Jesus' Vision of God's Fair Reign

© David Neville
(School of Theology, Charles Sturt University)

Introduction

We live in troubled – and troubling – times. There is no time when this has not been said, but the magnitude of certain problems faced by the world *as a whole* is unprecedented. Exponential population growth since the Industrial Revolution, especially in the past fifty years, coupled with unfettered exploitation of natural resources, especially on the part of industrialised nations, have cast a bleak pall over the future of our planet. Conflict between nations and people groups continues unabated. And the gulf between the wealthy and the wretched of the earth continues to widen. The devastation caused by the tsunami that ravaged parts of South Asia on 26 December 2004 rightly claimed the world's attention and response. But this natural disaster should not deflect attention from the reality that one billion children live in poverty, meaning that nearly half the children of the world suffer from at least one form of severe deprivation. About 30,000 children die daily from malnutrition and preventable diseases, and 850 million people go hungry each day. We live not only in an unpredictable world but in an *unjust* world. In such a world, what is our responsibility as people of faith?

What follows draws upon widely accepted views about Jesus. My aim is to explore aspects of the "politics of Jesus" – by which I mean the social dimensions of Jesus' life, death and resurrection – to ascertain something of the continuing significance of his vision of God's fair reign.

The burden of Jesus' message

When Jesus arrived on the scene in Galilee, the burden of his message was that because God's reign is near, so near that its presence can already be sensed and even experienced, the time is ripe for transformation (see Matt 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43). One aspect of the transformation Jesus called for was a change of attitude ("repentance"), a reorientation of mind and will and life. Yet there is another dimension to the transformation Jesus called for as a result of the nearness of God's reign, a dimension implied by the gospels even if not articulated overtly. This other dimension is *social* transformation alongside and in continuity with personal reorientation in response to the nearness of God's reign.

There are three reasons for claiming that Jesus called for social transformation: (1) it is implied in the very concept of the "reign of God"; (2) it is confirmed by the nature of Jesus' mission; and (3) it is spelt out in Jesus' teaching, which was both personal (directed at persons with hearts, minds and wills) and "political" (aimed at addressing social relations and redressing social injustice).

First, when Jesus spoke about the reign of God, he did not need to emphasise its social dimension because it was understood within his Palestinian milieu that the Lord of all the earth was necessarily Lord of every social order. Jesus' audience did not need to be advised or reminded that God's reign encompasses every aspect of life, including social, economic and political dimensions. Indeed, situated as Jesus and his hearers were within a vassal nation under Roman dominion, it would be difficult to think of any more political utterance than that God's reign was near! When Jesus taught that one's first priority should be "God's reign and righteousness" (Matt 6:33, echoing Matt 6:10), he explicitly associated the reign of God with God's own justice and concern for justice. That Matthew recorded this crucial saying within the context of Jesus' teaching about the lure of wealth and anxiety about basic necessities of life (Matt 6:24–34) demonstrates its socio-political and economic ramifications.

Second, although directed principally towards Galilean villagers, at least prior to his journey to Jerusalem – or perhaps, as John indicates, punctuated by occasional visits to Jerusalem – Jesus' mission was characterised by its public (hence socio-political) nature. While he responded to the needs of individuals, both his teaching and reputation as a healer drew crowds. There is ample evidence that associates, sympathisers and adversaries all recognised the political significance of Jesus' mission, motivated by his vision of God's fair reign, even if they failed to appreciate that Jesus' conception of social transformation envisaged something much deeper and more radical than regime change. Jesus' disciples seem to have thought that he was about to inaugurate a new social order, and some took steps to ensure they would exercise a measure of authority in that new order (see Mark 10:35–45). Jesus may have deflated their ambitions, but his instructions to his disciples about how power and authority should be reconfigured are no less "political" than what they had in mind. Jesus did not "depoliticise" their expectations by teaching them to focus on piety, religious experience or the inner life; rather, he taught them to re-conceive their understanding of social inter-relations.

As for the response of sympathisers, there is an illuminating comment at the conclusion to the feeding of more than five thousand people in John 6:15: "So Jesus,

knowing that they [witnesses to the ‘sign’ of feeding] intended to come and seize him *to make him king*, withdrew again to the hill by himself alone.” Ordinary people saw in Jesus the kind of qualities they wanted *in a ruler*. With regard to Jesus’ opponents, it hardly needs to be pointed out that they were all from the upper echelons of society, persons who had something to lose if the way things were should happen to change. That many of Jesus’ opponents were religious authorities does not signify that Jesus’ mission was concerned solely with religious matters; in Jesus’ context, religion and politics were inextricably intertwined.

