

# Miscarriage of Justice

*Readings: Isaiah chapter 1 verses 1-4 & 12-20; Luke chapter 18 verses 9-14*

We Brits pride ourselves on the fact that in our country the **Rule of Law** operates and Justice is done. That's why whenever there is a miscarriage of justice it hits the headlines. I hate to think what the Daily Mail would make of the Trial scene in our Old Testament reading today. The People of Israel are on trial for violating God's law. They are accused of idolatrous worship and of practising social and economic injustice and the evidence against them is damning. Yet, when it comes time for the verdict to be announced, God, who is Judge, pronounces a judgement which goes against all reason and all justice. *"Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow"*. In other words the verdict is 'guilty' but the sentence handed down is 'acquitted'. Where is the justice in that?

I have been preaching for 60 years now (so long that I have almost got to the point of actually believing what I say) and when I look back this Trial scene in Isaiah sums up what I have come to believe. Two aspects are important for me as summing up my Christian Faith.

One is that the context of a Trial means that things are conducted on a rational basis. Which is to say that our Christian Faith is a rational faith. Not all religion functions on that basis. For the first 25 years of my ministry I worked amongst the African people in Zimbabwe. They had their own traditional faith and the God in whom they believed was capricious and irrational. So African religion was all about getting on-sides with God and they evolved a complex ritual of prayer and sacrifice so as not to offend Him. I don't blame them. They had a 'pre-scientific mindset' and attributed drought and famine and disease to the fact that they had somehow displeased Him.

I did not expect to find a similar pattern of belief amongst Christians when I came to England in 1985. Only it was a lot more 'sophisticated'. The anti-intellectualism I found here confused me and I didn't expect to find that many Christians subscribed to a 'theology of the absurd'. Six days a week Christians lived in an ordered universe governed by rational principle. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day they came to Church and entered a topsy-turvey world where iron axe-heads floated down the river; where the sun stood still in the heavens to enable God's people to complete the massacre of their enemies; where donkeys talk in fluent Hebrew and a reluctant prophet has the whale of a time in the belly of a great fish; where moving stars pinpoint the exact location of a house on earth – and all other manner of wonderful things. Its all there in the Bible! And, no matter how irrational, it is to be believed because, as the Bible says, *"God's thoughts are other than our thoughts, and His ways higher than our ways."*

If the Trial scene in Isaiah says anything it says that religion is rational and God is not capricious. The people were allowed to argue their case before God and the evidence was allowed to stand for what it was.

**BUT:** the evidence against God's people was conclusive. Guilty x 1000. Yet the sentence goes against the evidence. *"Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow"*. Incredible!. What are we to make of this apparent miscarriage of justice? Does God treat sin so lightly that He can just ignore it? Because that's what it seems like.

The answer is that God does not treat sin lightly nor does He turn a blind eye to it. There is a penalty to be paid and the astounding truth of the Gospel is that God Himself pays the penalty. And because God has paid the penalty of sin He is justified in offering us a free forgiveness. This is how I understand the Cross of Christ. Christ on his cross was not being punished instead of us which is how so many Christians understand it, and how some of our hymns express it. I object to that hymn which is so popular with Christians today "In Christ alone." It contains the line:

*“and on the Cross where Jesus died  
the wrath of God was satisfied”.*

**No way.** Nothing could be further from the truth. For the truth is that the suffering of Christ upon the Cross was none other than the suffering of God. It is fundamental to our Faith the “God was in Christ” and what we see on the Cross was not the Son of God being penalised instead of us. The fact is that the suffering of Christ upon the Cross was none other than the suffering of God Himself. And He who bears within Himself the penalty and consequence of sin has the right to offer us pardon and a free forgiveness. Yes forgiveness is free to us. But it was not free to God. And the cost to God of being able to offer us a free forgiveness was the agony of crucifixion.

To see this and to know it in our experience is to be caught up in an answering response of love and gratitude for what God has done. What we see on the Cross is a love which will not let us go; a love which in itself bears the penalty and consequence of sin and therefore gives God the right to offer us a free forgiveness.

So there is no miscarriage of justice for justice has been served. God in Christ has endured the consequence of sin’ suffered its penalty and therefore has the right to say to us *“though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow”*.

I have criticised one hymn for its understanding of the Cross. I offer you another hymn which gets to the heart of the truth. It is Isaac Watts’ great hymn *“When I survey the wondrous Cross”*.

It begins by pointing us to the Cross.

*“When I survey the wondrous Cross,  
on which the prince of glory died”.*

It depicts the suffering of Christ and, if you believe that God was in Christ, it depicts the suffering of God.

*“See, from his head, his hands, his feet,  
sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
did ere such love and sorrow meet,  
or thorns compose so rich a crown.*

When we see and understand and experience that then only one response is possible.

*“Were the whole realm of nature mine  
that were an offering far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine.”*