



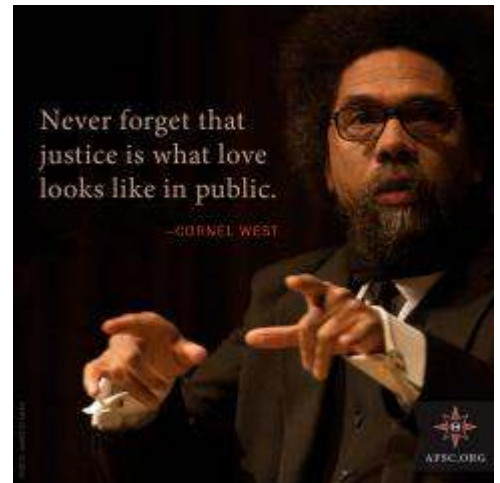
## *St John the Divine Anglican Church*

### **Quo Vadis: Discerning our paths together** ***Session one: Social Justice & Community***

#### **At the heart of faith is a concern for justice.**

Not just as a 'because it is a good thing to do' thing, but because it is a calling and a demand of faith. This goes back to the heart of the society presented in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible.

In the Old Testament there is no distinction made between religion, state, or individual, the whole point of the law is to enable harmony – **Shalom** – which is God's intention for all people. For a faithful Jew there are not just 10 Commandments, there are 613 – and the laws which govern fair weights and measures in the marketplace (eg Leviticus 19:36 ; Proverbs 16:11 ; Ezekiel 45:10) or allow the poor to glean in the fields (Leviticus 19:9-10 ; Leviticus 23:22 ; Deuteronomy 24:19-21 ) are as important as the laws governing the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16.) In this scheme the Judges, or, later, Kings are as much religious figures as a political ones, the priests and people have as much influence over the nation as the rulers. At least in theory.



**The law is therefore concerned not just with ritual and religious observance, except that all of society is 'religion'** – faith is not confined to any one aspect of life. One of the main developments of the Israelite religion is the rise of prophets, inspired by the Holy Spirit to proclaim justice, because justice is at the heart of the law, at the heart of faith, at the heart of God's love for humanity. And we see again and again not a plea for piety, but for purity – of heart, of intention, of compassion

**Jesus takes on the prophet's mantle, and adds greater demands** – making clearer the God of love and the demands of the law of love. His radical approach in the Gospels is to reach out to those who are excluded, and to include in a new way of thinking those religious types who need transformation and to return to the loving ways of God. So he eats and drinks and engages with the outcasts, with tax-collectors, prostitutes, those caught in adultery along with Pharisees and Sadducees, Synagogue leaders and scribes.

It goes even further again, contrary to what many say, particularly those who believe the 'social Gospel' is a distraction from 'salvation' - parables such as the Rich Man & Lazarus (Luke 16.19-21) or the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25.31-46) are not about being 'saved' as many claim, they don't even mention believing in Jesus as such – they are about acting with justice and love to others.

These thoughts are summed up in the beautiful but challenging

**‘Whatever you do to the least of these you do also to me’**

The Church carried on this tradition with an understanding of about **‘caritas’** which is often translated ‘Charity’ but is more accurately understood not as giving money or goods to the poor, but as **‘self-giving love’** which ***affects for the better both giver and receiver***. This has certainly been the experience of Saint John the Divine’s congregation – through contact with those who are in need we ourselves are transformed. Charity is not a patronising gift to those in need, but an often sacrificial action which favours the needy and seeks to bring transformation to individuals and society..



We are called, we affirm the hope that we will be an inclusive community – for it is from a strong sense of community and belonging we can reach out beyond ourselves.

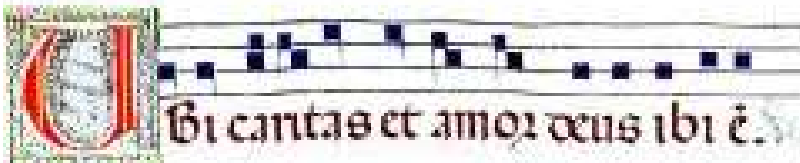
### **In closing, two questions:**

Firstly, the purpose of the law, the purpose of justice in Old and New Testaments is ‘Righteousness’ defined from the Hebrew word for righteousness - *tseh’-dek, tzedek*,: righteous, integrity, equity, justice, straightness. The root of *tseh’-dek* is *tsaw-dak*: upright, just, straight, innocent, true, sincere. It is best understood as the product of upright, moral action in accordance with some form of divine plan (or will) (thank you to Wikipedia for that definition)

**What does it look like to be a ‘righteous community’ and how can St John’s be that community?**

Secondly, based on Marion Little’s wonderful assertion ‘to privilege the needs of the lowest in any group, in society, is to elevate all’ – how can we be that kind of community?

**How can we privilege the lowest both within and beyond our community so that all may be elevated?**



Ubi Caritas et amor, deus ibi est - Where love and charity are, God is there