

Social Justice in Malaysia: Doing Justice to Our Faith

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Churchianity: The 'Church' as we see it today

In order to even begin any discourse on social justice, one must first analyse the frameworks that we use to see the world. The lenses that we put on ourselves have been commonly called "worldviews", through which we make sense of all that is around us. This foundation then determines everything about what we believe and how we consequently behave and react, depending on the situations surrounding us. This is extremely important as we examine the relevance and poignancy of the Church in Malaysia today.

The Malaysian Church, although made up of various denominations, differences of which I refrain from discussing here, has largely taken upon itself the Great Commission as the primary objective of its existence. The *raison d'être* of the church is based very much upon the passage in Matthew 28: 16-20, where Jesus tells his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations". In making 'disciples', again the Church has understood this to mean "saving and converting" the non-believers amidst us and beyond, through evangelism, mission trips, and so on. Indeed, evangelicals have historically done excellently in telling the message of personal salvation, and how people can get it 'right' with God.

The essence of desiring each individual to be reconciled with God is without a doubt crucial and central to the Christian faith. However, one growing concern is that this has been the sole preoccupation of the church at large, a sort of preaching a "passport" methodology that authorises entry into heaven in a simple 1-2-3 step neat package. Dallas Willard, author and theologian, calls this "vampire Christianity", saying that Christians must ask themselves if they are interested in Jesus for His blood alone, and little else. We have certainly been guilty of this! Hence, this little convenient salvation formula so familiar to us today clearly narrows down the very richness and depth of a relationship with our great Creator God.

This then begs the question of what salvation equals. Trees have been felled to produce the humongous amounts of paper spent in writing the theology of salvation (blame the theologians and thinkers of the day). Suffice to say, perhaps the concept stretches deeper and wider than we could ever imagine. We might even turn to other Christian institutions, whose history and traditions can teach us a great deal. Salvation in the Eastern Orthodox Church is defined as becoming the person God intends for us to be, mind, body and spirit, in an eternal development of attaining eventual wholeness and completeness. Our faith has so much more to offer the world, and oftentimes we are thirsting and hungering for more. A real faith that translates into action: does the Church today provide for this?

Life of Christ, not just His death!

Because the church has traditionally placed greater emphasis upon salvation of the soul (and this in itself is not wrong), it is Jesus' death and bloodshed on the cross that have solely taken the limelight. While the concepts of redemption from sin, securing eternal life for oneself and loved ones, are all important and crucial in understanding the Christian faith, it is equally relevant to focus upon the flipside of Jesus' story. It is with dry irony that I say the church should be reflecting more deeply upon the life of Christ, since this is what the Church should rightfully be doing anyway, to begin with.

Jesus was such an attractive personality that his life itself drew crowds all around Him. If *truth* comes in the form of a person, and Jesus is this person, then what was it that His life exuded and emanated that we as a church should learn from and emulate?

Jesus said to them, "And whom do you say that I am?"

They replied,

"You are He who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of angst and existential estrangement; You are He who speaks of the theonomous viewpoint of the analogia entis, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities."

"You are my Oppressed One, my soul's shalom, the One who was, who is, and who shall be, who has never left us alone in the struggle, the event of liberation in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom, and whose blackness is both literal and symbolic."

And Jesus replied, "Huh?"

So much time has been spent deliberating the nature of Jesus, the propositional aspect of who Jesus, and consequently, what Christianity, is all about. Less time has been spent on relational aspects, and how Jesus related to the people themselves in teaching them principles of living in the here and now. What is the message that Jesus was trying to impart to people in His time and beyond? Is it possible to explore not just *who* Jesus was (important for our understanding of personal salvation) but also *what* Jesus said and desired (important for principles of action in this very world)?

Kingdom Principles

You have heard it said that if our faith were all about being saved for eternal life, we would accept Jesus in our hearts and immediately die to join God in heaven, in eternal divine fellowship. But Jesus has taught us so much more. His purpose of being on earth was to restore and reconcile relationships with the other, many of which were broken during the Fall. These include relations between man-and-man, man-and-God, and man-and-nature. In the perfecting of humankind, what are the kingdom principles that we can live by?

Jesus spends a whole lot more time talking to people about the "Kingdom of God" through the many parables, and less so in convincing them that they must believe in Him. The parables resonate with the need for internal transformation, a slow but steady recognition of goodness, charity and humility. This required a paradigm shift to adopt such new radical teachings at the time. Jesus' vision was for the kingdom of God to be acted out, principles of life which would transform systemic evil that existed in this lifetime into those of goodness and holiness – emphasising humility, sacrificial love, compassion, justice, and so on. All of these would counter a world that was encroached upon by dominance, hypocrisy, pomp, pride, "greed, malice, deceit, envy, slander, arrogance and folly" (Mark 7: 22-23).

He does not merely preach these but *acts* on the principles he expounds upon. His care and physical attention given to the marginalised and ostracised in society – the tax-collectors, prostitutes, demon-possessed, blind, lame, diseased– are real reflections of principles of justice and speaking up for the voiceless and downtrodden upon. It is these actions that the Church must give great thought to.

People of the Abrahamic faiths have always been familiar with the concept of social justice, elements of which are peppered all over the Old Testament, especially within books of the Prophets. Amos admonishes the people of Israel, calling upon them to turn from their ways, saying:

*"You trample upon the poor and needy,
You oppress the righteous and take bribes.
You deprive the poor of justice in the courts." (Amos 5: 11-12)*

In Islam, the Qur'an speaks the same of justice being handed out deservingly:

"Allah commands that you should render back the trusts to those to whom they are due; and that when you judge between men, you judge with justice." (Sura An-Nisa: 58 (4:48))

In the Old Testament books of the prophets, the concept of justice means the use of mercy towards those who have no power to secure it for themselves, protecting and defending those who are helpless and powerless. In Jeremiah (1: 21-27), justice is absent when failure to defend the orphan and plead the widows' cause is the social norm.

