

JustMoney conference – 19 November
Rachel Lampard – What are our justice stories?

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Telling our stories of justice

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Over the past year in my role for the Methodist Church I've been travelling around– both physically and virtually – and asking people to tell me stories. I've been asking them to tell me about an object, something that represents for them what justice looks like.

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People have told me about teabags, specifically fairtrade teabags, and how they've been running the fairtrade stall in church for decades, and in their life time have seen fairtrade goods become more common in supermarket aisles. A lifelong a commitment to the wellbeing of people around the other side of the world, part of God's family

Someone showed me a piece of the Berlin Wall – symbol of division and oppression which seemed so permanent, but which unimaginably was brought down

And then there were symbols of ongoing injustice:

Can of beans which someone's grandmother always carried around in her handbag. She'd been hungry as a child, and so never went anywhere without having food with her. A sign of the scars of the past and the determination of the present

Dalit Madonna, by Jyoti Sahi from the Methodist art collection – a reminder of racism which this person had experienced, even within the Church, and a sign of being made in the image of God

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My great grandma was called Jane Ann

She left school at 13, and went into service as a housemaid

The lady of the house always called the housemaids the same name, regardless of what their actual name was! She said to my great grandma, "I'll call you Mary, I call all my housemaids Mary"

But my great grandma bravely replied,

"My name is Jane Ann. I have been baptized."

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Amazingly Jane Ann didn't lose her job. The lady of the house called her Jane Ann, and the family story is that future housemaids were allowed to keep their own names.

It's a small story. But it's part of my history. Asserted her dignity as a person and as a child of God. I have been baptized – that gave her her identity. Speaks to me of the courage to speak up in the face of injustice. And also remembering the people who would otherwise be nameless.

I wonder what your object would be? What your story is?

Sorry that there isn't time to hear from people about their image of justice. There are likely to have been lots of very different ones, probably as many as there are people in the room, varied in our own experiences and understandings of justice.

But I would guess that they are often really rather profound. Many would have told a very personal story, perhaps from our own painful experiences of injustice. For some justice has a personal face. Or a lifelong commitment to a particular issue. And many, I guess, will have had a deep connection, implicit or explicit, to our own faith. Our images of justice, our justice stories, are powerful in so many ways.

Let me tell you why I think we need to get better at telling our stories of justice.

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1. Justice stories root us in what gives us life and hope

I don't need to point out the turbulence of the times we're living in.

We've just seen the COP27 Conference and I heard the word "stalemate" on the radio as I was leaving the house this morning and we don't yet know the outcome but it doesn't look good. These talks remind us, should we need reminding, that climate change isn't a theoretical argument but an existential reality.

And the Chancellor has delivered his budget, with £bn of cuts, which will impact most severely, despite the welcome inflation increases in benefits, on the poorest in society

The Cost of Living Crisis isn't something new, it's a confluence of crises, as people who were already experiencing the rising tide of poverty since 2008 are now being washed away by rising prices, rising fuel costs, and increasing insecurity. Recent research by the Joint Public Issues Team, which I work for, bringing together MCB, URC, Baptists and CofS, and the Univ of Loughborough showed that low income families needed an extra £1,400 over the following six months just to stay warm and fed. They're currently over £200 a month short.

The threats to people and planet, here and around the world, are on a frightening scale. For those of you familiar with the idea of Kate Raworth's economic donut, we need an economy with a strong **social foundation** for all without going over the **ecological ceiling**. Yet we are

breaching both the human and the planetary boundaries which make life liveable and sustainable.

Following on from the pandemic, we are most probably tired, stretched, disappointed, even grieving, it's not surprising we sometimes reach the point of giving up.

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We need our justice stories to remind us that our longing for a just, fair, flourishing world is rooted deep ...rooted in what gives us life and hope.... and those roots sustain us

The reason I've been asking people to reflect on their stories of justice over the past year is because I'm helping the Methodist Church to undertake a process exploring what it means – today – to be a justice-seeking Church. Justice and activism are baked into the identity of Methodists, from our emergence as a revival movement which reached beyond the church walls to people living in poverty, and the holding together of evangelism and social justice. Methodists were involved in early trade unions, in education, in justice movements, in early ethical investment...

But what does this mean for our church today? So we have been listening to what matters to churches and communities, to groups with experience of injustice, thinking about our gifts, strengths and connections, and what we bring from our history. And we are beginning to identify three Ps – what are the principles which underpin our call to be a justice seeking church? What is the story that we tell about the God of justice? What vision do we cling onto of the just world ...

What are we called to do? What are the priority issues for us, where we can help to make a difference, to realising that vision. What is ours to do?

And what are the practices that make us more justice-seeking and help us to root our activism in God and God's justice?

So... if we believe that God made humans in the image of God, each worthy of equal value and dignity, then we can imagine economic structures which enable the dignity of humans in relationship, where dignity doesn't flow from what you own, but from your innate being made in the image of God.

.....If we believe that God desires the flourishing of creation and human community within it, then our we have a wider understanding of what growth looks like and who and what it is for.

