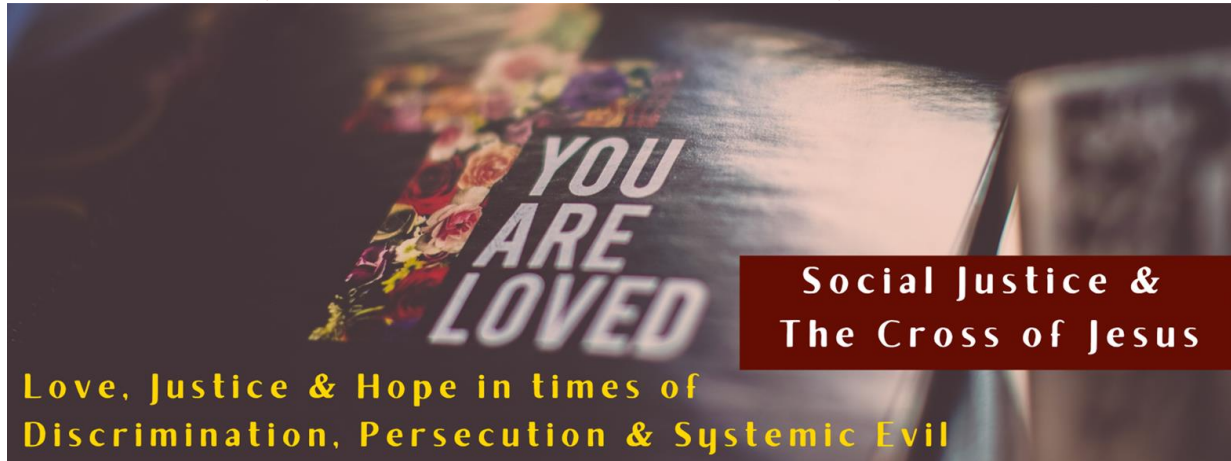


SOCIAL JUSTICE & THE CROSS OF JESUS

REFLECTION 6 – LOVE, JUSTICE & HOPE IN TIMES OF DISCRIMINATION, PERSECUTION & SYSTEMIC EVIL



INTRODUCTION

Some biblical passages on social justice are well known to Christians, including

- The advocacy for justice by the prophets of the Old Testament.
- The Ten Commandments
- Passages about the covenant interrelationship between God and ourselves
- Passages in the Bible on caring for God's creation
- The psalms
(e.g. Psalm 85:10-11 on the relationship of love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace)
- The Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ
- The mission of Jesus (Luke's Gospel Chapter 4)
- The Sermon of the Mount (Matthew's Gospel Chapters 5-7)
- The love commandments as Jesus teaches them.
- The Gospel parables of inclusion and mercy.
- The summary statements of equality by Saint Paul.
- The moral exhortations in the letter of James.

There are other writings that are not as well understood in the Bible, from the perspective of our working with God for justice.

Some writers speak about evil structures, but do not name those particular structures.

In this reflection we ponder some biblical writings, written in this way, and also a 20th century writer and saint, Edith Stein.

One of the literary styles in the Bible is the apocalyptic tradition, written during times of conflict and persecution.

For example, there are the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament, and the 1st and 2nd Letters of John, and the Book of Revelation, in the New Testament. In this Reflection, the New Revised Standard Translation is used.

Imagine living in a time of persecution, where your communication is not secure.

Rather than taking the risk of your letter or email or phone call being intercepted, you might think it safer to use symbols rather than specific names. You might speak in code, hoping that only the person meant to receive your communication would understand.

With fear of interception of messages by opponents,

- the writer of the Book of Daniel was concerned about the oppressive Hellenist Seleucid Empire, and disguised this by relating a story on the oppressive Babylonian Empire centuries before.
- John wrote of their opponents as antichrists in the Letters of John.
- In the Book of Revelation, John wrote to seven churches, alluding to the Roman Empire as a beast and another symbol, without actually naming the Roman Empire.

These writings speak of the terrible suffering faced by God's faithful, and also with the assurance of hope in God who will defeat these present evils.

PART ONE - THE BOOK OF DANIEL

The Book of Daniel offers hope, amid the pain, suffering and systemic persecution suffered by the Jewish people.

The Book of Daniel was written during the persecution of Jewish people by Antiochus 1V Epiphanes in the period around 167-164BC. The systemic unjust policy of Alexander the Great, of forcing other nations and peoples to be Hellenized, continued under his successors.

The Book of Daniel (written in the 2nd Century B.C.) presents a person, Daniel as living centuries before, (in the 6th Century B.C.), during the deportation of Jewish people to Babylon.

