

The Presence of Justice

It has been said that a person can hear a statement a hundred times and it never sinks in. But, on the 101st time, said by the same person or someone else, it has meaning. This has proven true in my experience and in those others have shared with me. Just recently, I was watching a movie, *Air Force One*, probably for the 12th or 15th time and a statement that Harrison Ford (fictional President James Marshall) made hit me as profound. He said, “Real peace is not just the absence of conflict, it’s the presence of justice.” I began to think about what justice really is and what it means. This article is not a proper place to go into a complete treatise on the topic of justice; but I would like to share a few thoughts.

I am also a believer that coincidence is really a message that God sends to help us focus on something important. Just recently, I was also reading a book, *Seeds of Hope*, in which I read two quotes. In February of 2005, Nelson Mandela said, “Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity – it is an act of justice.” The other quote was from Frederic Ozanam, principal founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. He wrote, “Charity is not sufficient. It treats the wounds but does not stop the blows that cause them ... Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. It is Justice’s role to prevent the attacks.” This morning I went to Mass and the responsorial psalm was “Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever.”

God is telling me something. So, I checked Webster’s Dictionary to see if I could get a good, clear definition of justice. There are a number of definitions present and the one that seems to fit my thinking is “the quality of being true or correct” – maintaining the balance of creation. Justice as used in the above quotes is about keeping things whole and true or restoring them to that state. It is not about court room drama in which innocence, guilt, and punishment are the key factors. Justice is about order, about people having what they are entitled to, about people being treated with dignity and respect, about people having access to the basic necessities of life: a place to live, sufficient food, proper clothing, proper medical care, and work with sufficient compensation.

In the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we focus on spirituality, fellowship, and service. But when we speak of service, we address it to mean more than works of charity. Frederic Ozanam told us that charity fills the gap that justice alone has not fulfilled. In Part I of the Rule of the Society, it states: *Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements.* (Article 7.6)

Peace cannot exist without justice. As I see it, we have three choices we can make. We can do nothing and just watch as people continue to use and abuse others. We can continue to patch the wounds created by injustice. Or we can do what Frederic recommended: “prevent the attacks” from occurring. It would be great if we could rewrite the psalm: *Justice shall flourish in our time and fullness of peace forever!*