

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS,  
FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED.

**I**n the early morning of 4 February 1999, Amadou Diallo was standing near his home. It was late, about 12.40am, and he'd just returned from a meal out with friends. Four police officers in plain clothes drove by, Diallo tried to enter his house, and reached inside his jacket. He was shot nineteen times. The police fired 41 shots. Witnesses testified that they shot without warning. The investigation found no weapons on or near Diallo; what he had pulled out of his jacket was a wallet. The last words his mother heard him say were those left on her answering machine: "Mum, I'm going to college."

We pay attention to last words because we normally understand them to be invested with great meaning, perhaps because coming at the end of a long illness or at great age, the death beds of those whom we love, even the famous great and good, become places of insight, perhaps even of irony or comedy. Often much time has gone into crafting these words, particularly the last words of the condemned facing execution. But the words of those like Amadou Diallo's were short sentences, almost brutal in their starkness, reflecting something of the brutality that took their young lives. There are the famous words of Michael Brown, "I don't have a gun. Stop shooting," who was shot and killed aged 18 on 9 August, 2014. His death sparked protests around the world. Eric Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," were embraced by the protestors. But the last words of Sean Bell were, for me, the most moving. His last words to his fiancée were, 'I love you too'. He was killed on the 25 November 2006 after police shot fifty rounds into his car. He was 23 years old. It was the early hours of the morning before his wedding.

Racial violence and police brutality are just one of the incalculable injustices which people around the world endure on a daily basis. Even if we ourselves do not suffer the injustice, as Christians, it should not leave us indifferent, and because we cannot be indifferent, because we pray for these people each and every day, it will take its own toll on you and me. Perhaps the first question that we might have from hearing these words from our divine teacher is whether, in a world such as ours, we dare to hope for a truly just society? For Aquinas, justice is twofold; perfect and imperfect.<sup>1</sup> We cannot, Aquinas tells us, have perfect justice in this world, for the structures of injustice are rooted in human sin, and as St John reminds us, '...if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.'<sup>2</sup>

So are we doomed to simply thirst and hunger after freedom in a barren wilderness of an unjust world? The hard answer to this is, yes. True justice will, ultimately, elude us in this life, just as true peace and true freedom will too, for as the Apostle tells us, 'our commonwealth is in heaven.'<sup>3</sup> It might be tempting at this point to despair. After all, if we can-

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on Matthew, §427.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John, 1:8.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians, 3:20.

not build a just society why bother to try? If the poor will always be with us, why bother to try and clothe and feed them?

Part of the key here, surely, is the thirst. It is not enough to simply do the works of justice, to perform acts of mercy and charity, unless you thirst for justice. We have to work with desire. Just as overcoming lust requires our purification through grace, and the conversion our mind, heart, and sight, so too our deeper conversion helps us to see as Christ Himself sees, and in doing so, our thirst for justice grows.

If we cannot build a truly just society because of human sinfulness, we can, by God's grace, build an imperfectly just society. This will require a certain bravery on our part, an openness, and also, sometimes, action. Martin Luther King often spoke out against the reluctance of Christians to act against injustice; 'I have seen religious leaders stand amid the social injustices that pervade our society, mouthing pious platitudes and sanctimonious trivialities. All too often the religious community has been the taillight instead of the headlight.' These pious platitudes and sanctimonious trivialities are what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace, a Christian life which is reduced to slogans and soundbites, and where grace ultimately does not take root in us.

How then can we avoid pious platitudes and sanctimonious triviality? Only by listening to our Lord's voice, for He not only reveals to us what the world is really like, but shows us also how to respond to these realities. We must speak boldly of God's justice, and measure the reality of the world around us by His justice, and not by any human standard, for the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 119:9.