulness’ (Lamentations 3:22).

Call to live in God’s likeness, to leave slavery and to journey to freedom: to live a life of justice and to summon all peoples to do the same; to be just as God is just.

God remains faithful and the mission remains

Isaiah 42:6-7

‘I am YHWH, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.’

Isaiah 45:21

‘I am YHWH, a righteous God and a Saviour;
there is no one besides me.’

Isaiah 58:6-9

‘Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of YHWH shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and YHWH will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say: Here I am.’

Isaiah 49:5-6

YHWH formed me in the womb

to be his servant,

to bring Jacob back to him,

and that Israel might be gathered to him,

for I am honoured in the sight of YHWH,

and my God has become my strength –

YHWH says,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob

and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Isaiah 51:2-6

‘Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you ...
For YHWH will comfort Zion ...
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of YHWH ...
Give heed to me, my nation for a teaching will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
I will bring near my deliverance,
my salvation has gone out and I will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me ...
my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never end.’

7. Return from exile. Promise of full future salvation

The return from Exile was the first step in this deliverance. Judah, however, was still under foreign rule.

The writers of second temple Judaism looked forward eagerly to YHWH's liberation of Judah, so that Judah would carry out the mission given to Abraham.

Many thought that YHWH would do this by raising up a second Moses, a Messiah.



Zechariah 2:10-11

Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion!

For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says YHWH.

Many nations will join themselves to YHWH on that day,
and will be my people; and I will dwell in your midst.

And you shall know that YHWH of hosts has sent me [Zechariah] to you.

Zechariah 8:20-23

Thus says YHWH of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, “Come, let us go to entreat the favour of YHWH, and to seek YHWH of hosts; I myself am going.” Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek YHWH of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favour of YHWH. Thus says YHWH of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

Tobit 14:5-7 (a 3rd century BC Romance)

‘God will again have mercy on his scattered people, and will bring them back into the land of Israel; and they will rebuild the temple of God, but not like the first one until the period when the times of fulfilment shall come. After this they all will return from their exile and will rebuild Jerusalem in splendour; and in it the temple of God will be rebuilt, just as the prophets of Israel have said concerning it.

Then the nations in the whole world will all be converted and worship God in truth. They will all abandon their idols, which deceitfully have led them into their error; and in righteousness they will praise the eternal God. All the Israelites who are saved in those days and are truly mindful of God will be gathered together; they will go to Jerusalem and live in safety forever in the land of Abraham, and it will be given over to them. Those who sincerely love God will rejoice, but those who commit sin and injustice will vanish from all the earth.’

Jesus of Nazareth: God's Promised Messiah

‘They will name him Immanuel, which means:
God is with us’ (Matthew 1:23).

‘You will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free.’
(John 8:32)

‘If the Son sets you free
then you are truly free.’
(John 8:36).

