

# *Simply Christian*

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## *Chapter One*

### *Putting the World to Rights*

I had a dream the other night, a powerful and interesting dream. And the really frustrating thing about it is that I can't remember what it was about. I had a flash of it as I woke up, enough to make me think how extraordinary and meaningful it was; and then it was gone. And so, to misquote T. S. Eliot, I had the meaning but missed the experience.

Our passion for justice often seems like that. We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse, for a moment, a world at one, a world put to rights, a world where things work out, where societies function fairly and efficiently, where we not only know what we ought to do but actually do it. And then we wake up and come back to reality. But what are we hearing when we're dreaming that dream?

It's as though we can hear, not perhaps a voice itself, but the echo of a voice: a voice speaking with calm, healing authority, speaking about justice, about things being put to rights, about peace and hope and prosperity for all. The voice continues to echo in our imagination, our subconscious. We want to go back and listen to it again, but having woken up we can't get back into the dream. Other people sometimes tell us it was just a fantasy, and we're half-inclined to believe them, even though that condemns us to cynicism.

But the voice goes on, calling us, beckoning us, luring us to think that there might be such a thing as justice, as the world being put to rights, even though we find it so elusive. We're like moths trying to fly to the moon. We all know there's something called justice, but we can't quite get to it.

You can test this out easily. Go to any school or playgroup where the children are old enough to talk to each other. Listen to what they are saying. Pretty soon one child will say to another, or perhaps to a teacher: "That's not fair!"

You don't have to teach children about fairness and unfairness. A sense of justice comes with the kit of being human. We know about it, as we say, in our bones.

You fall off your bicycle and break your leg. You go to the hospital and they fix it. You stagger around on crutches for a while. Then, rather gingerly, you start to walk normally again. Pretty soon you've forgotten about the whole thing. You're back to normal. There is such a thing as putting something to rights, as fixing it, as getting it back on track. You can fix a broken leg, a broken toy, a broken television.

So why can't we fix injustice?

It isn't for want of trying. We have courts of law and magistrates and judges and lawyers in plenty. I used to live in a part of London where there was so much justice going on that it hurt -- lawmakers, law enforcers, a Lord Chief Justice, a police headquarters, and, just a couple of miles away, enough barristers to run a battleship. (Though, since they would all

be arguing with one another, the battleship might be going around in circles.) Other countries have similarly heavyweight organizations designed to make laws and implement them.

And yet we have a sense that justice itself slips through our fingers. Sometimes it works; often it doesn't. Innocent people get convicted; guilty people are let off. The bullies, and those who can bribe their way out of trouble, get away with wrongdoing -- not always, but often enough for us to notice, and to wonder why. People hurt others badly and walk away laughing. Victims don't always get compensated. Sometimes they spend the rest of their lives coping with sorrow, hurt, and bitterness.

The same thing is going on in the wider world. Countries invade other countries and get away with it. The rich use the power of their money to get even richer while the poor, who can't do anything about it, get even poorer. Most of us scratch our heads and wonder why, and then go out and buy another product whose profit goes to the rich company.

I don't want to be too despondent. There is such a thing as justice, and sometimes it comes out on top. Brutal tyrannies are overthrown. Apartheid was dismantled. Sometimes wise and creative leaders arise and people follow them into good and just actions. Serious criminals are sometimes caught, brought to trial, convicted, and punished. Things that are seriously wrong in society are sometimes put splendidly to rights. New projects give hope to the poor. Diplomats achieve solid and lasting peace. But just when you think it's safe to relax . . . it all goes wrong again.

And even though we can solve a few of the world's problems, at least temporarily, we know perfectly well that there are others we simply can't and won't.

Just after Christmas of 2004 an earthquake and tidal wave killed more than three times as many people in a single day as the total number of American soldiers who died in the entire Vietnam War. There are some things in our world, on our planet, which make us say, "That's not right!" even when there's nobody to blame. A tectonic plate's got to do what a tectonic plate's got to do. The earthquake wasn't caused by some wicked global capitalist, by a late-blossoming Marxist, or by a fundamentalist with a bomb. It just happened. And in that happening we see a world in pain, a world out of joint, a world where things occur which we seem powerless to make right.

The most telling examples are the ones closest to home. I have high moral standards. I have thought about them. I have preached about them. Good heavens, I have even written books about them. And I still break them. The line between justice and injustice, between things . . .