



## Do Justice

*"Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8*

### A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the August edition of Do Justice as we continue to discuss issues of social justice from a Christian perspective in the tradition of Micah and St Francis.

#### The need for a new reawakening

George Monbiot is a regular columnist in the UK *Guardian* newspaper and has written a number of books. In 2016 he published "How did we get into this mess?",<sup>1</sup> a collection of columns he wrote for the *Guardian* from around 2009 through 2015. What is interesting in his writing is how much of it speaks to what we have experienced since 2016: Brexit, Trump, Boris Johnson, climate change, etc.

He starts the last chapter of his book with, *"So here we are, forming an orderly queue at the slaughterhouse gate. The punishment of the poor for the errors of the rich, the abandonment of universalism, the dismantling of the shelter the state provides: apart from a few small protests, none of this has yet brought us out fighting."* Regrettably this summary of the human condition is as appropriate, if not more appropriate, today as six years ago.

Monbiot then goes on to look at possible psychological issues that could help to explain this seemingly strange situation. According to psychologists, he says, human identity is either extrinsic or intrinsic. The more extrinsic are concerned about how other people see them, they cherish financial success, image and fame. In contrast, intrinsic people are more concerned about relationships, family and community, and self-acceptance. They tend to have beliefs that transcend self-interest.

Monbiot then goes on to explain that few people are all-extrinsic or all-intrinsic. Research in some 70 countries has shown that values cluster around some remarkably consistent patterns. Those who value financial success are less empathetic, have strong manipulative tendencies, a stronger attraction to hierarchy and inequality, stronger prejudices towards strangers and less concern about human rights and the environment. Those who have a strong sense of self-acceptance have more empathy and a greater concern about human rights, social justice and the environment. These values tend to suppress each other; the stronger someone's extrinsic aspirations, the weaker the intrinsic goals.

But Monbiot goes on to explain we are not born with our values. Rather we are shaped by the social environment around us. By changing our perception of what is normal and acceptable, politics alters our minds as much as our circumstances.

He then looks at the psychological impact of the Thatcherite revolution in the UK in the eighties, and so by implication the parallel Rogernomic years in New Zealand. He explains that competition and the 'free' market and the importance of financial success, as promoted by governments, changed our values. These changes were reinforced and continue to be reinforced, by advertising and the media. The focus on power politics, rich lists, fast cars, expensive houses, glamorous holidays, fashion, etc. – all extrinsic values. This focus generates feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, thus suppressing intrinsic goals.

This analysis appears to explain much of what has been going on in the USA over the last 15-plus years. One recent example is the reversal by the US Supreme Court of *Roe v. Wade* and the inevitable restrictions on abortion in many of the States. The campaign for this reversal calls itself 'pro-life' but the support for 'life' appears to stop as soon as the baby is born and many of the same people who support 'pro-life' oppose many social welfare policies because of cost.

As Christians, all we read and experience of Jesus should push us towards the intrinsic – concern about relationships, family community – love of our neighbour and love our enemies. But, regrettably, much of the 'Church' appears to put much more emphasis on extrinsic values of success, particularly financial success. For much of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century up to the 1980s we saw a steady move to a more socially equitable society led by Christians and the Church in general. The Thatcherite and Reaganite revolution including Rogernomics in New Zealand has reversed this progress and as a result we are now a much less equitable society. Some parts of the Church started opposing these changes in the 1990s: now the impact of the 1980s revolution is so clear it beholds all who claim to follow Jesus to join them.

Let's really do justice, and love kindness and then we will be able to walk humbly with our God.

<sup>1</sup> How Did We Get Into This Mess? George Monbiot. Verso 2016

### **Matariki – a Pākehā view**

In the northern hemisphere the New Year was celebrated in the middle of winter. The crops were harvested, the days grew shorter and the temperature cooler. But people knew that the spring was coming, and a new cycle would begin, hence the New Year.

Until Pākehā arrived in numbers, the people of Aotearoa thought the same. New Year was in winter, and the sign was the stars of Matariki rising above the horizon. But, as with so many other things, colonisation changed all that. Now Aotearoa New Zealand had to follow the north and New Year was in the middle of summer, right between sowing and harvesting, the days longer and the temperature higher.

