

“Make America great again.” We have heard this phrase over and over again for the last year. Who wouldn’t like to see America be great? But what are we hoping for when we want “greatness”? Power? Wealth? Security? Privilege? And what would we hope for if we said “Make Goshen great again”? Or if we said “Make the Mennonite Church great again”? Or “Make Berkeley Avenue great again”? Most of the time we want to return to some mythic, unhistorical, memorable but fictional past.

In this season of Advent—when we are talking about “the hope and fears of all the years,” about expectations and desires—we have heard in the Scripture just read (Psalm 72, Isaiah 11, and Matthew 3) an alternative, subversive picture about how to make Israel, or Jerusalem, or America, or Goshen great.

The prophet Isaiah and the person praying Psalm 72 have a very different perspective on greatness. The common theme from these two scripture, regarding greatness, can be summed up in the slogan, “Make Israel just—for a change.” Or we could say, “Make Goshen just—for a change.” These two scripture give us the vision that Isaiah, Jesus and John the Baptist are proclaiming. As we observe Jesus we see that this is the vision by which he lives his life and to which he calls all who would become his apprentices. Jesus celebrates all those who “hunger and thirst after righteousness and justice.” Notice that he does not say “hunger and thirst after greatness.” Martin Luther King was a noisy advocate praying Psalm 72. His words still hold very true: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Listen again to the prayer of intercession for the king in Psalm 72.

Give **your** justice to the king, O God,
and **your** righteousness to the royal son!
May he rule the people with righteousness,
and **your** poor with justice!
Let the mountains bear prosperity (*shalom*) for the people,
and the hills in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush their oppressor!

Notice how this begins:

Give **your own** justice to the king, O God,
and **your own** righteousness to the royal son!

Frequently we fail to pay attention. We fail to pay attention to the meaning of some “big stuff” like “righteousness” and “justice.” And we fail to pay attention to the little words like “your” (**your** justice and **your** righteousness) that are crucial. In Hebrew you can add one little suffix to the end of a noun to make it possessive. That one sound, that one phoneme, changes the word from “justice” to “**your** justice,” from “righteousness” to “**your** righteousness.” This addition pushes “justice” in a very specific direction. It is now “our justice,” but “your justice.” So what does it mean when we ask God to do more than just “give justice to the king,” but to “give **your own justice** to the king”? What is

the psalmist hoping for in the prayer, “Give your justice and your righteousness to the king”?

But let’s back up and start over from a different beginning. Let’s come at this from a different angle. During this Advent season 2016, we need to ask ourselves, “What are we praying for? What are our hopes and fears? How do we pray with wisdom, with humility, and with hope?” We should remember that Paul instructs Timothy with these words (1 Timothy 2:1-2, Jerusalem Bible):

My advice is that, first of all,
there should be **prayers offered for everyone**—
petitions, intercessions and thanksgiving
—and **especially for kings and others in authority**,
so that we may lead a religious and reverent lives, in peace and quiet.

That seems to be rather straightforward advice: “Pray for all those with leadership responsibilities.” But how do we pray this prayer? What do we say? What do we hope for? Do we just say “God bless those in power; God make them great”? Paul gives us no instructions about **how** we should pray. He acts like we know how to pray for those in leadership. Is he just assuming that we know how to pray for those in leadership?

I can hear Paul’s answer to that question: “**Yes! Obviously** you should know how to pray for our leaders. Don’t you know your Bible? Don’t you pray the Psalms daily? Don’t you pray Psalm 72? Aren’t you in the habit of praying that prayer daily?”

Let’s return now to hear how Psalm 72 prays for the King and all those in authority. Let’s return to the intercession for the king and notice the progressions of this prayer.

Give **your own** justice to the king, O God,
and **your own** righteousness to the royal son!
May he rule the people with righteousness,
and **your** poor with justice!
Let the mountains bear prosperity (*shalom*) for the people,
and the hills in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush their oppressor! (72:1-4)

Then in the second half of this prayer, the psalmist returns at the same concern:

For (if) he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and they who have no helper;
has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy;
redeems their life from oppression and violence;
and precious is their blood in his sight.
(Then) long may he live,
may the gold of Sheba be given to him continually,

and blessings invoked for him all the day (72:12-15)

For those of us who have caught Israel's and Jesus' prophetic vision, greatness **follows** justice; prosperity **follows** righteousness. Greatness does not produce justice and righteousness. That is why the common theme—from Moses to the psalmist to Amos through the rest of the prophets, then to John the Baptist and on to Jesus to Paul—is “Make Israel just (and righteous)—for a change. Deliver the needy and poor who have no helper; defend the cause of the poor; feed the hungry; heal the wounded; clothe the naked, redeem all their lives from oppression and violence. And then, when that happens Israel will be great. And furthermore even those outside Israel will celebrate and reward leaders who act in that manner.” That is the prophets' and Jesus' missional priority.

