**Justice and only justice**

Text: Deuteronomy 16:18-19:21

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:38-48; Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17:14-20; 18:15-18; 19:15-21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘O God beyond all praising’, 119:33-40, 94, 216, ‘Give thanks’ (or 72)

**Series:** Deuteronomy (#11)

**Theme:** Moses explains God’s law concerning the roles of judges, kings, priests and prophets as the ‘guardians of justice’ within the covenant community of Israel, outlining the principles of justice and revealing God’s promise of future prophets, pointing ultimately to Christ.

**Proposition:** Trust in Christ because He is the ultimate Guardian of justice who was Himself unjustly tried and sentenced to death, but who also rose from the grave and will judge all people justly when He returns to this earth.

**Introduction**

We used to live close to a small town in the North Island called Ohakune. Its claim to fame? A large carrot monument to recognise that the area produces the highest proportion of these root veges in New Zealand. One day someone in a car was speeding down the Ohakune main street. When this person pulled over to park a man walked up to the car and asked, “why were you going so fast?” Oh, the driver replied, ‘this is just a one-horse town’ (meaning a small and unimportant place). To which the plain-clothes policeman who had spotted him breaking the law replied ‘Well, I’m the sheriff’. You can be sure that a hefty fine followed!

Have you ever watched any movies about the ‘wild west’? I remember some of the old ones: The Gunfighter (1950); the outlaw Josie Wales (1976); the good, the bad and the ugly (1966). These films were all about shootings, bandits and bank robbers. In the late 19th century, settlers were coming into the frontier territories west of the Mississippi River in what is now called the United States of America. Back then, in the 30 years prior to 1865-1895 this was called the ‘wild west’. Why? because it was a largely lawless country back then. People could largely do as they pleased, acting against the law with little, if any, consequences. Might was ‘right’ in their eyes of those ‘cowboys’. ‘Justice’ was often rough and ready, often resulting in unjust shootings and lynchings.

For the people of Israel, living in the land which the Lord their God was giving them, it was vital that their new homeland not become the ‘wild west’ on the other side of the Jordan River. Instead, for the good land to be a place of continued blessing it was essential that there be ‘*justice and only justice*’ (16:20). We tend to think of justice in the sense of fairness and that is the key aspect of the word which Deuteronomy 17-19 focusses upon. However, the Hebrew word which is translated ‘justice’ here is one which occurs throughout the Old Testament, and is often rendered ‘righteousness’.

“*The LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds*” (Psalm 11:7); “*He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing*” (Deut 10:18). God is the just judge of all the earth (Gen 18:25).

For a human beings, righteousness is living in conformity with God’s standard – His law. Justice/righteousness is therefore the opposite of sin (e.g. Eccl 7:20). The book of Deuteronomy is very much about practical righteousness. It is about lawful living. Our text this morning focusses on practical justice amongst God’s people Israel. There are three points in this sermon:

1. The guardians of justice
2. The principles of justice
3. The fulfilment of justice
4. **The guardians of justice**

Have you ever been treated unfairly? Israel had been. In captivity the Israelites experienced great injustice. God had rescued them from the ruthless oppression of Pharaoh who had made the lives of the Israelites bitter in Egypt (Ex 1:8-22). After the Exodus, Israel was free of injustice from outside the covenant community, but not from within. How long did it take for injustices to arise between Israelite individuals and families after they left Egypt? Not long! For communities of sinful people everywhere, disagreements and difficulties in relationships are inevitable (e.g. 1 Cor 11:19). The question is not whether they will happen, but whether we will deal with them justly when they do.

At first, in the wilderness, Moses himself judged disputes between the people, working from morning until evening each day (Exo 18:13) until his father-in-law Jethro wisely advised him to delegate the smaller matters to others. Moses then commissioned able men who ‘*judged the people at all times*’ (18:26). This was to be the continuing pattern for Israel after they occupied the promised land and Moses was no longer alive. Such people could accurately be described as ‘guardians of justice’. A guardian is a person who protects, preserves and/or defends something or somebody.

Here is what God said through Moses to His people: "*You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.* ***Justice, and only justice, you shall follow****, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you*” (Deut 16:18-20).

