

# SOCIAL JUSTICE: RESOURCES, LEGACY, TREASURES OF SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

Salisbury Cathedral has had a long history of involvement with social justice. From its beginning the cathedral has held a strong position of authority in local matters, supported a just government and acted prophetically for the betterment of the people, the environment and for peace between peoples.

Social justice is a very broad topic and can at times be misunderstood and at other times be a catch-all for many different types of work. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) offers us this definition: 'Justice is a certain rectitude of mind whereby a man does what he ought to do in the circumstances confronting him.' As a theologian, Aquinas believed that justice is a form of natural duty owed by one person to another and not enforced by any human-made law. This reflects the Christian view that, before God, all people are equal and must treat each other with respect. Obedience to natural principles of morality satisfies a duty owed to God, and the outcome of social justice is driven by the tenets of morality embedded in the religion.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the concept of social justice has largely been associated with the political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) who proposed that 'Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason, justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many. Therefore in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled. An injustice is tolerable only when it is necessary to avoid an even greater injustice. Being first virtues of human activities, truth and justice are uncompromising.'

The principles of justice and social justice have a effect on how we live out our lives and how we live out our faith. We are called to incorporate these concepts and practices into our lives; but our lives can be quite complex without adding to the mix. There are any number of projects in my life that I have measured from afar and bracketed as out of my league - silly things like programming the VCR or running a marathon, and deeper things, like 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:43).

Unconsciously, we sort challenges into categories like do-able, conceivable and incurable. Many of us have put injustice in the last category; and understandably so. What could be more difficult? What could be more intractable? Whether it is local issues or foreign uprisings, or corruption, violent and coercive oppressors intimidate us.

Coercion is a thread throughout the discussion of social justice and injustice. Coercion is typically thought to carry with it several important concepts, including diminishing a person's or group of peoples' freedom and responsibility, and that it is wrong and a violation of human rights. Coercion is often associated with terrorism and typically, though not always, targets innocents and non-combatants. Thus, coercion is a matter of long-standing political and ethical concern.

In order to enter into a dialogue about social justice, and the effects of injustice, we must begin by developing a frame in which to understand these issues. The cathedral holds a number of treasures which provide this frame or window into the larger discussion. To start with, among the treasures of the cathedral are the Prisoner of Conscience windows, dedicated to those who suffer for the sake of conscience at the hands of oppressive regimes; the Sudan Chapel, reflecting the work of Salisbury diocese in helping the church with medical mission, education and advocacy in the world; and the best preserved original Magna Carta held in the Chapter House, the original human rights document.

Let's look at the windows dedicated to the Prisoner of Conscience. Amnesty International defines a prisoner of conscience as anyone imprisoned because of their race, religion, colour, language, sexual orientation, belief or lifestyle, so long as they have not used or advocated violence. It also refers to those who have been imprisoned and/or persecuted for the non-violent expression of their conscientiously held beliefs.

Such imprisonment is a very real example of injustice and coercion in the world today. The windows, as art, depict Jesus as a prisoner of conscience, persecuted and wrongfully executed for his beliefs and for his non-violent teachings among the people of Israel. The window depicts the issues of betrayal, trial, execution; and also redemption and resurrection; saving grace for all.

Each month at the cathedral we pray for a person or group of people who have been harassed, arrested, imprisoned or executed because of their conscience. This presents us, who are trying also to understand how to pray for people who persecute us, with a real way to focus on this kind of prayer. It also opens a door for us to help re-categorise some of our priorities from incurable to conceivable or maybe even to do-able.

Within the Chapter House of the cathedral is one of the finest exemplars of the original Magna Carta in the world. Magna Carta retains a symbolic importance in many other countries, especially those seeking to ensure liberty in the face of oppression. This is why it is so important, why UNESCO has awarded it Memory of the World status, and why Salisbury cathedral, as holder of this universal treasure, desires to share its meaning and legacy with people from all nations.

Magna Carta established the principle that even the highest authority in the land is subject to the law, and that the limits of authority can be defined by a written

document. This made it effectively the first human rights document and it continues to influence codes of law. Although it comes from a feudal, monarchical and baronial society, Magna Carta's clauses on social justice sowed the seeds of modern democracy and liberty. Personal liberties were indicated by Magna Carta. At the time they were given to restricted sections of society, but the important concepts of freedom, dignity, and peace have become central to later laws.

The basic concepts of human rights – in the case of Magna Carta, of the rights of the subject under their king - are timeless and are echoed in the Bible and other sacred writings. They are still the common language of governments and faith communities today.

The Magna Carta formed the first link in a chain of human rights which includes the English Bill of Rights of 1688, the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the European Convention on Human Rights of 1953, and the Convention on the Rights of Children of 1959.

During May, the cathedral introduced a full and new interpretation of the Magna Carta in the Chapter House, tracing its origins and bringing focus on its impact on human rights; its effect on the making of laws in many countries; and how communities can develop and continue to support those who are vulnerable and to respond to the larger issues of oppression and injustice. We are all interrelated. We are all part of one creation.

Each of these treasures provides an opportunity for teaching visitors about specific aspects of social justice in the world and why we need to be part of the greater community in helping others to understand what justice and freedom and dignity mean in the world.

Each month all are invited to join us in Prayers for Peace and Justice in the Trinity Chapel. This provides a space where we as a community can pray together about the issues affecting the world today.

Salisbury cathedral and its ongoing development of social justice programmes will offer a number of opportunities to understand better the issues of social justice and, maybe, more importantly, injustice in the world today. The cathedral's programmes will be designed to teach, challenge, provoke, and shepherd people about the issues that are facing the world. It offers a door into understanding how to think about some very tough issues concerning freedom, dignity and peace and it does this in a safe environment. Salisbury cathedral provides both a place of prayer and a place of deep learning.

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