It is also significant that Jesus was executed as a messianic pretender on the instruction of a governor of the Roman empire. This is one of the most historically secure pieces of information we have about Jesus, and its implications are manifold. Here the important point is that this particular prefect, concerned principally with Rome’s grip on power, either believed or was convinced by leading religious and aristocratic Jewish authorities that Jesus was a threat to the *status quo*. That they misunderstood the nature of the threat Jesus posed does not imply they were wrong to see him as a threat. Each of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ arrest, “trial” and execution explicitly raises the profile of political (royal) language in relation to Jesus, much of it dripping with irony. Even the saying recorded in John 18:36, “My kingship does not come from this world,” is not a renunciation of kingship *per se* but a claim to a source of authority higher than prefect or emperor and a qualification concerning the nature of Jesus’ kingship, as the following words make clear: “If my kingship came from this world my servants would fight, that I might not be delivered up to ‘the Jews’ [Jewish authorities]; but, as it is, my kingship does not come from here.”

Third, any number of texts relating to Jesus’ teaching reveals a social dimension to his message grounded in his vision of God’s fair reign. One could explore Jesus’ parables of God’s reign, “the moral vision of the beatitudes” (Marshall, 2003) or ethical implications of the “transforming initiatives” taught by Jesus in Matthew 5–7 (see Stassen and Gushee, 2004). There is also Jesus’ teaching on love of God and neighbour as the heartbeat of faith.

Each of the first three gospels records Jesus affirming love of God and neighbour as quintessential. The account in Luke 10:25–37 is the most distinctive: first, Luke chose a radically different setting for this incident; second, the teacher of Torah rather than Jesus articulates the double commandment (10:26–27); third, the quest for “eternal life” (10:25) prompts the exchange, although Luke notes that the question was insincere; and fourth,

only in Luke's version does the teacher of Torah ask, "Who is my neighbour?" and only Luke records Jesus' parable of the compassionate Samaritan in response (10:29–37).

In the more similar accounts in Matt 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–34, Jesus responds to a question about which of the commandments is primary rather than about what is needful for eternal life. Only Mark relates that Jesus first recited the *Shema*, "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one…" (Mark 12:29; cf. Deut 6:4), and only Mark has Jesus' questioner, a scribe, reiterate Jesus' response to his initial question. But the crucial point in both accounts is that in response to a question about the *single* most important commandment, Jesus identified *two that are inseparable* – love of God with all one's being *and* love of neighbour as oneself. One is incomplete without the other. Commitment to the God of Jesus both implies and is demonstrated by commitment to other persons. Or, put differently, responsibility for the well-being and welfare of others is integral to appropriate personal response to the one God. Here is the theological mandate, if one is needed, for locating commitment to justice at the centre of a life of faith. It is surely not accidental that Lev 19:18, the source of Jesus' injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself, concludes a section that begins with the Lord God's command to the people of Israel, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2), and includes instructions to provide for the poor and the stranger. Holiness cannot be realised without concern for, and the practice of, justice.

Having surveyed the landscape of Israelite scripture and tradition, Jesus unearthed the "hidden treasure," the interpretive key, that made sense of the whole. Little wonder that Matthew has Jesus conclude this exchange by saying, "In these two commandments, the whole Torah subsists, as well as the prophets" (Matt 22:40). In Mark's expanded version of this encounter, the scribe reiterates Jesus' words, yet adds the interpretive remark that together, love of God with all one's being and love of neighbour as oneself is more than *all* whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. To this Jesus responds, "You are not far from the reign of God" (Mark 12:32–34).

Jesus, John and Israelite tradition

Prior to launching his own itinerant mission centred on heralding the nearness of God's reign, Jesus was symbolically submerged in the Jordan River by John the Immerser. It is difficult to make out the precise nature of the relationship between Jesus and John, primarily because the gospel writers were concerned to present John as a witness – even if, at times, a doubting witness (Matt 11:2-3; Luke 7:18–20) – to Jesus. Luke, who presents

John and Jesus as relatives (1:36), suggests no close connection between them and even recounts the immersion of Jesus without reference to John (3:21–22)! But Jesus' immersion by John and his own testimony to John's significance (Matt 11:7–14; Luke 7:24–28; 16:16) suggest a closer relation between them, perhaps something akin to that between Jesus and his own disciples. In other words, Jesus learned from predecessors, including – but not only – John.

