

## Advent 2 2021 – Child Abuse, the Unforgivable Sin?

Malachi 3 vv 1-4 p961, Philippians 1 vv 1-11 p1178, Luke 3 vv 1-6 p1029

When I feel moved to pray about a court case which is in the news, I pray both that the truth will come out and that the court will know what to do with the truth when the facts are known. The truth is important. There have been too many cases of people being wrongfully convicted, unjustly punished, their reputations destroyed and their lives ruined, while the real villain gets away with his crimes. Wrongful acquittal is also a scandal. The victim is denied justice. The perpetrator escapes what is due to him and may become complacent about committing further offences. Public confidence in the judicial system is undermined.

There is the awkward fact that justice is not always done. Rightly, we believe that it is better that nine guilty men go free than that one innocent person is unjustly convicted. Imagine what it would be like to be found guilty of a vile crime which you hadn't committed. For this reason, courts are only supposed to convict those whose guilt is beyond reasonable doubt. Inevitably, this does sometimes mean that the guilty go free, supposedly without a stain on their character. Judges, magistrates and juries have grave responsibilities and are always in need of our prayers.

But, assuming that the whole truth has come out and that the court has correctly come to a guilty verdict, what should the court do with that truth? A sentence has to be passed. The sentence should reflect the demands of justice. The criminal should get what he deserves. The sentence should, if at all possible, have the effect of reforming the offender. The sentence ought to deter other people from committing the same offence. In some cases, justice is rightly tempered with mercy. Sticking my neck out here, I think it is right to say that the demands of justice ought never to be exceeded even if the aim is to reform the offender or to deter others. An extreme example of this might be to introduce the death penalty for parking on double yellow lines. It would certainly be a deterrent and anyone convicted of the offence would never do it again, but it would not be proportionate. It would be unjust. I mention this because it seems to me that more severe fines and longer prison sentences are being brought in by governments of all parties both for deterrence and for public protection rather than as a proportionate response to the seriousness of the offence committed. By public protection I mean keeping a person in prison after he has served the tariff for the crime he committed because the authorities are not satisfied that he will not re-offend.

When I was listening on the radio to the case of those two people who neglected, abused, tortured and finally killed six year old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, I cannot really say what my powerful emotions were, but what I wanted was justice. Those two evil people should get what they deserve. I didn't consider the possibility of their being reformed by their experience of punishment or that anything could be done to redeem them. I discounted deterrence as a factor in sentencing. I very much hope that there are very few people in this world so evil as to do what that man and that woman did to that poor child. If there are other such people, I doubt that the threat of punishment would deter them.

It may be that there are factors in the backgrounds of Arthur's father Thomas Hughes and his stepmother Emma Tustin which go some way towards explaining how they came to be the people they are. We have always to be open to the possibility of having to admit *There but*

*for the grace of God go I, but nothing in their backgrounds, nothing which they may themselves have suffered can justify what they did to little Arthur. Human beings are free to choose what they do with their lives even though it is certainly true that some of us are offered by life a far better range of choices than others receive. Justice, retribution, we have to careful not to exceed the demands of justice by giving in to the desire for revenge, to avenge that poor child for what he suffered. As I write these words, my conscience is pricked by a verse from a much loved Passiontide hymn; *Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies; But the Blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.**

Nevertheless, justice is something we feel strongly about. We ought to get what we deserve. The righteous should be rewarded, the wicked punished. It's a very basic human feeling and there is some evidence that certain animals behave in the same way. Animals which treat other members of the troop fairly and generously are rewarded and looked after when they are in trouble. Self-centred members of the troop may be punished or ostracised, finding themselves at the back of the queue when food is scarce.

When prophets like John the Baptist preach the coming of the Kingdom of God, the Day of the Lord, the Day when Justice shall be done, they strike a chord. We all long for justice. The wicked will get their comeuppance. The innocent will be vindicated. *He hath shewed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away.* Quoting the Magnificat, the song Mary sang when she visited her cousin Elisabeth, then six months pregnant with John the Baptist, herself expecting Jesus, having accepted God's Will for her life revealed to her by the Archangel Gabriel, it is worth noting in passing how often in Scripture the poor are equated with the innocent who will be vindicated and the rich are condemned as their oppressors. *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end* is one of the high points of the Nicene Creed which we say Sunday by Sunday.

The prophets of the Old Testament, John the Baptist, Jesus Himself preach that the Kingdom of God is at hand. At last, justice will be done. But the prophets also warn us not to be so complacent. The prophet Amos says: <sup>5<sup>18</sup></sup> *Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! to what end is it for you? the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light.* <sup>19</sup> *As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.* <sup>20</sup> *Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?* The Day of Judgment – not something for sinners to look forward to. These people have worshipped idols and oppressed the poor. They will indeed receive justice, but they won't like it. The Day of the Lord is something sinners ought to anticipate with fear rather than complacency. Amos also says: <sup>24</sup> *But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.* If you look forward to the Day of the Lord, you must be ready for it. If you want to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God in the hereafter, live your life as a citizen of the Kingdom of God in the here and now. If you want to share in God's Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace in the future, live a just, merciful and peaceful life here on earth. If you are a citizen of God's Kingdom, act like one. Obey God's Law, the Law of His Kingdom. Love Him with all your heart and your neighbour as

yourself. Both John and Jesus preach the same Gospel: *Repent ye for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*

The coming of the Kingdom of God, when He will judge the living and the dead, when everyone will receive what he or she deserves is bad news for sinners. In the light of the holiness of God, we are all sinners. None of us loves God as we ought to love Him. None of us loves his neighbour as he ought to love him. When we compare ourselves to Jesus, the exemplar of what a human life should be, we all fall very far short. We are all sinners and justice, judgment is very bad news for us.

*Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies; But the Blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.* That's the point, isn't it? Sinners though we are, we are forgiven if we turn to Christ, if we repent of our sins, if we put our faith in Him. Our sins are washed away in His Blood. He effects the Atonement, so that through faith in Him, we are at one with God. God gave His *only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.* We are set free from sin and the fear of death through repentance and faith in Christ. We are not complacent that the Day of Judgment will vindicate us while sentencing "real sinners" to perdition. Neither do we dread that day in the knowledge that we ourselves are sinners who do not deserve to dwell in the Presence of God forever. Because we are forgiven in Christ, as St Peter writes (II Peter 3<sup>13</sup>): *We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, in which dwelleth righteousness.* And we live as people who do so anticipate. Read on in chapter 3.

There is one loose end to tie up before we finish this morning. What if the torturers of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes were to repent? Would God forgive them? Can they be redeemed? One of the reasons why people guilty of child abuse were allowed to continue ministering in the Church for so long was a naive belief on the part of the Church authorities that these men could be reformed and had in fact sincerely repented of their sins. It is obvious why the Church would want to give even these sinners another chance, to believe in the possibility of a new beginning free from the taint of sin, but only too often, however sincere the repentance appeared to be, when the opportunity to abuse presented itself again, temptation proved too much and the whole cycle was repeated. We have to be realistic about people. Some only pretend to be reformed. Some sincerely desire to be reformed, but, when it comes to it, aren't strong enough to resist temptation. A person who sincerely repents of terrible crimes and sins may have to recognise that he still deserves to be punished, that he cannot expect people to trust him and that he cannot resume his former life in which he is likely to be faced with the same opportunities to do wrong.

But, if Thomas Hughes and Emma Tustin truly repented, would God forgive them? We may feel like Jonah did when God forgave the evil people of Nineveh, that God by showing mercy had made a fool of his prophet and a mockery of justice, but God told Jonah that he was wrong.

That's why we sing, *The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*