

Justice and Peace

From C. René Padilla

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PEACE is a desirable good for individuals as well as for nations. The human heart longs for peace, which is also a political objective that no responsible government can ignore. Be it in the East or the West, in the North or the South, the prophetic vision of a world in which swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks elicits a positive response.

However, peace has its conditions. Unless they are met, the ideal of peace becomes merely a desire that cannot be fulfilled. Isaiah 32:17 points to the most important condition: justice. It reads: **“The effect of righteousness [justice] will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quiet and trust forever.”** Peace relates to justice as fruit to the tree that produces it. Where there is no justice, there can be no peace. Injustice and peace cannot coexist.

Let us recall that the prophet Isaiah speaks from a context of injustice and oppression. The ruling classes have become corrupt and are using their power to exploit the poor. They are “rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts” (1:23). Their God-given duty is to do good, strive to do what is right, helping the oppressed, doing justice to the fatherless, defending the rights of the widow (cf. 1:17). Instead, they are busy buying homes and accumulating land “until there is room for no one . . . and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” (5:8). They have replaced God’s law with murder, and justice with shouts of pain (cf. 5:7). They have made unjust laws and intolerable decrees “to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!” (10:1-2). Neither can justice be expected of the judicial system, “which causes a person to lose a lawsuit, who sets a trap for the arbiter in the gate, and without grounds denies justice to the one in the right.” (Is. 29:21) Injustice is their daily bread. However, injustice is not alone. Where justice is neglected, anarchy reigns. “The people will be oppressed, everyone by another and everyone by a neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the base to the honourable” (3:5). Law and order are essential to the wellbeing of any society. But when they are used to defend vested interests, lawlessness and disorder are institutionalized, and as a result, the moral foundations of a society are destroyed. As rationalization for justifying the oppressors, law and order inevitably lose the respect of the oppressed, the victims of the system. Ethical values lose validity and a situation is created such as the one the prophet describes: “Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” (5:20). Any notion of good and evil is lost, and social chaos reigns.

Complicating the issue further is that during Isaiah’s time Israel is smug, unconscious of their sin. Consequently, the prophet’s message lands on deaf ears. For this rebellion, says the prophet, Assyria, a heathen nation, will be used as the rod of God’s wrath; for their refusal to listen, they will go into exile, “their nobles are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst” (5:13). His warning, however, is received with scorn and indifference. The sound of destruction is in the air, but instead of repentance and lamentation “there was joy and festivity, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating meat and drinking wine. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’, they say” (Is. 22:13). Hedonism walks hand-in-hand with false security.

The false security of the Israelite leaders during Isaiah’ time is an expression of confidence in the military might of Egypt. Instead of repenting and trusting in the God of justice, they have allied themselves with Pharaoh, forgetting that “the Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit” (31:3). Quite a warning for those who even today seek peace and security by means of brute force, but show no concern for justice!

Chapter 32, in which our text appears, begins with the promise of a kingdom in which “a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice” (v. 1). In contrast to the situation of institutionalized violence which currently exists in Jerusalem, in this coming kingdom “a fool

will no longer be called noble, nor a villain be said to be honourable"; the hungry will not return empty-handed or the thirsty without water, neither will the poor be ruined with lies (vv. 5-8). Jerusalem, "the jubilant city", will be destroyed. The carefree women who live there are therefore exhorted to leave aside their false security and to recognize the coming judgment (vv. 9-13).

After this exhortation the prophet turns his eyes towards the changes which will be carried out when God's judgment is fulfilled. The Spirit of God—he says—will be poured out and a new society and a new creation shall arise. "Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness [justice] will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places. The forest will disappear completely and the city will be utterly laid low. Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely." (vv. 16-20)

For a better understanding of this prophetic vision of a peaceful world, one must view it in contrast to the aforementioned chaotic situation. The peace that is referred to is not merely the absence of war, but *shalom*, that is, harmony, well-being, wholeness, abundance, prosperity, health, happiness, plenty for both individuals and society. In our text it is related to tranquility, quiet or rest (*sheket*) and with trust or security (*batah*). In the midst of a situation of injustice, social tension and insecurity, the prophet envisions a new era in the history of his nation, and he describes it in terms which remind us of the Year of Jubilee according to Leviticus 25: "In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. . . you shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God. You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely" (vv. 13, 17-19).

The longing for a world in which people enjoy life in all its dimensions, without feeling threatened by violence or misfortune, is a common characteristic of humanity. It is not surprising then, that the promise of peace and security is frequently an important element in the political rhetoric of all countries. Nevertheless, our text, in conjunction with the mosaic revelation, places justice and peace in a cause-and-effect relationship: "the effect or result of justice will be peace".