As the Book of Daniel spoke about the suffering of 6th Century BC Jews caused by the unjust and oppressive Babylonian Empire, Jewish people in the 2nd Century BC would have realized how God was speaking to them in the 2nd Century BC, as they suffered under an unjust and oppressive Seleucid Empire.

The Jewish people had suffered under different unjust and oppressive foreign regimes over the centuries. The Book of Daniel symbolised these regimes by four beasts, with the fourth beast being different again. The Seleucid Empire tried to eliminate the religious beliefs and worship, religious seasons and sacred laws of the Jewish people. It was described in Daniel 7:23-25

“This is what he said: ‘As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth that shall be different from all the other kingdoms; it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces. As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them. This one shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings. He shall speak words against the Most High, shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High, and shall attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law; and they shall be given into his power for a time, two times, and half a time.’”

PART TWO – THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The Book of Revelation offers hope, amid the pain, suffering and systemic persecution suffered by Christian communities.

Eventually the Roman regime conquered the Greek regime, and the Roman power and other foreign powers were referred to by symbols and images in the Book of Revelation (or Apocalypse) in the New Testament. Revelation drew on the Old Testament, including the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah, as it used symbols to speak about the persecution of the Christian Church.

One of several social justice issues raised in Revelation, was that of merchants who profited from trade with the unjust regime, and their future grieving after the fall of the regime.

‘And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.’ Rev 18:11-13

Verse 13 can also be translated *‘chariots, and human bodies and souls’* (NRSV footnote) The evil regime and some merchants traded human people as slaves. The evil of human trafficking continues today, and finds biblical condemnation in this passage.

The merchants were so deeply involved in this evil injustice, that the trade and profits were the fruits that their souls longed for.

‘The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you’ Rev 11:14

Chapter 11 included those who transported the cargo.

'And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea.' Rev 11:17

One of the other international social justice issues raised in Revelation was the wrongdoing of other nations and kingdoms in their support for the Roman regime, and in the ways they benefitted from their alliances with Rome.

PART THREE – THE LETTERS OF JOHN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The First and Second Letters of John speak of love and hope, amid the pain, suffering, sense of betrayal and possible persecution suffered by seven Christian communities.

The term “antichrist” is found in the First and Second Letters of John. Let us first recall the message of God’s love in the First Letter of John:

'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.' (1 John 4:7-12)

'So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.' (1 John 4:16)

From the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament, we know that, as Christians, we are called to love God and love our neighbour. Our work for social justice is based on our love of God and our neighbour.

In teaching about love, John’s Letters also refer to false prophets and the spirit of the antichrist.

'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.' (1 John 4:2-4)

There is more than one antichrist. As we know, there have been antichrists throughout human history.

“Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.” 1 John 2:18

In the context of John’s community, the question is asked

‘Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!’ 2 John 7

In working for social justice amid the challenges of the world, we are called to discern what is from God, and what is not.

‘Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.’ (1 John 4:1)

PART FOUR – CHURCH TEACHING

Two of the key Catholic references to this aspect of social justice are from *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2004)

“When human authority goes beyond the limits willed by God, it makes itself a deity and demands absolute submission; it becomes the Beast of the Apocalypse, an image of the imperial persecutor “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev 17:6). The Beast is served by the “false prophet” (Rev 19:20), who, with beguiling signs, induces people to adore it.” #382

“Love must thus enliven every sector of human life and extend to the international order. Only a humanity in which there reigns the ‘civilization of love’ will be able to enjoy authentic and lasting peace.” #582

PART FIVE - SAINT EDITH STEIN

As we live our faith in love, a part of carrying the cross, is to witness to Jesus Christ

- in times of discrimination against Christians
- and, in some countries, persecution against Christians.

Saint Edith Stein (1891-1942) experienced racism and sexism in her professional career as a philosopher and educator. Structural racism grew worse with the coming of the Nazis into power in Germany in 1933, and the suffering and murders of millions of people during The Holocaust. Edith herself, a Jewish woman and Catholic Carmelite Sister, was murdered by the Nazis in the gas chambers in August 1942.

This is the Centenary Year of her adult Baptism and Confirmation.

She was baptized on January 1st 1922 at St Martin's in Bergzabern.
On February 2nd 1922, she received the Sacrament of Confirmation.
in the Bishop's chapel in Speyer.

In October 1933 she entered the Carmelite Sisters,
and took the religious name of Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in 1934.
On her Profession card in 1938, her chosen wording was
"Henceforth my only vocation is to love".

On September 14th, 1939 in the first month of World War Two,
she wrote about the cross, and that

*"The world is in flames, the battle between Christ
and the Antichrist has broken into the open."*

She described some of the actions of the followers of the antichrist,
in a way so that people would know
that she was speaking about the evil of the Nazi regime.