Given both (a) the testimony of the first three gospels that Jesus experienced a new sense of identity and purpose as he emerged from the Jordan River and heard the voice of God in words of scripture (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22) and (b) Jesus' own reference to John as the culmination of Torah and God's prophets (Matt 11:11–14; Luke 16:16), John serves to symbolise Jesus' indebtedness to his Israelite heritage. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke reinforce this connection by means of genealogies and infancy narratives. All four canonical gospels emphasise that in many and varied ways, Jesus "fulfilled" scripture. Indeed, according to the gospel writers, Jesus' mission was shaped by scripture. Little of what he did or said makes sense apart from the larger story recounted in scripture. Yet certain aspects of Jewish scripture and tradition made more of a mark on Jesus than others. While he shared with fellow Galileans and Judeans an uncompromising commitment to the sovereignty of the God of Torah and the prophets, he also perceived that although the Lord God was sometimes portrayed as little different from other tribal deities, more often the true Lord of the universe had been encountered by his people in the past as merciful, compassionate and just.

Jesus' prophetic persona

Most Christians are reluctant to think of Jesus merely as a prophet, and some scholars are reluctant to accept that the mantle of "prophet" fits Jesus best. Yet Jesus' association with John the Immerser, the occasional yet consistent reports of how he was perceived in his socio-cultural context, the content of what he taught and the symbolic character of much of what he did all strongly suggest a prophetic dimension to his public mission. Perhaps because of his association with John, whose own mission and message recalled Israel's prophets, Jesus adopted a prophetic idiom and style, giving rise to popular perception that he was a prophet, even if he did come from Nazareth (see John 1:46). Indeed, it was in his hometown of Nazareth that Jesus himself apparently responded to the perplexity and/or distrust his words elicited with the proverb, "A prophet is not without honour except at home and among his own" (Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; cf. Luke 4:24).

The two-sided aspect one sees in John’s teaching (warning of judgment and concern for justice) features in many of the biblical prophets, who were concerned not only to utter a word from the Lord but also to remind Israelites of YHWH’s concern for the poor and the alien in their midst. Perhaps the story that best captures both the responsibility and risk associated with the prophetic role is that of Elijah’s challenge to King Ahab following Ahab’s usurpation of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21), although the precedent had been established by Samuel and Nathan. Often enough, the prophet who spoke for YHWH had to speak against the highest (human) authority in the land. So it was that the prophetic tradition reaching back to Moses (see Deut 18:18–19) and shaped by Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, the ‘troubler of Israel’ (1 Kings 18:17), Elisha, Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kings 22), Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel shaped, in turn, the public profiles of John and Jesus. This is not to deny important differences between Jesus and many prophetic predecessors, some of whom came from more privileged backgrounds and some of whom had much more ready access to the courts of kings. Yet he laid claim to – or was claimed by – Israel’s prophetic heritage, an important feature of which was the pursuit of justice among the people of God. Little wonder that William Herzog refers to Jesus as a “prophet of the justice of the reign of God.”

One aspect of Jesus’ prophetic persona was a body of teaching dependent on and illustrative of his vision of God’s fair reign. As Leander Keck (2001: 83) observes, the gospel records indicate that while Jesus responded positively to requests for both healing and liberation from demonic forces, his own priority was to teach: “he was not a healer who found he had something to say but a teacher who found it necessary to heal.” This puts the onus on those who claim to take Jesus seriously to take seriously what he taught. This might seem self-evident, yet as Stassen and Gushee (2003: xi) point out,

> … the teaching and practices of Jesus – especially the largest block of his teachings, the Sermon on the Mount – are routinely ignored or misinterpreted in the preaching and teaching ministry of the churches and in Christian scholarship in ethics. This evasion of the concrete teachings of Jesus has seriously malformed Christian moral practices, moral beliefs and moral witness.