In the nation of Old Testament Israel, civil and religious laws were closely intertwined. In today’s language we would say that there was ‘no separation of church and state’. The judges (17:8-13), king (17:14-20), priests (18:1-8) and prophets (18:14-21) were together responsible for putting the commandments of God into practice (cf. 1:9-18) in order to ensure that the people of Israel dealt justly with each other. We’re going to look at what our text reveals about these ‘guardians of justice’ in three categories:

1. **Firstly, judges/kings:** Judges are officials with the authority to administer justice by trying cases (17:9). Old Testament Israel was led by a series of judges (Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson) before the period of the monarchy beginning with King Saul. In Deuteronomy we see that the Lord did not institute a human kingship (17:14-15), but did permit monarchs if they met these criteria:

* The king must be chosen by God (17:15), not self-selected, as Absalom later attempted to be (2 Sam 15).
* He must be part of the covenant community of Israel, ‘*one from among your brothers*’ and not a foreigner (17:15).
* He was not to exploit his position in order to gain wealth, armies or many wives; as Solomon did later (1 Ki 10:26-11:8).
* He was to be a student of God’s law, ‘*writing for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests*’ (17:18).
* He was to fear the Lord his God and keep the law ‘*that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers*’ (17:20).

1. **Secondly, priests:** The primary responsibility of a priest was in temple worship where sacrifices were offered to the Lord. The priests were also to bless the people (Num 6:22-26) and to teach them the law of God (Deut 31:9-12). All priests were to be part of the tribe of Levi (Levites) and were provided for by the people from the other 11 tribes of Israel (18:1-8). Not all Levites were priests. The Levitical priests, together with the judge at the central place of worship, together functioned as what we would call ‘the high court’. People in need of a legal decision were to consult the priests and the judge who would then reach a binding verdict. Those affected by this ruling were to “*be careful to do according to all that they direct you*” (Deut 16:10).
2. **Thirdly, prophets:** The primary role of a prophet was to receive revelation from God and to faithfully communicate this to His people. In conveying God’s Word to Israel they taught the Lord’s standard for justice and the consequences of acting unjustly. In doing so they called people to repentance. The true prophets spoke God’s will by consulting Him. Most of what they prophesied (on average about 90%) was a re-telling of what God had previously said, the rest was revelation of what was yet to come. False prophets were identified when their predictions of the future did not come true (18:22). For example, later in the history of Israel, Jeremiah was confirmed as a true prophet, whereas Hananiah was a false one (Jer 28:15). The people were to listen to the Lord’s true prophets and not to ‘*learn to follow the abominable practices*’ of the pagan nations (18:9) which included child sacrifice, divination, fortune telling, sorcery and consultation with mediums (18:9-14).

The Israelites were to follow justice, only justice, so that they would be blessed in the Promised Land. This justice was to be protected and executed through faithful judges, kings, priests and prophets so that the Lord would be gloried and so that His people would greatly flourish as they followed the principles of justice. This brings us to our second point.

1. **The principles of justice**

‘Kangaroo courts’ do not originate in Australia. The name possibly comes from 'claim jumping' in the California Gold Rush. They are sham legal proceedings which are set-up in order to give the impression of a fair legal process. In fact, they offer no impartial justice as the verdict, invariably against the accused, is decided in advance. In the ‘wild west’ ‘kangaroo courts’ were common. The sheriff in a ‘one horse town’ had little or no back up and if he tried to enforce the law, he could find himself locked up in the town jail, shot or hung (if the Western movies are anything to go by).

How would it be here in New Zealand if there was no system of courts where legal cases and disputes could be heard? Or if there was no civil government to regulate and oversee the public servants whose role is to maintain law and order? What would this country rapidly become if we no longer had a police force? I can confidently tell you that we would not become some kind of liberated utopia where everyone lived happily ever after. Chaos, disorder, anarchy, instability, violence and corruption would rapidly increase. The oppression of the vulnerable by the powerful would escalate. It would be bad, very bad, as we have seen in other countries which have been wrecked and ravaged by lawlessness and conflict.

This was notthe outcome that the Lord God desired for the people of Israel upon whom He had set his love (Deut 7:7). In addition to the appointment of ‘guardians of justice’, God graciously gave to His people the principles of justice: a fair trial, a court system, the need for multiple witnesses who are cross-examined, and just sentencing. Let’s look at these five principles now from our text.

