

Loving Justice: Shall we rebuild the ruined cities

Isaiah 61:1-11

1 Thessalonians 5:14-24

John 1:4-6; 19-23

In 2012 a man fell from an Angolan airlines flight as it came into London. He'd hidden himself in the undercarriage of the plane and, whether or not he had survived the temperatures at thirty thousand feet I don't know but when the wheels came down for landing he fell. He was, therefore, an illegal immigrant. It happened again in 2019 when a man falling from a Kenyan airlines flight in the same way startled someone sunbathing in their London garden. 'Illegal migrants.

When thirty nine Vietnamese people were found dead in the back of a lorry the press were duly sombre and sympathetic, but still the term illegal migrants was used. It's used of every soul crossing the wintry channel in boats, including those who died this week.

What does the term 'illegal' add to these descriptions? Of course, there might be a law against trespassing on the runway or interfering with the workings of a plane. It might not be lawful to cling to the axle of a lorry in the tunnel or slip past border control, but is illegal really the key adjective? Perhaps foolhardy would be better, or courageous some might venture. Desperate, maybe? Determined, tenacious, or forlorn? But, illegal?

It was surely right that the traffickers of the Vietnamese citizens were acting illegally, and are now in prison and do not count among those we would like Isaiah to release from captivity. The cynical providers of dangerously inadequate boats should likewise be prosecuted. We can add the good old fashioned adjective evil to illegal for the commoditisation of human beings, and for the subsequent transactions planned for any on their way to slavery in Britain. But for the migrants themselves, "illegal" just doesn't seem relevant. Is it so persistent because they are coming to a country that loves justice?

We know the term is doing some important, ugly political work, safely categorising desperate people as undesirable. Moreover, some months of debate make it rather unclear whether the government was presenting

an illegal immigration....bill,

or an illegal...immigration bill.

Our foreign secretary sternly told Israel this week to adhere to international law. Meanwhile Energy Security minister Graham Stuart, rushed back from the Climate Summit to vote on the said bill with which the government says we will "disapply" elements of our own human rights act. When we have to invent a word like "disapply," we have probably already admitted to ourselves that we are doing something wrong. Some politicians were proud and delighted to leave Europe and

are very eager to loosen all ties with the European standards on human rights, including the right to family life. This is taking effect now as some seek to forbid people from overseas, working here on average salaries, from bringing their family to live with them. If any party claims to be the party of Law and Order or "family values" we might want to shine an even brighter light on them to check what they mean. Wherever we are on the political spectrum and whether we think the Rwanda policy is a good idea or a disgrace, we surely find Isaiah's words, God's words, clarifying:

'I, the Lord, love justice.'

When the God who loves justice calls for the devastated cities to be rebuilt, the restoration looks like this: liberty for the captive and the oppressed, binding up the broken hearted. That God's kingdom proclaims release to captives shines light on the suicide of a migrant imprisoned on the Bibby Stockholm barge this week. That God longs to bind up the broken hearted highlights the bleakness of that place.

After their desperate journey, it is no wonder that someone reach a point of screaming frustration and dismay and consider ending their life in such circumstances when they *had* thought they had finally reached a country that loves justice. While the prison barge optics do their political work for the right, home office announcements say 'welfare is the highest priority.' As for optics, our Prime Minister has taken the second photo-opportunity in a few weeks alongside the homophobic Italian premier, friend of homophobic Victor Orban, friend of homophobic Vladimir Putin: an ugly axis of people who love hideous oppressive laws, rather than loving justice; people who legislate against the right to family life for gay people. Irrespective of party, we need to be free to say if we're uncomfortable with our premier's chosen proud associations.

Meanwhile we wonder which destroyed or dangerous cities and communities those incarcerated on the barge have fled from. They must wonder if they will ever be rebuilt. We surely wonder if Gaza can ever be rebuilt. It's hard to imagine as we look helplessly at every smashed up building and rubble strewn street. But Isaiah, in no less bleak a time, insists that they can. He speaks of God's "recompense" and "vengeance," only to startle us with the fact that for God they are expressed not in destruction but rebuilding; not in violence, but in healing and growth. Justice for God it seems is a minimum standard of behaviour. S/He expresses "vengeance" for past wrong by giving a new start. Built upon a foundational judgement of justice, God then proceeds to build an edifice of grace. The Anointed One whom John announces will likewise set a baseline of justice. (In Luke particularly he re-sets our understanding of the relationship between rich and poor.) Then he will demonstrate that justice is not an end goal, but rather becomes the foundation upon which a city of grace and mercy can be restored.

Human vengeance looks like this (*Gaza photo*). Vengeance claims to arise righteously from a love of justice, righting a wrong. It's striking how irrational it is, though. Claiming the attacks on 7th October were in any way justified by past events is ludicrous. If anyone organising that wickedness cared for the well-being of

Palestinians they were deluded. As for rescuing hostages: how many were released after negotiation? 100+. How many have been released by force? One. Then three tragically killed by Israeli soldiers - as tragic as the killing of Palestinian citizens - so we're at minus two now.

Human vengeance has little to do with justice. And we need a sharp eye to notice when claimed love for the law conceals contempt for justice. How is it that the vengeful and the law-lovers who hold justice in contempt get to claim to be the realists?

At first glance it may appear that a wholesome city that loves justice looks like this (*Westminster photo*) but letting Isaiah and John clarify our vision we might see the crumbling away of integrity; the worse than careless destruction of foundational humane care, the hypocritical claims of loving legality while tearing up inconvenient principles; taking what should be a source of dignity and pride, internationally agreed human rights laws, and turning them into rhetorical negatives massaging nationalist pride. "Foreign courts." There is more than one way to ruin a city. Bombs destroy buildings. Deceit, arrogance, desperate power play, and more subtle erosions of justice, fake righteousness and prejudicial language, passive aggression, resentment: all that distorts British politics today crumble away the integrity of a city, and suffocate grace. "I, the Lord, love justice. Repair the ruined cities."

In differently testing times, when the regime was not kind, but the grace of the Gospel still shone in their hearts, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to hold on: to pray without ceasing; to find anything you can give thanks for, even in the worst of circumstances. "Do not quench the Spirit, he said. Do not despise the words of prophets but test everything. Hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil." I therefore need to check and watch for the resentment that brews within me, surely simmering beneath the surface of this clumsy sermon. Paul believed God is faithful and will achieve restoration of communities that do not repay evil for evil. Isaiah believed it hundreds of years before him. We must hold on. As we do so, sobered by the realisation that, Isaiah and John ringing in our ears, it's not only Gaza that falls under the blazing love of God's gaze.