Justice grounded upon Rights and Freedoms

Aside from what we can explore based on the Scripture, there are fundamental principles that we can refer to when exploring the need for social justice. The Catholic Church has been working at issues of social justice for many years, the Jesuit order specifically tasked with this very responsibility and role. In 1963, Pope John the 23rd issued one of the most famous encyclicals called *Pacem In Terris*, or in English, "On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty".

This document clearly sets the basis upon which justice is grounded, laying the premises that God created all men equal, and as such he has rights and duties that are universal, inviolable and inalienable. Therefore, man has economic, political, cultural, and moral rights and duties. In detail, "man has the right to live, to bodily integrity, to the means necessary for development of life, to be respected, to worship God according to one's conscience, to choose freely one's state in life, (and) to freely meet and associate." (sic)

It further states, "All men are equal in natural dignity, and ... no form of approval is being given to racial discrimination... and the possession of rights involves recognition and respect by other people". Many of such statements ring similar to those contained within present international human rights law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other legal Human Rights instruments. We believe therefore, that mankind has been bestowed these rights to life by God through the moral order through which He has created the world. It is hence when individuals part of this refined order fall through the cracks of the system, failing to be duly recognised as equal citizens whose natural rights are consequently violated, that we say justice has not been sufficiently provided for.

The Great Malaysian Case

I have outlined thus far the current state of looking beyond a pretty package of salvation into kingdom principles that Jesus preached on earth, revolutionary values primarily for the sake of reconciliation in the here and now. I showed examples from Scripture that show historically God's desire for justice on earth, and how freedoms and rights given to us through the moral order of creation are inextricably linked with social justice.

So how does all this really relate to Malaysia? Can we apply this model to our local contexts?

Of course. That is the whole point of the argument, to form bases upon which the Church can be spurred onto action.

So clearly drawn out are the reasons for which we should be continually concerned for our fellow neighbours who do not receive equal treatment in the present world. It could be as simple as, God cares for the poor and marginalised and therefore we should too. There is something fundamentally wrong if we are not impassioned and emboldened to do the work that is clearly what Jesus desired - to restore the broken relationships between man and man, man and God, and man and earth. This to me is a deeper salvation process that we can partner God in, in saving and freeing the oppressed from physical and spiritual ailment besetting people right here.

In Malaysia, the list of examples goes on terribly long. I could share my experiences in interacting with the disengaged Orang Asli community, or stories heard about migrant workers being treated with gross disregard and cruelty, trafficked children and women with nowhere to run, the homeless and penniless street roamers that sleep in Pudu Bus Station and so on. These are all people groups whose many basic rights have been denied. Many organisations contribute to alleviating their state, but “the harvest is plenty and workers few”.

On a more macro level, the relationship between Church and Government should be explored. Is the agenda, for example, of the Malaysian Government sound and in coherence with godly principles to be supported? Do its national development plans and policies, social, economic, legal and otherwise, reflect the sort of social justice that God would envision for His people? At which points, if any, do they converge? If they do not, is it the role of the Church to point out the dissonance? If so, what are the ways in which the Christian church can respond, and what mechanisms exist that allow for a response to take place?

The Malaysian church has thus far responded to national issues as and when they occur through their representative bodies such as the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF), the Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM) and so on, at times responding through the collation of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST). However, individual churches seem to be little concerned about the current affairs and issues – or if they are, feel underpowered to react accordingly. In fact, there seems to be a lack of a cohesive, theological and contextual response to what is happening in the country. A theological framework that is merely reactionary in nature is insufficient. We would do well in engaging in a deeper theological reflective exercise to understand how to *be* church instead of how to *do* church.

Malaysians prefer to refrain from socio-political involvement. However, there comes a time when such engagement is necessitated based on present situations. Now is such a time.

There is a need to more deeply understand our role in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural Malaysia, specifically how Christians can be engaged with the socio-economic and socio-political fabric that eventually determine outcomes of people’s lives. We must begin to draw out frameworks to comprehend the co-existence of Islam and Christianity; the polity of minority religious and ethnic groups set amidst a majority religion and ethnicity. Does the current model reflect a just society? If not, how can we contribute to encouraging, moving Malaysia along the right path? How can the Church speak out for the oppressed against impediments to justice – corruption, bribery, greed, prejudice in courts – and help liberate people from the shackles of evil we are collectively trapped by?

What Now?

By now we should realise that Biblical principles lead to social and political implications – a commitment to justice, a belief in the sacredness of life and the rights therein, an emphasis on personal and communal responsibility for the less fortunate, and an obligation to promote peace. Christian justice is seamless, holistic, total. In determining the identity and consequent action of the Malaysian Church, we must ask ourselves what it really means to be a Christian living in this country, not isolated from society but in daily dynamic interaction with the “other”. Perhaps there is even a need to be rid of the “other”.

A greater reflection will enable Christians to not only take a step closer to understanding their role in society today, but also contribute positively to be part of a maturing society that thinks, explores, questions, and desires for justice to be practiced, and likewise actively engaged in the world. There are numerous ways and means through which we can be directly involved in freeing, liberating, saving the underprivileged – and this must be done in the spirit of genuine love. The responsibility is ours to take heed of. We merely need to respond.