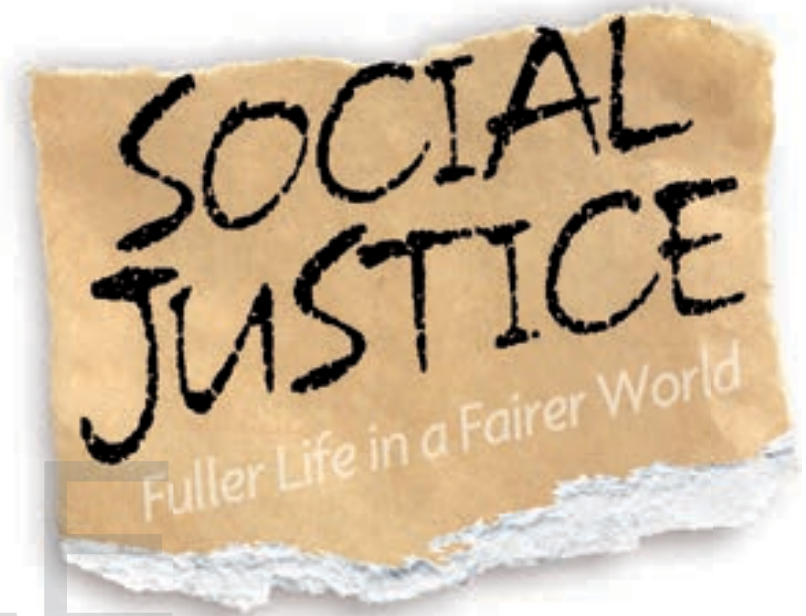




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Bruce Duncan

# Contents

<b>1 Social Justice in the Scriptures</b>	6
God's concern for the poor and distressed All made in the image of God The Jubilee	Jesus and social justice Jesus and the Jubilee Almsgiving and social justice The Kingdom of God (or of heaven)
<b>2 The World today</b>	24
The Gospel includes human liberation The social heart of the Gospel	The critical role of lay people in social transformation Sustaining our planet
<b>3 Key Catholic Social Principles</b>	50
The focus on the person The community and the common good Social justice in different forms	Solidarity Subsidiarity Human rights Preferential Option for the Poor
<b>4 Critique of Capitalism</b>	62
The importance of work Just wage Australia's Cardinal Moran and social reforms	Trade unions Private property
<b>5 The Global Financial Crisis and Neoliberal Ideology</b>	70
'A radical capitalist ideology could spread' – John Paul II	Pope Benedict XVI on the economic crisis
<b>6 Key Issues and Urgent Concerns today</b>	80
1 Joining hands with our Indigenous brothers and sisters 2 Issues of war and peace	3 Refugees and asylum seekers: we must do better
<b>7 Conclusion : Working to make a Fairer World</b>	90

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# Introduction

*You will not find the words  
'social justice' in the Old  
or New Testaments of  
the Bible.*

*Social justice is a modern  
term, but it captures  
central themes in the  
Scriptures and in later  
Christian traditions.*



Social justice means that we organise society to support the human wellbeing of all people. It is an umbrella term, covering many different aspects, especially the social, political and economic areas.

What social justice implies in practice will vary according to circumstances, since it depends on judgments about what is reasonably possible in different situations.

In earlier centuries, most people lived in agrarian societies where customs and traditions played a major role in how to sustain human wellbeing. But in our much larger and more complex societies, we need governments to play a greater role in helping organise security, services, education, health care, trade and production. All these areas involve decisions about how to promote the common good so that everyone has reasonable opportunities and support to live a fulfilling life.

Achieving social justice in a society is a difficult, complex and ongoing task, as situations are constantly changing. It demands not just people skilled in many areas of expertise who are able to advise us and suggest better ways of doing things, but a firm commitment to improve the wellbeing of everyone.

This presupposes a belief in the human dignity of every person without exception. From one's human dignity as a person spring our rights to the social, economic and spiritual resources needed to develop to our full stature as human beings.

Social justice does not demand absolute equality in material goods for everyone, but it does demand that the goods of the earth be distributed fairly so that no people are left in severe poverty or deprivation, as is still the case in parts of the world, and to a lesser extent, even in Australia.

Social justice implies more than equality of opportunity. It looks to outcomes to ensure that everyone has enough resources to live a decent life. It also supports a safety net for people caught in situations of acute disadvantage, particularly those who are chronically ill, suffer from a disability, lack housing, have had severe social or economic setbacks, or cannot find employment.