*"More than ever the cross is a sign of contradiction.
The followers of the Antichrist show far more dishonor than did the Persians who stole it.
They desecrate the images of the cross,
and they make every effort to tear the cross out of the hearts of Christians.
All too often they have succeeded even with those who, like us,
once vowed to bear Christ's cross after him.
Therefore, the Saviour today looks at us, solemnly probing us, asks each one of us:
Will you remain faithful to the Crucified? Consider carefully!
The world is in flames, the battle between Christ and the Antichrist has broken into the open.
If you decide for Christ, it could cost you your life."*

*"The world is in flames. The conflagration can also reach our house.
But high above all flames towers the cross. They cannot consume it.
It is the path from earth to heaven.'*

(The Collected Works of Edith Stein – The Hidden Life
Edited by L Gleber and Michael Linsen, O.C.D. Translated by Waltraut Stein.
ICS Publications 1992, 2014)

Six years before, Edith gave warning to what was already happening,
when she wrote to Pope Pius XI in 1933.

*"As a child of the Jewish people who, by the grace of God,
for the past eleven years has also been a child of the Catholic Church,
I dare to speak to the Father of Christianity about that which oppresses millions of Germans.
For weeks we have seen deeds perpetrated in Germany
which mock any sense of justice and humanity, not to mention love of neighbor.
For years the leaders of National Socialism have been preaching hatred of the Jews.*

But the responsibility must fall, after all, on those who brought them to this point and it also falls on those who keep silent in the face of such happenings. Everything that happened and continues to happen on a daily basis originates with a government that calls itself "Christian." For weeks not only Jews but also thousands of faithful Catholics in Germany, and, I believe, all over the world, have been waiting and hoping for the Church of Christ to raise its voice to put a stop to this abuse of Christ's name."

Abbot Raphael Walzer forwarded Edith's letter to the Vatican. In the Vatican archives, is Cardinal Pacelli's reply that the letter had been presented to Pope Pius XI.

On February 2nd 1934, in the foreword to her Reflection "Love for Love: The Life and Works of St Teresa of Jesus", she says

"In our time, when the powerlessness of all natural means for battling the overwhelming misery everywhere has been demonstrated so obviously, an entirely new understanding of the power of prayer, of expiation, and of vicarious atonement has been awakened."

(The Collected Works of Edith Stein – The Hidden Life Edited by L Gleber and Michael Linssen, O.C.D. Translated by Waltraut Stein. ICS Publications 1992, 2014)

Edith's last book was **The Science of the Cross**.

She wrote about the literary work of St John of the Cross (1542-91), centuries before. The special occasion was the 400th anniversary of John's birth in 1542.

- She drew strength from his teaching about the cross of Jesus,
- what it meant as a disciple of Jesus, to carry the cross,
- and from the insight of St Teresa of Avila (1515-82) into John's life and faith in the early years of his ministry.

It was published after her death.

CONCLUSION

The **Book of Daniel** offered hope to Jewish people who were suffering intense religious persecution.

The **Book of Revelation** highlighted the guilt, not only of evil regimes, but also the guilt of others who benefit from the practices of those regimes. It offered hope to Christians who were suffering religious persecution.

The **First and Second Letters of John** were written to Christian people in one region, highlighting the love of God and love of neighbour.

Within this context, it spoke of those who had betrayed them and who had deliberately distorted true Christian teaching.

Saint Edith Stein reminded us that responsibility for evil actions included

- those who created and maintained evil systemic structures

- those who had helped that evil to eventuate,
- and those who remained silent while it was happening.

A COVID-19 Prayer for the Intercession of Saint Edith Stein is available at [\[COVID Prayer for the Intercession of Saint Edith Stein in 2022 - print English & Arabic\]](#)

It recalls Edith’s experience as a volunteer nurse’s aide working in infectious wards for a part of 1915, and calls on her intercession now before our loving God.

PRAYER

Violence against Christians can be so severe, that the persecutors *‘make every effort to tear the cross out of the hearts of Christians.’*

Let us pray for all who experience religious persecution today.

[pause and pray]

Let us pray for all who are oppressed by sinful social structures today.

[pause and pray]

Let us pray for ourselves, that we reach out in solidarity to those who suffer injustice in our world today.

[pause and pray]

Let us pray with love, for a deepening of our understanding of what it means to carry the cross.

[pause and pray]

Let us pray for a growing appreciation of the power of prayer.

[pause and pray]

Our work for social justice is founded in God’s love for humanity. It is a work of love and in humility.

Let us pray the words of the prophet Micah 6:8

‘and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’

Father Gerry Hefferan
21 January 2022