1. **Firstly, a fair trial** – includes the hearing of evidence by a court of justice. The evidence or decisions reached must not be ‘bent’ to suit the personal interests of those involved. Justice must not be perverted, and no bribes accepted (16:19). One person must not be favoured over another as is often the case where the powerful, wealthy and popular are treated better than those who have less influence. Outside of the court system, partiality was a problem in the fellowship of early New Testament church where the rich were honoured, and the poor were not (James 2:1-7).

Here and now, you and I need to be careful not to favour those who are more like us, or those whom we think to be ‘above us’ in wealth, education, ethnic background or worldly status over those who are not so much like us or whom we do not know.

There is an essential equality between us all (Gen 1:27; Gal 3:28). In the ‘wild west’ someone could be lynched and executed without a fair trial. This was not God’s will for His people. Perhaps the alleged crime was actually an accident, like that described in Deut 19:4-5 where the head of an axe, which a man is using to cut down a tree, slips off the handle and hits his neighbour thereby killing him without any intent of harm by the ‘manslayer’. In order to ensure a fair trial, the manslayer could flee to one of three ‘cities of refuge’ in the land and so be protected from relatives of the victim or others who might seek their own revenge in their ‘hot anger’ (Deut 19:6).

1. **Secondly, a court system:** Judges and officers were to be appointed in the many towns (Deut 16:18) that the Lord would deliver into the hands of the conquering Israelites as they occupied the Promised Land. The Lord also prescribed a central court of justice for difficult cases which required greater wisdom, care and authority than was possible in every town. These ‘difficult cases’ would not necessarily be the worst crimes, but could also have been offences where it was difficult to determine whether they had been committed intentionally, by accident or through carelessness. This ‘high court’ was to meet ‘at the place that the Lord your God will choose’ (17:8) where the Levitical priests and the judge would be consulted and then give their decision (17:9).
2. **Thirdly, multiple witnesses:** A single witness is unreliable because they may wilfully speak falsely and/or they may not be aware of all the facts of the case. The need for multiple witnesses for any alleged offence is expressed in Deut 19:15 ‘*Only on the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses shall a charge be established*’. (Also in 17:6 for any who are accused of transgressing the covenant). This key principle of justice is repeated in the New Testament (2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19). Within the church, any charged must be established on the evidence of two or three witnesses (Matt 18:16).

How many times have you heard something from one person about someone else and formed an opinion, and shared this with others without being careful to listen to the other side of the story? Gossip and slander are often fuelled by a failure to following the basic principle of consulting multiple witnesses whose reports are to be carefully examined to check that they are speaking the truth (Prov 18:17).

1. **Fourthly, careful examination:** Consulting multiple witnesses does not ensure justice if the witnesses speak falsely, as they did at the trial of Naboth, whose vineyard Jezebel unjustly obtained for her husband Ahab who wanted it for a vege garden (1 Kings 21). There is a need for the judges to ‘inquire diligently’ in order to determine if the witness is a false witness (Deut 19:18). The prescribed penalty for false witnesses was to ‘*do to him as he had meant to do to his brother*’ (Deut 19:18). Proverbs 18:17 states that “*The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him*”.
2. **Fifthly, fair (proportionate) sentencing:** The last principle of justice arising from our text is that the punishment must fit the crime. This is expressed in Deut 19:21 “*It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*”. {This is called the ‘law of talion’ (Latin: lex talionis) and was a principle of justice in other Ancient Near East cultures}. This law was not a licence for revenge. It was intended to ensure that the punishment was limited to fit the crime: ONLY an eye for an eye, ONLY a tooth for a tooth.

When Jesus quoted the words of Deut 19:21 in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:38) he was speaking to those who were using this Scripture as a ground for personal revenge. He was not speaking against seeking justice in court, but for extending grace and love towards others who act unjustly towards us.

It is not surprising that these basic principles of justice are familiar to us as the basis for the judicial systems of many nations. They are wise principles that our perfectly just Creator has revealed to fallen human beings as the way to deal with injustices which occur in our relationships with one another as a result of sin. Ultimately, they all point forward to our need for a Saviour, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The fulfilment of justice**

God is the ultimate, the Divine, ‘Guardian of justice’ and He had ministered justice through Moses the judge and had spoken through Moses the prophet to reveal His law to His people Israel. As we have seen, God called for the appointment of human ‘guardians of justice’ so that there would be ‘justice, only justice’ for His people. Moses himself was not permitted to go west across the Jordan into Canaan (3:27). He died outside the Promised Land (34:5). However, he did reveal this promise to the Israelites: "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers- it is to him you shall listen*” (Deut 18:15). After Moses, God would provide a continuing line of prophets who would faithfully declare His Word to His people.