Social justice covers a vast array of concerns and issues, including such pressing ones as climate change, war and peace – and for Australia especially – relations with our Indigenous people. We cannot look at all these aspects fully in this publication, but we need to keep them in mind as we focus on how social justice affects our lives.



# 1 Social Justice in the Scriptures

*From the earliest records of human civilisation, people have been concerned about how to improve human wellbeing, though primarily of their own clans or tribes. There is something deeply intuitive in most people about caring for others in dire straits.*

The Jewish people shared with others in their ancient world a special concern for widows and orphans. This concern for widows and orphans, along with the poor in general, was greatly heightened in the Jewish scriptures, and became a central element in their religious observance.

This showed the religious experience of the Israelites to be unique in the ancient world. Their religious consciousness grew out of the memory of the exodus from slavery in Egypt, when they believed God intervened directly and overwhelmingly to liberate them as a chosen people. The Israelites did not liberate themselves from their bondage. They did not fight in a revolution to win their freedom. In the Biblical account, God intervened in extraordinarily dramatic fashion to force Pharaoh to release them.

Out of this memory came a deepening sense of who God is and what the Lord asks of this people. The Bible records how they recognised this God as their one and only God, and they developed their moral codes in the light of how God had freed them from Egypt. They entered into an agreement – the Covenant – to live always in the spirit of this liberating God, and to treat others as God had treated them.

Justice in the Bible is thus fundamentally a matter of preserving this relationship with God, manifested especially in how the poor are treated.

The Israelites remembered how in Egypt they had been in a wretched situation, oppressed and facing genocide with Pharaoh killing their baby boys. In honouring God, the Israelites were required to care for others in similarly oppressive situations. Because they had been foreigners and strangers in Egypt, they were to have a special care for strangers in their own land.

The Bible recounts how Moses led his people to the Promised Land of Palestine, and how they entered and settled the land. As part of this settlement, every family and clan were to be allotted their own piece of land to provide sustenance and security. This was seen as part of God's Covenant promise to them. But if the people broke the Covenant, then God would abandon them to their own devices and disaster would overtake them.

Central to the Covenant was the duty of care for the widows and orphans, the poor and destitute, the sick and the hungry. The 'poor' at times became a code word for all those afflicted or in distress.

From the rulers in Israel, God demanded justice for the poor, in the words of Psalm 82:

*How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?  
Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (82: 2–4).*



The righteous ruler is depicted in Psalm 72:

*Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice ...  
For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper.  
He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.  
From oppression and violence he redeems their life,  
and precious is their blood in his sight.  
(72: 1–2, 12–14).*

Psalm 146 sings of God's concern for the poor:

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God ...  
Who keeps faith forever;  
Who executes justice for the oppressed;  
Who gives food to the hungry.  
  
The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
The Lord watches over the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the strangers;  
He upholds the orphan and the widow,  
But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (146: 4–9).*

### God detests piety without justice

Whenever religious practice drifted away from social concern in Israel, the prophets rose up to denounce such practices.

*The prophets spoke of a God who was interested in justice, even above worship.  
The Exodus, the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, had revealed a God who was centrally concerned with the liberation of an oppressed people, a God who cared deeply about suffering and oppression... God is a God of justice who is not neutral in the face of oppression.*

Australian Catholic Bishops,  
*A New Beginning: Eradicating Poverty in our World* (1996), page 29



The prophet Amos about the year 734 BC condemned as corrupt and deceitful religious ceremonial that ignored the needs of the poor or their despoliation by the rich. He wrote that God fiercely rejected such self-deluding worship and the veneer of hypocritical piety:

*"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5: 21, 24).*

Instead God demanded justice for the poor and oppressed. Writing about the same time, the prophet Hosea also denounced injustice and violence: 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings' (6:6).

The writer of the final sections of Isaiah reiterated that God is not fooled by displays of religious observance, even fasting, if the distressed are neglected.

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (58: 6–7).*

God's concern is for justice on the earth.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations ...*

*I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42: 1, 6–7).*



Such astonishingly powerful and assertive passages occur through many parts of the Bible.

### God's concern for the poor and distressed

Around 700 BC, Isaiah insisted that God is not uninterested in the fate of the marginalised:

*What to me are the multitudes of your sacrifices? says the Lord. I have had enough of burnt offerings ... When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (1: 11, 16–17).*

The prophets hammered home the message that to know God involves an obligation to care for the poor and hungry in their society.

