

Christian World Service Christmas Day 2025

Readings

Amos 5: 21-24

Luke 1: 46-55

50 years ago today, I saw Father Christmas for the first time.

Except that in my case, it was Mother Christmas.

The oldest of four children, my mother, upon questioning from me, had told me prior to Christmas Eve that year that Father Christmas did not in fact exist and that it was her and Dad who played that role.

So I lay in bed that Christmas Eve, with one eye open and one closed and spotted Mum coming into my and one of my brother's rooms with a cricket bat and a snorkeling set, complete with flippers and mask.

We had very generous parents growing up and we had wonderful Christmases with our extended family in Palmerston North.

That was 50 years ago.

40 years ago but mid-year this time, when it was summer on the other side of the world, something else quite special happened.

I'll always remember the day in 1985 when during the course of a Bible Class leaders retreat, someone mentioned "have you heard about this big concert? It's going to be at Wembley Stadium."

What followed on television was bedraggled images of Bob Geldof in a telephone booth, prior to the age of cell-phones, haranguing ego-driven pop-stars into appearing on stage for nothing to raise money for starving children in Africa.

This man, who would later be knighted and one day voted Britain's fourth best mother for caring single-handedly for four daughters, considered that the 'Live Aid' concert was only scratching the surface.

In fact he used the name of the group of pop-stars who sang 'Do they know it's Christmas', known as 'Band Aid' to be an apt description of what they were accomplishing – simply applying a band-aid to the vast breadth and depth of starvation in Africa, despite the millions raised in two concerts and millions of record sales.

Yet their famous song is still known as 'Feed the world.'

~

Fast forward 40 years to 2025 and we ask, what has changed?

Much has. Much of our world and its wider societal structure has been changed post Live-Aid through the ongoing development of information technology for one thing.

As futurist Alvin Toffler wrote in his book 'Future Shock' in 1970, "too much change in too short a period of time", it has been the rate of change which has been the issue, rather than change itself.

But then again, much hasn't changed.

Children are still starving. Children are still dying.

Christian World Service's observation that the girl child is the most vulnerable person in the world remains.

How many of the world's children know it's Christmas time at all?, paraphrasing the 'Feed the world' song?

Our world hasn't changed when it comes to attending to that which Abraham Maslow identified in his hierarchy of needs.

The innocents are still looking for water, for food, for shelter.

And the call of the prophets remains, unchanged.

The words of Amos, in the northern kingdom of Israel during the 8th century BCE, still resound.

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain

offerings, I will not accept them,

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like water

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

There are two tenets lying at the heart of this passage – the Hebrew (מִשְׁפָּט, *Mispat*) justice and (צְדָקָה, *tsedaqah*) righteousness and it is critical that we not only understand them but see them as the basis for a new vision for our world. In the social milieu of Amos' time, economic prosperity and political stability prevailed in Israel.

Outwardly and arguably, the nation appeared “successful” including in terms of bustling religious activity centering around sanctuaries like Bethel and Gilgal. But beneath the surface, this prosperity was built on systemic social injustice where the wealthy exploited the poor (Amos 2:6–7; 4:1), corruption pervaded in the courts (5:10–12) and though religious rituals flourished, they were disconnected from ethical living.

Enter Amos, a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees called by God to confront the hypocrisy.

He emphasizes that true covenant faithfulness is not expressed in ritual alone but in those two tenets as highlighted before:

- Justice (מִשְׁפָּט, *Mispat*)
- and righteousness (צְדָקָה, *tsedaqah*).

It is critical that we grab a hold of those principles in our understanding not only of this text or the book of Amos or the Hebrew Scriptures or the entire collection of the scriptures known as the Bible - but of our very place as followers of the way in our world today.

Because those twin principles lie at the very heart of our faith.

Justice and righteousness – in the Hebrew, *Mispat* and *tsedaqah*. ('ts' pronounced as in 'tsetse fly' if you are reading this out as your sermon)

Both principles flow through the scriptures like tributaries in our local river, the Waimakariri here in Otautahi, Christchurch.

And like many tributaries, while distinctive, they do not remain separate, they eventually join up.

The justice stream refers to fair legal processes, protection of the vulnerable and equitable social structures.

The righteousness stream refers to right relationships with God and others, moral integrity and faithful covenant living.

Mishpat comes from the root ‘to judge, govern’ and it appears over four hundred times in the Hebrew bible.

It is associated with fairness in legal processes, such as in Deuteronomy 16:18–20; protection of the vulnerable (the widow, orphan, stranger) and social order in line with God’s covenantal will.

Here in Amos, it is used to critique corrupt courts in chapter 5, verse 7 and chapter 6, verse 12.

It isn’t abstract – but is tangible fairness in community life, ground in God’s character.

It’s twin, righteousness, has its root in “to be right, just.”

It is about moral integrity, doing what is right in God’s eyes.

It is about right relationships with God and neighbour and in a broad sense is about faithful covenant living.

The prophets Isaiah and Amos often put both principles together, forming a moral and social ideal.

Together, Tsēdāqāh is the personal and communal righteousness that sustains just structures (mishpāt).

Several years ago, the Reverend Michael Thawley, prior to beginning in his role as moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, studied under Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann in the United States.

Michael was determined to unite the church as it wrestled with issues of sexuality and leadership.

And in his study leave report back to the Presbytery, he said that in working with Walter Brueggemann, he found that in the scriptures, these two traditions of justice and righteousness exist.

And the way he described them was very clear: Michael said that the justice tradition may be pictured as running along a horizontal plane. And that the righteousness (or holiness) tradition may be pictured as running along a vertical plane.

This is a useful word picture when we consider justice as part of the dynamic reaching across society and righteousness as one which gives expression to the human-ward to God-ward vertical relationship if you like.

Pictured like this, both the horizontal and vertical planes together form a cross.

And in the Celtic tradition, a mandala or circle chape encircles the four arms.

Given Carl Jung's conclusion that the cross and the circle are the two most important expressions of wholeness, reconciliation and healing known to humanity, then we see the power and the potential of both traditions for our world today.

Perhaps one of the most powerful expressions of both traditions took place a week before I was born.

On the 28th of August 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Junior delivered his famous “I have a dream” speech.

In a speech calling for civil and economic rights, he quoted those words from Amos today:

“We cannot be satisfied until justice flows down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

King capitalised on the power of those words. In Amos, the ever-flowing stream connotes an image of abundant, unstoppable, life-giving flow.

In a dry land like Israel, a perennial stream symbolized sustenance and blessing. And here, when we delve further into these scriptures, we uncover the richness of the image, which suggests a powerful, natural, rolling movement—like a torrent after rain.

When I think of my late mother, of her love and compassion, of her desire for justice in our world today, who once stood up at the General Assembly in Christchurch and said that our focus should be on poverty in our society, rather than on ourselves, I think of the one whose song calls us back to what the real meaning of Christmas is about.

The song ‘Do they know it’s Christmas’ can only be given effect to by putting into action Mary’s Song.

For it is the clarion call of the Magnificat which calls us to our task:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowly state of his servant.

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name;

⁵⁰ indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Those are the gifts which the innocents caught up in war and displacement need today.

Only through justice and righteousness might the children, the innocent, the hungry be filled with good things this Christmas Day and every day.

May our prayer be that those two tributaries of justice and righteousness meet to become a powerful, natural, rolling movement, a torrent after rain, sweeping away the powerful and the unjust, ushering in a new order in a new land where the hungry are watered and fed and sheltered as God intended for all God's children; amen.

~