

Our persistence, God's justice

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Alison Sampson, reflecting on Luke 18:1-8

Once upon a time, long, long ago, there was a war on. Authorities were concerned that power stations might be bombed, and with them, the people who lived nearby. So, along with many other children, a little boy was evacuated from his home near the power station at Yallourn, and sent to live in Bendigo. At his new primary school, he sat next to a charming little girl, and they've been sitting next to each other ever since. Last week, they celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary.

Much has changed in that time. I hear a lot of talk about how overwhelming life is nowadays, how hopeless, how difficult, how depressing. There are days when I feel this, too. But Walter Brueggemann writes, 'Memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair.' And indeed, when I stop and think about things, I cheer up immensely. So in the interests of hope and good cheer, and in the face of calls to return to that era, I'd like to remember that time in Australia's history.

For some, life felt simpler and easier. Sure, there was a war on. But everybody knew their place and roles were clear. Straight white men were the top of the pile, in charge of work and finances and public life. They dictated the terms of morality and theology and the church and the law; things seemed pretty good to them. But for people who fell outside that norm, women, perhaps, or people of colour, or queer folk or disabled folk or children, life wasn't quite so straightforward.

When those children first sat together, the White Australia policy was in full force. Migrants from Great Britain and Europe were considered acceptable; everybody else was blocked. As for Aboriginal people, many endured horrific treatment. They weren't considered citizens. They couldn't vote in federal elections, or in some states. They weren't counted in the census. They weren't paid the same as white people; and what income they received was frequently handed over to government trust funds and never given to them. Women, on the other hand, received just over half the minimum wage as men doing the same job. Married women were banned from the public service. No woman could open a bank account without a male guarantor, and, as my mother discovered even in the 1970's, a woman was not eligible for a mortgage.

When those children first sat together, sexual violence was frequently joked about or dismissed, and only the victims were shamed. Single mothers were often forced to give up their newborns. Immediately after birth, the babies were whisked away and adopted out, the mothers sometimes told that their children had died. As for disabled children, they could be locked away in what were sometimes brutal institutions, as could young girls who were perceived to be overly sexually active and people with gender dysphoria. Neurodivergence was barely understood, and

autistic characteristics all too often misinterpreted as schizophrenia, stupidity or extreme naughtiness. One beautifully gifted friend of mine was institutionalised and heavily sedated for 17 years through this lack of understanding or care.

When those children first sat together, male-to-male sexual activity was a crime and, in Victoria, was technically punishable by death. On the other hand, the sexual abuse of children was rarely taken seriously and the authority of adults, particularly priests, was rarely questioned. In the home, family violence was widespread. My own great-grandfather was a horrific wife-beater, and everybody knew. When he came rolling home from the pub, the neighbours would yell warnings down the street; his wife and kids would run out the back door, climb over the fence and scatter around the suburb in hiding. Until the Family Law Act of 1975, the police could do nothing about it.

In the home, in the law, at work, at church and in all public arenas, straight white men were in charge. They had more rights and more privileges, more authority and more respect, more money and more power than almost everybody else. And while some consider those the good old days, for very many people this world was suffocating, impoverishing, cruel and often violent.

‘In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about people. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with her plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary!’” (Luke 18:2-3). The widow wasn’t a judge; she had no power to change or enforce the law. Perhaps in that place and time, she wasn’t even recognised as a citizen. She may not have been able to hold property or open a bank account or enter a profession or earn an equal wage. Her body may not have been considered her own. We don’t know.

What we do know is that she had dogged persistence, and she also had a vision of a different world. A world where some people do not lord it over others. A world where oppressors are challenged and checked. A world where even the most vulnerable person gets justice. And so she kept going to the judge and laying out her vision for justice, for respect, for change. Knock, knock, knock, nag, nag, nag: again and again, she tackled him.

Well, the judge didn’t care. The law worked for him. He had authority, power, respect. He didn’t fear God, which tells us he didn’t protect God’s special charges: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the refugee. And he didn’t give a fig what other people thought about him; he didn’t need them. So the widow’s case seemed hopeless. But she had persistence. She kept turning up. And she kept setting out her vision for justice.

We often think of justice as a sudden gift from on high. But students of history teach us that change only happens once it seems inevitable. First, a wild idea emerges in the shadows. Something radical, something disruptive, something deeply shocking and strange to those who hold power. Something like, perhaps, that people of colour are fully human. Indigenous people, too. Also women, maybe even children. Disabled people, queer folk, autistic folk. Everybody, in fact. And

following on from this wild idea comes another new and shocking thought: perhaps such people should have the same privileges and protections as straight white men.

At first, the idea is nearly invisible. It bubbles up first here, then there. It's whispered by women over kitchen tables, by First Peoples slaving in stolen fields, by gay men to their illicit loves. It's owned by trans people living their truth, and by disabled folk insisting on agency. Gradually the idea takes hold, not yet as a real possibility but as a wonderful vision of how life could be. Artists and poets begin to express it, essayists and journalists write about it, musicians let the vision inspire new songs, even some preachers catch a whiff and cast the vision in their sermons.

The vision is passed on by aunties, it's shared between ordinary folk, and over time it gains traction. People begin to realise that the vision might be possible, and in their imagining they begin to embody it. Sympathetic men start checking their privilege; brave women begin speaking out; Indigenous people insist on their sovereignty. People network. Groups coalesce. They organise to spread the idea, to share wisdom, to look at what has worked in the past, to employ old stories and new metaphors, to plan effective prophetic action. In time, they lobby politicians; they boycott corporations; they write letters; they march in the streets. They sing new songs, and they go to court. Back and forth they go, with small wins, major setbacks, sideways movements, sudden victories. Because in time, the idea seems inevitable and, when this happens, the world changes. Someone is given the vote. Someone becomes entitled to equal wages. Someone is now able to hold property. Someone is finally permitted to marry. Through persistence and patience and imagination and prayer, through sheer bloody-minded determination, through weeks and months and decades of turning up and demanding justice: knock, knock, knock, nag, nag, nag: the widow persists.

And the judge says to himself, 'Even though I don't care, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she doesn't eventually wear me out with her coming.'" (Luke 18:4-5).

Since those children first sat together, thanks to the vision and persistence of so many widows and widowers, so many artists and activists and community organisers and churches, so many poets and preachers and teachers and volunteers, there have been seismic shifts in how women, children, people of colour, queer folk and disabled folk are perceived. With these shifts have come an extraordinary opening up of access to the privileges and protections of our society. No longer are they held only by the few; gradually, and despite many hissy fits and temper tantrums along the way, we are learning to share. And while these shifts haven't yet been fully realised, even so, how much has changed. Which is why remembering makes me so happy: because look how far we have come! Look what happens when a vision for a more just world is cast again and again and again, and people catch that vision and band together and work towards it! Look what is possible when we create the imagination necessary for change!

And if even unjust judges have agreed, one by one, to these seismic shifts in equality and access, how much greater will be the justice of our God? A justice which does not exclude anyone, not even the unjust judge, but which sweeps up all people in merciful tenderness and the transforming power of love.

So let us keep praying for justice. Let us keep working for justice. And let us never give up: for as the anti-slavery preacher Theodore Parker famously declared, ‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’ (1857). With patience and persistence, and with bucketloads of prayer, let us continue this long work. Ω

- For whom or what do you consistently pray?
- For whom or what have you demanded justice?