About 600 BC, Jeremiah wrote:

*‘Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood...’ (22: 3–4).*

Jeremiah extolled God as a God of justice and concern for the poor: ‘I am the Lord, I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these I delight’, declares the Lord (9:24). Jeremiah praised King Josiah (who ruled from 641–609 BC) who ‘judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me? says the Lord’ (22:16).

The Bible uses many terms related to our modern use of the word justice. The Hebrew terms come out of a very different context with different but overlapping nuances. Isaiah uses *mispat* (justice, judgment in law) and *sedaqah* (right, righteousness) linked together, and this can be translated as social justice.

To describe the heart of God, the Bible also uses a number of other key terms which are closely intertwined: love (*hesed*), mercy (*rahamim*) and fidelity (*emunah*).

Biblical justice is not distinguished from ‘charity’ or works of mercy, but includes them.

### All made in the image of God

After the captivity in Babylon (598–538 BC), a new awareness emerged about how God relates with human beings. In the Book of Genesis, God is not just the one who liberates the Israelites from Egypt, but also the great Creator of all that is, especially human beings, formed in God’s own image: male and female.

This is a major breakthrough in religious consciousness. Human beings are the only image of God that God allows and recognises. But God expects us to recognise and reverence this image in each other, and so to treat each other with respect and concern. This message powerfully reinforces the central message about what living justly in society entails, especially care for those in distress and affliction.

Because everyone is special in God’s sight as the living image of the same God, we are all radically equal. Though we all have different talents, abilities and limitations, this does not change our dignity as persons and our fundamental equality before God.

This does not mean we have to be all treated exactly the same, or possess an equal amount of possessions. That would be impossible. Our natural gifts and life opportunities vary enormously, we have different roles to play in life, and circumstances can be very diverse.

But it does mean that we should organise our societies so that all can have access to the







means to obtain a fulfilling life and a decent standard of living, in as much as it is possible in the circumstances of culture, time and place.

### The Jubilee

The Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25) was a remarkable interpretation of what God intended to be an enduring prospect for the Jewish people in the Promised Land. Every 50 years, families were to return to the economic structures that the Israelites believed God had determined when they first entered Palestine. It was to be a return to the original arrangements, so that

- families regained ownership of their ancestral land that had been alienated,
- debts were to be remitted,
- those in bonded servitude were released,
- and the land itself was to enjoy a sabbatical rest.

The Jubilee celebrated the foundational event of Israel: God's intervention to rescue them from slavery, oppression and even attempted genocide in Egypt. This social and political liberation is the metaphor on which rests our understanding of salvation/redemption/liberation. For the Jewish people, this social liberation was deeply enmeshed in their religious consciousness. They did not separate the religious and social dimensions.

The Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus also insisted: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (19:18b). This applied especially to the poor, the deaf and blind, the aged destitute, day labourers and resident aliens. 'You shall love the alien as yourself.' (19:34).

Most scholars doubt that this ideal of the Jubilee was effectively enacted in practice.

Written after the Babylonian captivity, the writer of Leviticus envisioned the ideal of prosperity and equity that God intended for his people. The Jubilee affirmed – as a religious duty – that wealth should be redistributed to ensure that everyone had the means to live and raise their families. It opposed the tendency for wealth to be concentrated in the hands of the few, which would have left much of the population impoverished.

Whatever the social reality of different periods, the Jubilee remained a powerful metaphor in the minds of many Jews. In the Gospel of St Luke, as we will see below, Jesus himself interpreted his mission in terms of fulfilling the Jubilee.

Over the centuries, through all the history of wars, invasion, exile and return, most of the Jewish people depended on an agrarian economy that had good years and bad seasons as well, when the situation of the poor would be especially dire. Even in comparatively prosperous times, the prophets in Israel repeatedly denounced the wealthy when they ignored or oppressed the poor and destitute.

So strong in the Bible was duty to care for the poor that the author of the book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) about 280 BC wrote this astonishing passage:

*Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the person who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor... A man murders his neighbour if he robs him of his livelihood, sheds blood if he withholds an employee's wages (34: 23–26).*

### Jesus and social justice

Jesus was profoundly imbued with these sentiments and beliefs in the Hebrew scriptures that he read and studied thoroughly. He saw himself as the embodiment of the hopes of Israel and the promises of God, whom he confidently and intimately addressed as his Father.

The famous Last Judgment scene from Matthew's Gospel echoes the belief of the Old Testament that God is intensely concerned about the wellbeing of the poor. Jesus highlights this concern of God, so much so that Jesus declares that whatever we do to the poor, we do precisely to Him.

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then will be sit on his throne of glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*