We know from the history of Israel, revealed in Scripture, that God fulfilled this promise. Many Old Testament books are named after the prophets whose prophesies they contain (e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, etc). Yet, despite many prophets, many judges, many kings and many priests, Israel did not enjoy ‘justice and only justice’. For example, the prophet Amos prophesied God’s judgement on Israel for her social injustices, oppressing the poor (2:7; 5:11); exploiting the needy (4:1) and dealing dishonestly in business (8:5).

The problem was not a lack of appointed human ‘guardians of justice’, nor was it that the people did not know the principles of justice revealed to them by their God. The obstacle which prevented ‘justice and only justice’ back then is exactly the same as it is now. Do you know what it is? Jeremiah, one of the Lord’s prophets did. He prophesied the Lord’s Word saying: “*the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick*” (Jer 17:9). The devious condition of the fallen human heart which loves darkness rather than light (John 3:19) is the root cause of all injustice.

God’s gracious solution is revealed in the promise He makes to raise up a prophet like Moses (18:15). This last prophet of God is Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2-3) who has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses (Heb 3:3).

* He is the enduring High Priest who is both God and man, able to sympathise with our weaknesses (Heb 4:14-16).
* He is the humble king who was chosen by God the Father (e.g. Matt 17:5).
* He is One like us; tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15).
* He did not exploit His position to gain wealth or armies for Himself.
* He was a student of God’s law. At age twelve he sat amongst the teachers in the temple, listening to them and asking them questions.
* Everyone who heard Him was amazed at his understanding (Luke 2:46-47).
* Jesus Christ is the eternal prophet, priest and king.

To quote the words of Heidelberg Catechism LD12, Answer 31, He has been ordained by God the Father to be:

1. **our chief prophet and teacher** who perfectly reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God for our deliverance
2. **our only high priest** who has set us free by the one sacrifice of his body, and who continually pleads our cause with the Father
3. **and our eternal king** who governs us by his Word and Spirit and who guards us and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us.

Jesus is the ultimate Guardian of justice. He has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets (Matt 5:17). He is without injustice. No deceit was in his mouth (Isaiah 53:9). Yet He was unjustly condemned to death in a ‘Kangaroo court’ where many false witnesses were brought to testify against Him (Matt 26:60). The human guardians of justice in those days, Caiaphas, the high priest, the scribes and the elders followed injustice, only injustice. Pontius Pilate, the judge in the Roman court, reached the right verdict about Jesus saying, “*I find no guilt in this man*” (Luke 23:4). However, his sentence was injustice, only injustice. Knowing Jesus to be innocent, but wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate delivered Him to be crucified to death (Mark 15:15).

It is because Jesus lived a perfectly righteous, just life on this earth and because He fully paid for God’s people the penalty for all their unrighteousness and injustice that He rose from death to life. Jesus Christ is alive now and will return to this earth having been appointed by God to judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Peter 4:5). Hear this: God now “*commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead*." (Acts 17:30-31).

So how is it with you today? We do not live in the American ‘wild west’ of the late nineteenth century, but many injustices have been done in our lifetimes. We know that the courts of this land do not always reach just verdicts. Witnesses sometimes lie. Cross examination does not always reveal the truth. The punishment does not always fit the crime.

Perhaps you are someone who has suffered painful injustice, perhaps in your family, your marriage, at your workplace. Perhaps you’ve been abused, abandoned, taken advantage of, robbed, or unfairly dismissed from your employment. Perhaps you’d like to take revenge against those who have hurt you. God’s Word says, ‘*never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God*” (Romans 12:19). You can trust that when Christ returns there will be justice only justice.

Are you ready for that day? Have you come to Jesus in repentance and faith? Do you trust Him to declare you innocent of any injustice or unrighteousness because He has fully paid the price for your sin? This is God’s amazing grace in which He, brothers and sisters, for our sake made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).

In the New Heavens and New Earth there will be justice, only justice as people like us dwell with God, not in the ‘wild west’, not in this unjust world, but in the eternal Promised Land. There Christ, the last Prophet, the eternal High Priest, the King of Kings will dwell forever with His people. There will be no more death, mourning, crying, pain and injustice there, for this first earth will have passed away (Rev 21:1).

AMEN