But this year, for the first time, we have all been able to celebrate an indigenous New Year – Matariki. Maybe the time has come to think about how we number our years? Logically it should be from the time the first waka arrived in Aotearoa but that would put us out of sync with the rest of the world, so maybe it is not a good idea. But reflecting on Matariki and the impact of things Māori over the last 30 years, it does seem that the Māori language has become much more integrated into the language of Aotearoa, and we are beginning to have a language that is unique to this motu.

Thirty-plus years ago the most common Māori phrase used by English speakers was 'kia ora' and that was not long after a telephonist had been criticised for saying 'kai ora' when greeting callers. Now our everyday speech is increasingly sprinkled with Māori words, which are also used regularly by radio and television presenters. Some government bodies are commonly known by their Māori titles, such as Waka Kotahi, Oranga Tamariki and Kāinga Ora. These are just three examples regularly used without the addition of an English translation. As a nation we have much further to go but a start has been made and should not be reversed.

### **Five men and one woman rule a land?**

The last few days of June saw six judges of the United States of America Supreme Court hand down decisions that will have enormous impact on life in the USA and possibly in the rest of the world. Maybe the three most significant decisions are on abortion, guns and the environment. The abortion decision has received the most publicity and has re-awakened, and possibly re-empowered, the so-called 'right to life' campaigners in many countries including New Zealand. Thankfully the decision to overturn a New York State law that had been on the law books for over 100 years about carrying concealed handguns is unlikely to have any impact in New Zealand except possibly on some ACT MPs. However, the decision on the ability of the US Department of the Environment to make rules about the burning of coal to generate electricity does have much wider implications. The contribution of fossil fuels and carbon dioxide emissions on global warming is now an indisputable fact. Unless the world collectively reduces the use of coal, oil and natural gas to generate electricity there is no way that global warming can be limited to 1.5°C by 2050. The decision of the US Supreme Court will encourage the fossil fuel industry to continue to ignore any action to limit the use of their products to generate electricity or other uses. Whilst China is the biggest user of

coal to generate electricity, the USA is not far behind and either country not actively reducing fossil fuel emissions will be very damaging to our environment worldwide, if not disastrous.

What these six people are effectively saying to the rest of the world is, "We don't care about the future of our world and the right to life of all the people of the world; the right of a small number of very rich companies in the USA is more important."

So, as George Monbiot has asked, "How did we get into this mess?" The US Supreme Court is an integral part of the governmental system of the United States of America. The writers of the US Constitution back in the 1770s wanted to separate the executive, legislative and judicial powers of the state to avoid any possibility of the perceived authoritarian rule they had experienced as colonies of the British monarch. Hence the President, the Congress and the Supreme Court, with the members of the Supreme Court nominated by the President and approved by the Senate of Congress. The number of Supreme Court Justices was not stipulated in the US Constitution but had settled at nine for the last 100-plus years.

In addition, the US Constitution has the President being elected by an electoral college with each state having one elector for each senator and representative the state has. This gives more power to the smaller states as each state has two senators and must have at least one representative irrespective of population. Hence it is possible that the President is elected by a minority of the voters in a presidential election. George Bush Jnr and Donald Trump were both elected by minorities and between them they appointed all six of the justices that made these decisions. George Bush Jnr appointed three and Donald Trump three. The other three justices were appointed by Obama (two) and Biden (one).

Much is being made in certain political circles in Aotearoa of one person one vote as being central to democracy. So, is the USA a democracy? One vote in say a small state like Wyoming with a population of 576,851 and three electoral college votes compared to California with a population of 39,237,836 and 54 electoral college votes, a vote in Wyoming has more than three times the influence of a vote in California. Interestingly over four million Americans cannot vote for a Senate representative as they are not 'states'. This includes those who live in Washington DC and five overseas territories including Puerto Rico. However, Washington can elect three members of the electoral college and each of these 'non-states' does elect a non-voting member to the House of Representatives.

The other country we regularly compare ourselves to is the UK with 'first past the post' elections. The present Government with an 80-seat majority in Parliament, received 41 percent of the votes at the last election. How democratic is that? And the outgoing Prime Minister claimed he had 'overwhelming support' from the electorate at the last election. At least with MPP the result depends on the number of votes from the whole country, and how boundaries are drawn is not significant. That is one person, one vote.