Jesus’ exorcisms and healings comprise another dimension of his prophetic persona. Both exorcisms and healings reinforced his message that the reign of God was so near as to be present and active in his own mission. “The exorcisms of unclean spirits and restorations to life and health indicate that God’s salvation is bursting into the world”

(Hooker, 1997: 36). But no less important than Jesus' demonstration of the presence and activity of God's reign is the nature of that presence and activity. Again and again, one finds that in Jesus' understanding – at least as reflected in his behaviour – God's reign was impinging on the present primarily on behalf of the poor and powerless, the destitute and disenfranchised. This makes all the more sense when one appreciates that demonic possession or disease excluded people from the socio-cultural network of relationships (kinship) that made sense of their lives. Jesus' exorcisms and healings were no less concerned with social and religious restoration than with physical restoration.

A third dimension of Jesus' prophetic persona was his symbolic, prophetic actions. The most obvious of these occurred in the vicinity of Jerusalem: Jesus' entry into the city riding on a borrowed donkey, his provocation in the temple and a final meal with his disciples. Other symbolic actions were less provocative but no less significant for understanding Jesus and his mission, for example, his deliberate selection of an inner core of twelve disciples and his flouting of social convention by keeping company with the disreputable. Hooker's discussion of such prophetic signs is illuminating, especially in light of her argument that like the signs of various biblical prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), Jesus' prophetic actions were not visual aids to illustrate his teaching but dramatic equivalents of prophetic oracles and dramatic embodiments of the purpose of God. In other words, in various specific ways, Jesus not only brought to bear but also brought into being the will and purpose of God in particular situations. He not only heralded the nearness of God's fair reign but also embodied its presence and pressure in what he taught *and* did.

Jesus called disciples

The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and John indicate that at the outset of Jesus' public activity he gathered a group of disciples, although in the fourth gospel it is disciples of John, rather than Jesus, who take the initiative. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus calls disciples early, but not before they witness something of his mission (4:31–5:11). One is hard-pressed to know which of the three depictions is most likely to be historically accurate, although the presentation in Matthew and Mark's accounts is most difficult to explain both culturally and psychologically. Some are sceptical of the tradition that Jesus deliberately formed an inner circle of twelve representing the twelve tribes of Israel, symbolising either Jesus' mission to Israel as a whole or a reconstituted Israel. However, it fits in with Jesus' historic sense of mission to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24; cf. 10:5–8)

and his prophetic persona, in the sense that selecting twelve was in all likelihood a prophetic sign. It also helps to make sense of the perceived need to replace Judas after his death with a single individual, even though there was apparently a larger number who had been present with Jesus from the time of his immersion by John (see Acts 1). In any case, most scholars accept that Jesus gathered around himself a group of associates to share in his mission (see Matt 10:1–8; Mark 3:13–18; Luke 6:12–16; 9:1–6; 10:1–12).

One does not take responsibility for forming a group and giving those who belong to it a sense of purpose and mission unless one intends to have a social impact. To instruct *others*, to share one's vision *with others* and to commission *others* bespeaks an intention to make an impact in the here and now. In effect, Jesus formed an alternative, apparently counter-cultural, society in which many widely accepted social and cultural distinctions and boundaries no longer applied. While we may wonder whether any of the disciples fully perceived the vision of God's fair reign that makes sense of Jesus' assertion that the first will be last and the last first (Mark 10:31; cf. Matt 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14), they were nevertheless encouraged to experience it *and to make it last*. Jesus did not remove them from society but aimed to shape them into an alternative society, an "upside-down kingdom" (Kraybill, 1990) or what Horsley (2003: 126–28) calls "Jesus' alternative to the Roman imperial order" built on military domination, economic exploitation and cultural disintegration.

This cuts against the grain of all expressions of Christian faith concerned solely with individual salvation, as if to redeem the world all God needed was a long weekend (Good Friday to Easter Sunday). The unanimous witness of all four gospels in the New Testament is that the final few days of Jesus' interrupted life was the *culmination* of a significantly longer period of public activity. In other words, Jesus' mission had *duration*, time taken to be shaped by history, tradition, culture and society. In turn, his deliberate recruitment of disciples to share in his mission bespeaks intentional *extension* for the express purpose of shaping the same forces that had shaped him.

