

Defending the Poor

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Sermon by Dan Schrock

January 6, 2013

¹*Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.*

²*May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.*

³*May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.*

⁴*May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.*

⁵*May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.*

⁶*May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.*

⁷*In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound,
until the moon is no more.*

¹⁰*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.*

¹¹*May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.*

¹²*For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.*

¹³*He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.*

¹⁴*From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.*

I

I don't know how it is for you, but sometimes when I read the Bible I get tired of all its talk about justice, righteousness, and peace. Throughout the English Bible, the word "justice" pops up 147 times, the word "righteousness" 241 times, and the word "peace" 256 times. Usually these three words appear in the same passages. After a while it starts to sound like a slogan, a mantra: justice, righteousness, and peace. "Ugh," I sometimes mutter under my breath, "there are those words again." They pop up in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, 2 Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, and Malachi, not to mention almost every book in the New Testament. "Oh no!" I sometimes

say to myself, “there come those old, repetitious words again—justice, righteousness, and peace. I’m a little tired of the Bible throwing them in my face.”

Do you ever feel this way?

Well, here they come again in Psalm 72.

Why do these three words appear so often across such a wide range of biblical texts? The answer that makes the most sense to me is that God must care an awfully lot about justice, righteousness, and peace. These words, and the moral behavior they suggest, must lie at the core of God’s heart. They must be among God’s top priorities.

So here we are again, facing these words in Psalm 72.

II

Psalm 72 is one of ten royal psalms written with Israel’s kings and queens in mind. This particular psalm is a coronation psalm, meaning it was crafted for the crowning of a new king in Jerusalem. We don’t know which king it was first written for, and it’s possible it was used in the coronation ceremonies of many kings.

This psalm is also an intercessory prayer to God for the king. Later in the New Testament, the author of 1 Timothy 2 urges Christians to pray for “kings and all who are in high positions.” Well, here’s an example of that in the Old Testament. This is a prayer that was prayed in public for the public work of the new king.

And what does the prayer say? What does it ask God for? To put it bluntly, this prayer, this psalm, says that the king’s most important job is to carry out justice, righteousness, and peace. It says this plainly in the first four verses:

*¹Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king’s son.*

*²May the king judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.*

*³May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.*

*⁴May the king defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.*

Verse 7 sounds the theme again:

⁷In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound.

Verses 12-14 sums it up:

*¹²For the king delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.*

*¹³The king has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.*

*¹⁴From oppression and violence the king redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.*

Like most biblical texts, this psalm does not get into specific legislative issues. We find nothing here about specific laws that the king should enact about commerce, land ownership, or inheritance. Psalm 72 is also silent about the national budget—on whether people living in the city of Jerusalem should pay more or less taxes than people who live in the rural areas, or on who should receive what percentage of the national income.

Instead Psalm 72 focuses on public policy. It says rather clearly that public policy should focus on making life better for the poor and needy. This is the most important national priority. Psalm 72 uses five verbs to describe how the king ought to act with regard to the nation's most vulnerable citizens. The king should:

- “defend” the cause of the poor (v. 4)
- “deliver” the needy when they call on him (v. 12)
- “pity” the weak (v. 13a)
- “save” the lives of the needy (v. 13b)
- “redeem” them from “oppression and violence” (v. 14)

Again, there's nothing here about specific laws. Instead the burden of the text is to define God's views on broad political, social, and economic policy. The purpose of the text is to name the number one, overarching national priority. Giving justice to the helpless is what kings are for. It's what they're supposed to do.

III

Verse 14, which is the last verse of today's scripture reading, suggests one way for national rulers to grant first priority to the needy—and that is to “redeem” them from

“violence.” While working on this sermon I found an essay by Aaron O’Connell, called “The Permanent Militarization of America.”¹ You should know that Aaron O’Connell is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve and teaches history at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. In spite of his obvious commitment to the U.S. military, he is deeply concerned about this country’s permanent preparations for war. He laments that hardly any of his students at the U.S. Naval Academy remember a time when their country was not at war, and he’s appalled that his students think it’s ordinary to hear of U.S. drone attacks in Yemen. “Few Americans today,” he writes, “are giving sufficient consideration to the full range of violent activities the government undertakes in their names.”

O’Connell wants his fellow Americans to heed the warning that President Eisenhower gave the country back in 1961 about the rise of the military-industrial complex. President Eisenhower, you may recall, was also a military man, a five-star general in the army. Eisenhower was deeply worried about how much money the U.S. was then spending on the military, and how that spending robbed money from poor people. “Every gun that is made,” said Eisenhower in 1953, “every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.” O’Connell says that if Eisenhower were alive today he would “be aghast at our [national] debt, deficits, and still expanding military-industrial complex.”

Today the U.S. spends more on its military than the next 13 countries combined spend on their militaries.² Along with President Eisenhower, Lieutenant Colonel O’Connell argues the military’s portion of the U.S. federal budget is too big. He openly invites Americans to think about decreasing military spending.

¹ *The New York Times*, November 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/05/opinion/the-permanent-militarization-of-america.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed November 9, 2012.

² Jon Healey, “The U.S. Defense Budget: It’s Even Bigger than Obama Suggested,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-ol-defense-budget-size-and-potential-for-cuts-20121023.o.6396267.story>, accessed November 9, 2012.

As a matter of public policy, lowering federal spending on the military would free up money for other uses, including uses that could, in the words of Psalm 72, “redeem the needy from violence” (v. 14).

IV

During this season of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, our worship services have explored the biblical imagery of light and dark. In Psalm 72 we see that God’s light shines in the world when rulers defend, deliver, pity, save, and redeem the poor. This divine light also shone through Jesus, who said quite plainly in Luke 4 that he was bringing “good news to the poor,” “release to the captives,” and freedom to “the oppressed” (v. 18).

Sometimes we might get tired of how often the Bible talks about justice, righteousness, and peace. However, if you and I want to be a biblical people, and if we want the light of God to shine in this world, then we can’t avoid these words and the priorities which they imply. They are central to God’s passion. They are foundational for God’s priorities.