

GIVE JUSTICE TO THE WEAK¹

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins on the Fifth Sunday after Trinity (Sixth Sunday after Pentecost), 20 July 2025

My friend and fellow parishioner, Leon Fitzgerald, frequently reminds me of events that happened on the dates of my sermons. He wonders whether I might be able to weave them in somehow. I can rarely do so. However, on this day in 70AD, Roman general, Titus, stormed the Fortress of Antonia in Jerusalem, ending the Jewish Zealot revolt and beginning the destruction of the city, an event that echoed through the young Christian church. In 1944, Hitler survived the famous assassination attempt that led ultimately to the execution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1969 the Apollo Mission landed the first human on the moon. These events bring me to Psalm 82:

God standeth in the congregation of princes: he is a Judge among gods.
How long will ye give wrong judgement: and accept the persons of the ungodly?
Defend the poor and fatherless: see that such as are in need and necessity have right.
Deliver the outcast and poor: save them from the hand of the ungodly.

Psalm 82 is described as a “Psalm of Asaph”. Asaph was a musician in the court of King David, but, like many ancient writings, this Psalm is an attribution, rather than an identification of the actual author. Several psalms are ascribed to Asaph, particularly numbers 73 to 83. Yet, despite the attribution, they appear to have been written after the Hebrews returned from exile in Babylon, that is, around 540 BC.

The opening of the psalm may sound a little strange to us, given our understanding of Jewish monotheism. It presents a vision of a court presided over by a chief God. This chief God is judging lesser gods. Although the Hebrew embrace of monotheism was neither consistent over time nor uniform at any one time, the scene in this psalm is a literary device. We don't need to draw any conclusions about polytheism. The chief God is certainly the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but the target of the psalm is distinctly worldly. The minor gods represent earthly rulers whose behaviour is to be judged by God. Their evil is so apparent that, after reading the charge, the chief God proceeds directly to judgement, although this may not be in accordance with contemporary jurisprudence, which would give accused some right of reply. The scene may be redolent of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*:

“Let the jury consider their verdict,” the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.
“No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first—verdict afterwards.”²

More seriously, the psalm is like the work of a court reporter. At the end of the psalm, we hear the reporter's voice urging God to act in the world as God did in the heavenly court. This is a psalm about justice, a central theme of the Psalms of Asaph, and about social responsibility. Of course, all of us must act justly as individuals, but this psalm is not about individuals but about communities, about shared responsibility. This is a highly political psalm.

In their commentary on this psalm Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger quote the poetry of the Brazilian liberation theologian, Hugo Assman³ in relation to false gods with phony mandates:

¹ Readings: Psalm 82; Deuteronomy 30:1-10; 1 Peter:3.8-18

² Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter 12

³ [Hugo Assmann - Wikipedia](#)

The true idolatry
 is not that of nonbelievers,
 is not that of atheists
 (who are often those who
 destroy idols
 and are fighting against idols).
 Idols are
 the gods of oppression.
 Idols are the
 shining fetishes
 with divine names
 and broad smiles,
 with creeds,
 with worship,
 with prayers,
 with laws,
 with sacred and divine power,
 power to oppress,
 power to exploit,
 power to kill.
 The dominators,
 the idolatrous,
 will never make the mistake
 of declaring themselves
 atheists
 (of their idols) –
 God, Homeland, and Family,
 Tradition, Family, and Property.
 The family that prays together
 stays together
 without work,
 without food,
 without housing,
 without good health.
 In God we Trust. Amen.⁴

In last Wednesday's *Sydney Morning Herald*, Ross Gittins, writing about incessant demands to spend more on defence, came to a similar, although differently expressed, conclusion.

Let's assume we spend these many tril-
 lions on armaments rather than lesser
 worries such as health, education and cli-
 mate change, and nothing untoward oc-
 curs. Will this prove the money was well
 spent, or that it was a complete waste?
 We stocked up for a party, but no one
 came. We'll never know.

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⁴ Brueggemann, Walter; Bellinger, Jr, William H. *Psalms* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary) (pp. 358-359). Cambridge University Press. See also Matthew Anstey [Psalms: from personal angst to global politics - Guardian](#)

⁵ [Sydney Morning Herald](#)

Our two readings this morning also make the same point. Deuteronomy told the Hebrews that obedience to God's laws will bring together scattered people. That is, justice is a prerequisite for unity.

1 Peter reminds us of the criteria for a true community. Verse 8 sets them out: like-mindedness, love for one another, tender-heartedness and humility of mind. That is, community strength depends on individual integrity. That integrity, Peter says, is worth suffering for, since it is good.

In summary, each of the three readings point us in the same direction. The political psalm, the historical socially forming laws and the development of the young church all depend on doing good, on the pursuit of justice.

To return to poetry about poetry, Malcolm Guite has also a sonnet:

For things are not so hopeless as they seem
God stands among the rulers as a judge.
He has no partiality. We deem

Ourselves better than others, hold a grudge
Against the stranger in our midst, reject
The ones who aren't like us, but he will judge

The world in righteousness. He will reject
The special pleading of the privileged.
And bless the meek instead. If we reflect

A little, in this earthly pilgrimage,
On how he loved the 'other' and the outcast
Then we will learn to share our heritage,

Not keep it only for our kin and caste,
But gather as the children of one king,
As kindred in our father's house at last.⁶

⁶ [Defend the Poor And Fatherless: A Response to Psalm 82 | Malcolm Guite](#)