.....If we believe that God in the Bible has shown a bias to people living in poverty and those who are excluded, then the perspective of the stories we seek to tell, and to hear, changes, and perhaps our world turns a bit upside down.

These are just some of the principles for justice that the Methodist Church is starting to articulate – nothing new, many if not most of you would claim them as your own. But I hope they will give us an anchor in what we understand of God's just character. And therefore a place to find renewal and refreshment and recreation.

So our justice stories help to root us in a vision of justice that sustains us in turbulent times.

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2. Justice stories create powerful movements

But they also help give us powerful stories to tell the world. A vision of what God's justice looks like. The hungry fed and the humble lifted high. All creation is redeemed. Justice flowing like a river and righteousness like a never ending stream.

The writer George Monbiot: A string of facts, however well-attested, will not correct or dislodge a powerful story. The only thing that can displace a story is a story. Those who tell the stories run the world.

On St. Crispin's Day eve, according to Shakespeare, King Henry tells a new story, a story promising identity transformation for all who choose to take part in the impending battle with the French, by whom they are vastly outnumbered. This is more than a motivational speech, it's a compelling picture of an alternative future. And a unique source of social movement power is in the new story it tells.

Rabbi Michael Lerner said: "People of all faiths need to shape a political and social movement that reaffirms the most generous, peace-oriented, social justice-committed, and loving truths of the spiritual heritage of the human race."

Again – shaping a movement.

Becoming the JustMoney Movement is a lot more powerful than just a change of brand. What is the story that we will tell as the JustMoney Movement, rooted in our understanding of a God who is just, and whose greener, fairer just world we glimpse even in the turbulent world around us? It's an exciting challenge.

But it's certainly not a small idea of justice that will be satisfied by sticking plasters.

...It's not a justice that will be satisfied by families being given a food parcel to keep them from going hungry or somewhere warm to sit to save them putting the heating on, however necessary this may be.

....And it's not a justice that will be satisfied by donations to charity, however vital they may be

...And it's not a justice that will be satisfied by aid given to countries in the global south whilst multinational companies continue to extract resources and wealth

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3. Going upstream for justice

Desmond Tutu's famous challenge is that there comes a time when we can't just keep pulling people out of the water but have to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.

The vision we have of a just fairer greener future means that we need to go upstream.

Anyone who's actually tried to follow a river upstream knows it's not always very easy. There are often lots of tributaries, it can get rather boggy, and it's easy to get lost. As with many things, it's better to travel with others who have first-hand experience than to strike out on your own. But it is only through going upstream that we will tackle the causes of injustice.

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Churches are – thank God – really good at responding compassionately, urgently, sacrificially to the needs of their communities. But a recent report by Theos showed how fragile this safety net is. It suggested that not only are we facing an economic recession but also a social recession, as the social safety net, the voluntary organisations, the churches, the volunteers, the charitable giving, the community activity, was becoming unsustainable in the light of the economic crisis. The front cover of the report showed a powerful image of a ripped safety net. It's not enough to be a sticking plaster or a safety net – however needed they are - and it's clear that those safety nets are no longer safe.

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This is why as well as social action we are called to social justice. We are called to name and challenge the structures of injustice. The policies, the practices, the laws, the relationships, the power dynamics, the deep social narratives, that perpetuate injustice and keep people trapped.

Through campaigns such as Church Action on Tax Justice, for example, we can be part of challenging the structures of injustice, which may seem to be permanent are in reality like the Berlin Wall. And may come down slowly and then suddenly. We can influence our banks and our pension providers as they make decisions about investing in fossil fuels or nuclear weapons.

We can use our power as part of communities to organize at grassroots levels in to tackle economic injustice, to encourage the transformative practice of involving people in

participatory budgeting by local authorities, or explore how local economies can be distributive, nurturing, and regenerative.

We have a vision of a world that can be different. And by telling our stories of justice, we can help to change the underlying system of stories that help people make sense of the world.

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Act justly, love kindness, walk humbly with God

To finish, the project I'm running for the Methodist Church is called Walking with Micah. We could have chosen inspiration from any number of prophets, but I've always felt challenged by the famous verse of Micah 6:8. Micah lived at a time of turmoil. There was an expansionist neighbor on the border and war was looking likely. There had been a time of prosperity, but now it was clear that whilst some had become richer, others were becoming poorer. Those with power had been defrauding those without. Injustice was ruling, in the market place, the law courts, even in houses of worship. There was bribery, sharp practice, relationships were strained and shattered

And as people abused their relationships with each other, they had forgotten about the covenant relationship with God.

Now they panicked. How should they get God's help? How to get back into God's favour? Should they sacrifice rivers of oil? Even their first born children? They had forgotten how to worship God

But Micah says – you are confused about what has gone wrong and how to put it right. He reminds them of God's covenant relationship, and says:

Listen!

This is what God asks of you, only this

That you act justly,

Love kindness

Walk humbly with God

What does God ask of us now, in this time of economic and ecological turmoil?

Only this. Simple but never easy. That we act justly, lovely kindness and walk humbly with our God. And I hope that holding onto your story of justice will root you in a God of love and justice, sustaining you on the journey, and that God will help us to share that vision of hope and our movement for transformation with the world.