A part of this vision with which we as Mennonites are uncomfortable is the hope and desire that God will “crush the oppressor” (72:4). Yet we need to trust Jesus and the prophets that God has the legitimate power to “vindicate” (rearrange things in a healthy, mutually beneficial creation)—and part of this vindication is the removal from power those who are abusing (and ignoring) the humans around them and who are doing violence to the world that God loves and to which God is devoted. God has very little tolerance for arrogant, selfish persons and systems that only look out for their own interests. God's desire is to “reconcile all things” into a new world of harmony, sufficiency and mutuality. This “reconciling all things” is the very portrait of righteousness and justice.

*So what is **God's justice and God's righteousness**?* For Israel, God's justice and God's righteousness are different from the Canaanite, Egyptian and Babylonian justice. Jesus' justice and righteousness are not like Roman and Herodian righteousness. In Israel justice and righteousness are complementary terms; they are often interchangeable. Prophetic justice is not “giving what a person deserves,” but “giving what a person needs.” Righteousness is not “being right,” but “being in right relationship.” For the prophets, justice cannot coexist with injustice. They are mutually exclusive.

In our scripture from Isaiah we hear this same vision (Isaiah 11:3b-5):

He (the successor of David) shall not judge the people by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ear hears
but with **righteousness** he shall judge the poor,
and decide with **justice/equity for the meek of the earth;**
(the Jerusalem Bible says, “judge by appearances”
and “give a verdict on hearsay.”)
he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.

The beloved vision of the peaceable kingdom (and often considered utopian and unrealizable) follows the description of this “just and righteous” successor to David. Now

old enemies are “destroyed” by becoming friends—“and no one will hurt or destroy in my holy place.” This is “the kingdom of God that comes on earth just as it is in heaven.”

When our leaders do justice, they make peace, they make prosperity, and consequently they become great. Then it is truly the case that “everyone loves them.” They are given undemanded, unsolicited tribute; they are celebrated and sought out. This is the coming king that Isaiah desires; this is the humble, modest kingship that Jesus practices as he does justice, loves mercy and walks humbly.”

When we make our families just—for a change (by doing justice), we become the yeast that leavens the whole loaf. When we make our schools and businesses just—for a change, we become the salt that transforms the taste of the world around us.

Two weeks ago, when Ruth and I were in Cuba visiting the beautiful Basilica el Cobre in the far eastern part of Cuba, there in two high niches outside this famous basilica were statues of Christopher Columbus and Bartolome de la Casas. You all know who Columbus is, but how is the Bartolome de la Casas. He is the Martin Luther King of the early 1500’s in Cuba, the Caribbean and Central America. Called the “Protector of the Indians,” de la Casa turned his life toward advocating for the humane treatment and protection of the native Americans in the Caribbean and Central America. He became an active, noisy advocate for those who suffered under the Spanish empire that spread across the Western Hemisphere. A priest who then became a Dominican monk, he travelled back and forth between the Western hemisphere and Spain raising his voice “for justice and righteousness” both to the Spanish king and authorities and also to those Spaniards living in the western hemisphere. He wrote, spoke and acted exposing and opposing the decimation and inhumane treatment of the native, and then of the African slaves who sold across the empire. Eventually he advocated for the freeing of all slaves. His life is a noisy, active prayer of Psalm 72—and that was 500 years ago here in the Americas. His life is an invitation for us to both “do justice” and to intercede for justice.

So in summary, **what is said in Psalm 72 and Isaiah?** We need to pray that our leaders have a vision for what God’s justice is, for what God’s righteousness is, and for what real *shalom* is. Furthermore, our leaders need to “do justice and righteousness.”

Finally in conclusion we need to answer a series of questions that accompany Psalm 72:

1) Where is this prayer said? What is its setting? This is a temple prayer said in public for all to hear! (This is not just a “closet prayer,” although it is safer to do it in you closet.)

2) How is this prayer spoken? Loudly, with a sense of urgency! Also persistently and patiently. This is a subversive prayer at its best: it seems quite safe, yet it carries the vision and plants all the seeds for a new and just society.

3) Who is this prayer talking about? First and explicitly, about the king, the one who has legitimate authority; but then second, by extension, about anyone who has power and authority: judges and priests, business and community leaders, parents and teachers.

4) Who is the audience for this prayer? Not only God, but, since this is said publicly, it is to be heard both by the persons in power and the general public; it is a public call for justice.

5) What is the situation that this prayer assumes? That there are needy and oppressed who need relief and assistance. As Deuteronomy 15 reminds us, “Let there be no poor among you (vs.4); be generous with the poor (vss. 7-9); and there will never ceased to be poor in the land (v. 11). What an interesting sequence!

6) Why is this prayer important to the one praying? It keeps alive in our minds and imagination what God’s will for the earth is: God desires a distinctive justice and righteousness from the people that claim to be God’s chosen.

7) What is the outcome that this prayer desires?

- 1) That needs be met and that right, health relationships are restored;
- 2) That *shalom*, prosperity and peace be experienced by all;
- 3) That “outsiders” will be impressed and desirous of the same situation.

8) How often is this prayer said? Continually: every time that needs are seen and whenever brokenness is noticed.

Please pray this prayer at noon today before you eat. **This is a prayer the says,**

“Make our leaders just, for a change!”

“Make Israel just, for a change!”

“Make the world just, for a change!”

“Make America and Goshen just, for a change!”

“If Goshen is just and righteous, then Goshen will be great!”