The kind of justice (*tzedaká*) which the prophet refers to is no more and no less than God's justice: the justice that He loves and He demands; not merely a social convention or a human value, but a divine mandate. As Abraham J. Heschel puts it, "This is not just the relation between man and his neighbor; it is an act that implicates God, a divine necessity." And it is intimately linked with compassion for the oppressed, the weak, and the marginalized. It is an "option for the poor." It has to do with God's special preoccupation for the needy and disinherited. Because He is a God of justice, it is sinful to remain indifferent towards those who suffer from causes outside of their immediate control. *Tzedaká* is an essential condition for the existence of *shalom*. Without justice, there is no peace. Justice and peace are inseparable; they are indissolubly united. In the words of the psalmist: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness [justice] and peace will kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10). In the absence of justice there is only a spurious peace. There will be false security of the oppressors, based on coercion, or the stupor of the oppressed, resulting from fear, but not true peace. It is the peace of a graveyard, a concentration camp, or a country under military occupation, but not a genuine and enduring peace. *Shalom* can never be experienced by a corrupt society. A materialist society obsessed with riches and indifferent towards the situation of the poor. A hedonistic society geared to satisfy artificial needs and blind towards the suffering of the masses in the Two-Thirds World. A consumerist society captive to the idolatry of fashions and hardened towards the misery of the marginalized. A wasteful society subject to the ideology of unlimited economic growth and without compassion towards the hungry crowds. Neither can *Shalom* become a reality in a world characterized by global injustice. A world dominated by the drive for political power and forgetful of human rights. A world that snatches bread from the mouth of the needy with the aim of fattening an elite with obesity problems. A world where whole generations from poor countries are born mortgaged by rich ones.

The only possible peace in this kind of society and this kind of world is a peace imposed by governments of national security. A peace that depends completely on persecution and exile, arbitrary arrest and torture, forced disappearances, mutilations and assassinations. A peace reserved for a privileged elite, bought with the blood of the oppressed. A peace which the poor detest and the rich cannot completely enjoy. A peace that threatens to destroy humankind.

If the fruit of justice is peace, the fruit of injustice is violence and social chaos, enmity and insecurity, hate and fear. Every injustice committed against the poor carries with it the seed of subversion. Justice fosters to life, injustice culminates in death. Injustice is not merely the violation of human rights, but a sin against the living God. Consequently, those who persist in injustice place themselves under God's judgment. "Those who mock the poor insult their Maker; those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished" (Pr. 17:5). It follows that the most efficient way of working against peace is to work towards injustice. Sow injustice and you will reap violence. Wherever violence erupts, the common explanation on the part of the beneficiaries of the system is that the causes of these problems are agitators who are foreign to the situation. The question one must place in front of the defenders of the status quo is: What would such agitators accomplish if it were not because the land is fertile soil for resentment and hate caused by injustice?

Latin America is a good illustration of the problem. It looks as if throughout their history our countries were tied to a vicious cycle of impoverishment of the masses followed by social eruption, followed by repression, followed by increased impoverishment of the masses, followed by increased social instability, followed by increased repression, and so on and so forth. Each time this cycle is repeated, a higher social price is paid. Is there a way out, especially taking into account that every attempt at change immediately becomes the target of suspicions of those who retain control of the power structures?

The situation becomes even more complicated in light of the game of economic interests at the international level. U.S. foreign policy operates from the premise that democracy and freedom are values that must be preserved at any cost throughout the world. The undeniable result, however, is that during the Cold War the U.S. government was often the bedmate of the most repressive governments in the history of humanity.

Today the situation is different. We have left the Cold War behind. At least, in Latin America no longer do we have military dictatorships. But let us not fool ourselves: today, now more than ever, economic power is concentrated in giant transnational corporations at the bidding of the ill-fated neoliberal system, a system of injustice that benefits the elite—the "transnational class"—at the expense of the great majority. We have transitioned from the Cold War to the War on Terror. Whoever disagrees with the system is no longer subversive or an "accomplice of subversion", but runs the risk of being branded a terrorist. And of course, if we desire peace, we must get rid of the terrorists!

In contrast, the most efficient manner of working for peace is to fight against injustice. Do you desire peace? Then, "let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Do you desire "rest and security forever"? Then, "put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right" (Ez. 45:9). Do you desire to live "in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places"? Then, **"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"**(Mi. 6:8).