

Old Testament: Jeremiah 23:1-6
New Testament: Luke 23:33-43

Please join me in prayer. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The prophet Jeremiah was active in the southern kingdom of Judah during the time period immediately leading up to, and including, the overthrow of Judah by Babylon and the destruction of the temple. Jeremiah was witness to the moral decay of Judah. He called the people to repentance as he prophesied regarding God's desire for humility and righteousness. And not just individual people, but entire nations. God recognized, and Jeremiah declared, that justice and humility were not just individual struggles in individual hearts, but that those struggles extended to entire nation-states as they struggled with how best to comport themselves to the broader world.

The question becomes then what did this aforementioned "moral decay" that Jeremiah was witnessing look like? The fact that we are currently engaged in so-called "culture wars" here in the United States makes this question not just pertinent but some might even say that it makes this question pressing. Verse 5 tells us that the righteous Branch of David will practice wisdom and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. From this we can infer that the leaders of the people, and therefore the people themselves because many people follow the cues of their leaders, were not practicing wisdom, justice, and righteousness. You see my logic here I hope. If wisdom, justice, and righteousness were being practiced and modeled then there would be no need for a prophetic promise of such things to come in the future.

What, then, is wisdom that was lacking in Judah? Wisdom is most frequently associated with learning from your past. Learning from both mistakes and successes so that a wise person, or a wise nation, does *not* repeat past mistakes and does repeat past successes. In order to do that you have to keep people around you that know the history of things, people who have "been around the block" a few times so to speak. You also have to practice humility. Not every single person can know every single historical thing that has ever occurred. That's why we have a profession called "the historian". And that is further why we have the need just mentioned of humility. Not every single person can know every single thing. Hence practicing wisdom requires a certain level of trust in other people, professionals, who know things that the rest of us don't know. Lack of wisdom is an indication of moral decay and there is a severe lack of wisdom in our nation right now.

What, then, is justice that was lacking in Judah? In our culture justice has mostly been associated with punishment and consequences. The legal system is also known as the justice system. If you commit a crime, then you are punished appropriately, or inappropriately, for committing that crime. You face negative consequences for your actions and behaviors. Does this however accurately reflect a biblical, particularly Old Testament law code because Jeremiah was prophesying to Judah, a biblical understanding of justice? The law codes did not *emphasize* punishment. They were concerned with appropriate recompense. There are instances where punishment is prescribed. But the vast majority of the time the law is focused on precise and accurate recompense so that all may proceed forward and continue to live fruitful, meaningful, and productive lives. Hence, “eye for eye, and tooth for tooth”. Even more so than this, the law codes and their prescriptions of justice were primarily about providing for, and protecting, the weak and vulnerable. Don’t harvest to the edges of your fields thereby leaving some for the weak and vulnerable to glean. Don’t pick up whatever of your harvest you dropped thereby leaving some for the weak and vulnerable to pick up. Practice hospitality; invite people into your home and feed them. Treat those who are sojourning in your land as if they are your own people. Practice the year of jubilee every fifty years so that wealth and resources do not become monopolized by a few wealthy elites but are disseminated throughout the population so that all might have the ability to live whole lives. This is what justice looks like. Lack of justice is an indication of moral decay and there is a severe lack of justice in our nation right now.

What, then, is righteousness that was lacking in Judah? Righteousness is being in accord with what God is doing. I fear that we oftentimes get this understanding of righteousness confused and actually reversed. As stated, righteousness is being in accord with what God is doing. So, if God is practicing the kind of wisdom and justice we just talked about then a righteous person, or nation, would also be practicing the kind of wisdom and justice we just talked about. Righteousness is not doing what we think is right or making excuses for ugly behaviors and then asking God to bless it. Or claiming that we were trying to honor God. By all means, keep trying to honor God! I keep trying to honor God as well. But trying to honor God is not righteousness in and of itself unless we actually practice Godly wisdom and justice and not just our broken version thereof. Righteousness means doing what God wants even when we don’t want to. Lack of righteousness is an indication of moral decay and there is a severe lack of righteousness in our nation right now.

Righteousness means doing what God wants even when don’t want to. This is where our gospel reading comes in. Why is Christ the King? Because he practiced the wisdom, justice, and righteousness of God just as Jeremiah prophesied the Branch of David would. Jesus practiced wisdom. When the religious leaders came to him he

helped them see the errors of their way; how they were not practicing wisdom. And when the religious leaders came to him and were practicing wisdom themselves, he affirmed them and encouraged them to keep on their path toward the kingdom of heaven. Jesus practiced justice. He healed the sick. He restored the marginalized to society. He uplifted the sojourner and treated them as one of his own. He cared for the weak and vulnerable when neither the Romans nor the religious leaders would. Jesus practiced righteousness and he did so even when he didn't want to. Father, I pray, take this cup from me. But not my will; Thy will be done. And when he was foolishly, unjustly, and unrighteously put to death for doing so, for practicing wisdom, justice, and righteousness, in rising from the dead he defeated foolishness, injustice, and unrighteousness. And he is definitively the King. All hail Christ the King. Amen.