Bad company

Compared with the apparent austerity of John the Immerser, Jesus' social behaviour both puzzled and shocked his contemporaries. Especially important is his flouting of convention with regard to table companionship. In an environment in which both what one ate and with whom one ate were matters of grave concern and thus strictly controlled, Jesus gained a reputation for associating with the riffraff of society, those who by behaviour or custom

placed themselves beyond the pale of God’s gracious favour. Many such people were poor, but many were not. The important point is that Jesus’ willingness to share food and fellowship with “sinners” gave practical expression to his vision of God’s fair reign. In his view, God’s goodness was not directed solely towards those concerned to honour God by their behaviour; rather, God’s goodness was for all. In this sense, God’s reign was like God’s rain, showered upon the just and unjust, the obedient and the disobedient. Jesus’ association with the disreputable of his day *enacted* the indiscriminate “perfection” of God, and he called upon would-be followers to emulate God in this respect (Matt 5:43–48; cf. Luke 6:36, which translates the language of “perfection” into that of “mercy”).

If one accepts that what Jesus did and said reveals something of the being and character of God (John 1:18), then it is important to recognise and to reflect on the significance of sharing. Jesus probably had little in the way of possessions, but he found a way to demonstrate God’s generosity. If his teaching is anything to go by, his expectation was that those who managed to catch a glimpse of his vision of God’s fair reign should also find ways to demonstrate God’s concern for all, but especially those in the world who have good reason to think that God’s gaze is averted from them.

Jesus and Jerusalem

Luke 13:31–33 records Jesus responding to an apparently friendly warning by Pharisees of Herod Antipas’ intent to kill him by saying, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Today and tomorrow I am driving out demons and performing cures, and on the third day I shall finish my work.’ Yet I must continue my journey today and tomorrow and the next day, because it is impossible that a prophet should perish outside Jerusalem.” In this fascinating exchange unique to Luke’s Gospel, Jesus not only acknowledges his prophetic role but also anticipates the inevitable fate of a prophet perceived to challenge the *status quo*.

Jesus seems not only to have anticipated but even to have provoked confrontation with ruling authorities in Jerusalem. As already noted, the manner of his (final) entrance into Jerusalem and his provocation in the temple were probably prophetic signs. Given the inherent ambiguity of any symbolic action, it is understandable that Jesus’ action in the temple has been variously interpreted. In brief compass, it is impossible to do justice to this incident. But in line with what has been said already, two interrelated points are integral to comprehending this event and its ramifications: (1) Israel’s prophetic heritage, apart from which Jesus’ action in the temple makes no sense; and (2) the socio-political and economic dimensions of both Jesus’ and earlier prophetic judgments.

Seven hundred and fifty years before Jesus, Micah had pronounced judgment on Solomon's temple in Jerusalem because of wanton disregard for justice on the part of Judah's rulers (Micah 3:9–12). A little over a century later, Jeremiah's prophecy of the temple's destruction (Jer 7:1–15; 26:1-6) is said to have reminded "elders of the land" of Micah's earlier prophecy (see Jer 26:17–18). Against the complacency reflected in the mantra, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD," Jeremiah stationed himself at the temple's entrance and pronounced this reality-check:

> For *if* you truly amend your ways and your doings, *if* you truly act justly one with another, *if* you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, *and if* you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, *then* I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever (Jer 7:4–7, NRSV).

It is surely no accident that when Jesus disrupted economic transactions necessitated by the sacrificial system, he was recalled as citing part (but probably representing the whole) of Jeremiah's prophecy against the temple (Jer 7:11; Matt 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46). Yet again, Jesus found in the prophetic heritage that had shaped him resources for articulating and enacting his own vision of God's fair reign. After all, it was Jeremiah who had been credited with relating knowledge of God with acting justly (Jeremiah 22). Although only Matthew records Jesus appealing to the words of Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matt 9:13; 12:7), as the interpretive clue to aspects of his mission, this resonates with Jesus' symbolic disruption of temple activity. So, too, does the allusion to Micah 6:8 in Jesus' denunciation of scribes and Pharisees who tithe diligently, even down to the smallest herbs, but neglect the most significant dimensions of Torah-observance – justice, mercy and faith (Matt 23:23; cf. Luke 11:42).

