

The Fourth Sunday of Advent 2015

*Bristol Cathedral
Commemorating Eglantine Jebb (Year C Readings)*

It is one of the most beautiful and compelling pictures in the gospels, these two women, cousins, an older one and a younger one, greeting one another with joy, each of them carrying a child, soon to be born, in one case a longed for child when hope of having one had been long past, in the other a young mother surprised to be finding herself pregnant when perhaps not much more than a child herself. And one of the children in the womb leaps with joy sensing the presence of the other. Mary and Elizabeth, Jesus and John. It is a beautiful and compelling picture to contemplate as Christmas draws very near.

And then the women burst into song. At least Mary does, though some scholars think it is Elizabeth who sings. Either way both, one feels in this moment of intimacy, share the same joy. But the extraordinary thing is that they don't sing about their pregnancies and the boys they are bringing to birth - both told by the angel it's going to be a boy! - they sing not so much about their joy in the children but about their joy in God and they sing about justice.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Their story focuses on a child, a child still in the womb. Their song focuses on the God of justice, the God of the poor. Just put that, the child and the justice, alongside that appalling news report this week of the refugee man who lost his wife and seven children, the youngest a baby of a few months, to drowning in a capsized boat as they tried to cross to Europe. The child and the justice.

This morning we have a third woman in our prepare-for-Christmas celebration. Unlike Mary, whom all generations do indeed call blessed, I am tempted to think of Eglantine Jebb as the most neglected saint of all. True, she is in the calendar of the Church of England, but on the 17th of December, when even the Church, let alone the world, is thinking about other things. The international organisation she founded, still going strong after almost a hundred years, though it tells her story with pride does not, at least on its website, so much as mention the strong Christian faith and spirituality that was the driving force in her life. The most neglected saint of all. Let's do something about that.

Born in 1876 in Shropshire, Eglantine Jebb went up to Oxford to study Modern History, but came under the influence of Charles Gore, Henry Scott-Holland and William Morris, trained to be a teacher, but realised quite soon that this was not precisely her vocation, and began to work for the Charity Organisation Society.

Just before the First World War, more precisely at the end of the Balkan War of 1912, she and her sister Dorothea were asked to go out and distribute relief to both the liberated Macedonians and the defeated Turks. There were terrible stories of atrocities and many thousands of displaced peoples - refugees, children, homeless and dying of starvation. When they returned to England, Eglantine began a campaign for relief work. This campaigning continued through the war years and in 1918, when there was starvation,

disease and high mortality in defeated Germany and Austria, with reports of babies thrown into the Danube or left in hospitals where they were ranged on shelves to die, Eglantine and Dorothea responded by joining the work of the Fight the Famine Council and set up the Save the Children Fund. This was in opposition to Prime Minister Lloyd George's policy of "squeezing Germany till the pips squeak", surely one of the most catastrophic government policies of the 20th century. When Eglantine distributed pamphlets showing starving babies, she was arrested and charged under censorship laws. She was fined five pounds, but the prosecuting counsel made a contribution to the fund. The child and the justice.

Eglantine went to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, to ask him to make an appeal to the Church of England to help. Davidson was not willing to help. What do you do if the Archbishop of Canterbury lets you down? Try the Pope. Off to Rome she went and had a two hour audience with Benedict XV, a sad man reviled on all sides for his lack of moral leadership in the war years. The result was a Papal Encyclical, which named the Save the Children Fund and instructed every Roman Catholic community to make a collection and that help must go to all needy children and not just to Roman Catholics. Back to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who really did have to change his mind, and on Holy Innocents' Day 1919 collections for the children were made in every church. Eglantine was seeing the whole Church respond to her passion to save as many children as possible irrespective of any considerations of country or creed.

Her political campaigning continued with the drawing up of a Children's Charter, enunciating the inalienable right of every child to have the opportunity of full physical, mental and spiritual development. The Declaration of Geneva, as the charter became, was adopted in 1924 by the League of Nations and is the basis of much contemporary recognition of the rights of children. Preaching at the ratification of the Declaration in Geneva, Eglantine said

May God put in our hearts to strive and strive and never cease from striving, until we have clean swept away this appalling blot which disgraces our civilisation, this iniquitous child suffering.

The child and the justice. Remember the seven drowned children. This appalling blot which disgraces our civilisation.

Eglantine Jebb died in Geneva on 17 December 1928 at the age of 52, worn out by a strenuous life of campaigning and bringing relief. "Every generation of children offers mankind a new possibility of rebuilding the ruins of the world," she wrote before she died. "See, God, I have come to do your will," she might have said, words we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning. And all generations should certainly call her blessed, this childless woman, with a passion for the child and for justice.

What shall we learn from her story as we prepare for Christmas?

First we may learn again of the inescapable call to justice that is part of the faith we profess. What Mary's song, *Magnificat*, teaches us is that this is God's mission, God's passion, and, if it is ours too, it is ours because it is God's.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Eglantine's life teaches us that sometimes the search for that justice involves campaigning, political action and a willingness to challenge harmful policies. And that search is not a kind of add-on to faith. It arises from the very nature of the God of the poor and the marginalised. And, if we are invited, as we sometimes are by archbishops and the like, to identify God's mission and to join in, then a large part of that mission, that passion, is for justice. Eglantine's success in marshalling the Church's support for the relief of children in 1919 tells us something about how effective the Church can be in the righting of wrongs if it sets out to do so. Of course all charities and relief agencies are full of Christian people, alongside others of goodwill, playing their part, often appropriately not parading their faith, but sometimes it is the Church as an organism that needs to act and to be seen to be acting, especially when there is injustice and self-interest to be challenged, as in relation to the refugee crisis today.

And Eglantine's life also teaches us something about continuing to focus, staying with a cause and not letting go. "May God put in our hearts to strive and strive and never cease from striving," she said. So that first - to learn again the inescapable call to justice that is part of the faith we profess. Justice.

The justice and the child. For the other lesson we must learn from Eglantine is the sacredness of the child and of society's duty to promote the dignity and opportunity of every child. The Declaration of Geneva had this to say:

The child must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually. The child that is hungry must be fed; the child that is sick must be nursed; the child that is backward must be helped; the delinquent child must be reclaimed; and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succoured. The child must be the first to receive relief in times of distress.

We might say it slightly differently in the 21st century, but these words of nearly a hundred years ago remain true for today. The justice and the child. The time is drawing near when we celebrate a world of harmony where, as Isaiah expressed it, "a little child shall lead them". That little child, of course, was the child of God, God's son. The child was the child of Mary and there were those who would have had him dead, as Holy Innocents' Day will remind us, but as Luke wrote

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.

He grew and he spoke of the kingdom. The justice and the child. Let both be our focus this Christmas. And let Eglantine Jebb not be the forgotten saint of December.

+Michael Perham