Given the central role of the temple in the political and economic administration of Judea as a Roman province, Jesus' disruption of sacrificial exchange is probably best understood as a sign of divine judgment on the temple – not only, or even primarily, for its religious inadequacies as for its role in the economic exploitation of ordinary people. Alternative interpretations are inevitable, as with any symbolic action, but no interpretation that ignores or dismisses the socio-political and economic dimensions of Jesus' prophetic action in the temple can do justice to the content and context of its description in the first three gospels.

Directly or indirectly, Jesus' provocation in the temple probably precipitated his arrest and execution. Determining the reason(s) for Jesus' crucifixion is not straightforward, in part because of the interpretive character of the passion narratives in the four canonical gospels. Nevertheless, the historicity of Jesus' execution at the hands of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, is beyond serious challenge, and both the fact and manner of his execution are illuminating.

The first-century Judean historian, Josephus, described the public activity of a later Jesus, son of Ananias, who for a period of over seven years both before and during the Judean war of 66–70 CE pronounced oracles of doom against the temple in Jerusalem. (See Josephus, *Judean War*, 6.300–309.) As with Jesus of Nazareth, he was arrested by members of the Judean aristocracy and turned over to the Roman governor. But in the case of this later Jesus, the governor, Albinus, determined that he was mad, had him scourged for good measure and ordered his release. Clearly he posed no obvious threat. Not so, Jesus of Nazareth. As Bruce Malina (2001: 38) observes, "The gospel story clearly reveals that Jesus' death was the outcome of establishment violence," that is, violence on the part of those with both an interest in and the means to maintain the socio-political situation as is.

Jesus' mission of heralding the nearness of God's fair reign by enacting its pressure on the present in his teaching, exorcisms and healing was not simply the prelude to his death on a Roman cross. Nor was his death the unfortunate result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rather, his death was a *historical consequence and logical outcome* of his intentional, divinely inspired, publicly visible and politically threatening mission. The particular death he suffered was the cost of his determination to live out his vision of God's fair reign. His death by crucifixion reveals that his mission had social as well as "spiritual" impact and that it challenged unjust political and economic arrangements on behalf of those disabled, disassociated, diseased, displaced or dispossessed by such arrangements.

Resurrection and justice

Today, reference to the resurrection of Jesus is as likely to divide as to unite. However, regarding the meaning and significance of early Christian belief in the resurrected Jesus, there is one point on which many agree: The conviction that God raised Jesus from death by crucifixion signifies God's vindication of Jesus' mission and message. The repudiation of Jesus and what he stood for at his crucifixion was reversed by none other than God, which implies that the shape of Jesus' public mission and the content of his message correspond to God's character and will for the world in which we live.

To believe in God’s resurrection of the crucified Jesus entails more than confessing that this event occurred. As Thorwald Lorenzen (2003: 169) insists, “The resurrection of the crucified Christ calls for a life of faith in which Jesus’ passion for God and therefore for justice is echoed.” Those who affirm that God raised Jesus are summoned to participate in life in a way that both witnesses to and mirrors the contours of Jesus’ own life. In short, authentic Christian discipleship is both captivated and sustained by Jesus’ vision of God’s fair reign. Ponder these words by William Herzog (2000: 251):

> Resurrection is the raising of Jesus by the power of God into a transformed existence beyond our reckoning. Its importance for discipleship is considerable, both because of the one who was raised and because of the substance of his public work. The resurrection is not only an abstract possibility pointing to life in the reign of God (although it does do that); it is God’s way of validating what Jesus incarnated and embodied in his life, including his practice of justice. Therefore, the choice to become a justice people is not primarily a political decision but a christological commitment informing our discipleship as we align ourselves with the way of God revealed in the historical Jesus and the will of God confirmed in the Risen Christ. Social ethics is finally rooted in Christology, just as Christology is rooted in the resurrection. To confess “Jesus is Lord” is to confess a desire to pursue the vision of justice that informed Jesus’ work.

The resurrection of Jesus is *God’s* reaffirmation of Psalm 109:30, “For the Lord will stand at the right hand of the poor, to save them from those that would condemn them.” In our good but unfair world, with whom do *we* stand – the defender of the poor or those that condemn the poor people of the world to live without hope? In the light of Jesus’ vision of God’s fair reign, look again at this priority-rectifying summons:

> “With what shall I come before the LORD,
> and bow myself before God on high?
> Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
> with calves a year old?
> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
> with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
> Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
> the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
> 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?
>
> (Micah 6:6–8, NRSV)

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