

The Jubilee and Jesus

In the New Testament, Jesus identified himself with the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-3, when he read in the synagogue of Nazareth. This episode in Luke 4:16-30 becomes a central theme for the entire ministry of Jesus in Luke's Gospel as he becomes the one through whom God would accomplish all those prophecies. Jesus, therefore, identified himself and his ministry with the eschatological implications of the Jubilee year and fulfils the Jubilee itself in his life, death and resurrection.

In several parables Jesus clearly demonstrates how the Spirit, as well as the Law, of the Jubilee code should work when he challenges abusive behaviour between masters and slaves working on their land (see Mark 12:1-11; Matthew 21:33-44; 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-27; 20:9-18). Jesus describes how moneylending and debt have to be fairly negotiated and managed in Matthew 18:23-31; Luke 7:41-43 and 16:1-9.

The economic angle reveals the two principles that we can apply today. God desires just distribution of the earth's resources, and the land was assigned fairly among the people. The Jubilee was not focused on redistribution but restoration and redemption. The Jubilee principle opposes three things:

- a) Mass accumulation of land and wealth at the expense of the community.
- b) All forms of monopolies and nationalisation that destroy a more equitable exercise of personal or family ownership.
- c) Creation of barriers to opportunities and resources for families to provide for themselves.

In many of our modern democratic countries, people cannot be sold into slavery to pay for debts. Bankruptcy laws provide some relief to those saddled with unpayable debts, and family members are not liable for previous generations' debts. The basic property or assets can be protected in specific circumstances particularly where there are vulnerable dependents. However, Leviticus 25 provides a broader foundation than our contemporary bankruptcy laws. It is not solely founded on protecting personal freedom and property for poor people, but on breaking the poverty cycle. It ensures everyone has access to the means of making a living and escaping multi-generational poverty which remains a constant issue today.

The gleaning laws in Leviticus show us that the solution is neither to offer tokenistic handouts nor mass appropriation of property, but social values and structures that give every person an opportunity to work productively. Jesus reminded his people several times that they had either forgotten or chosen to ignore these legal and ethical codes in the way they indebted their employees. Yet these principles had previously differentiated the

Hebrew nation from its neighbours and from those who had enslaved them while they waited for God to deliver them.

When we reflect on the global issue of human trafficking and servitude, we see it increasing on our very doorsteps with millions of children and adults enslaved in situations where anti-slavery laws are not adequately enforced. It is here that we have lost sight of these founding values and of Jesus' kingdom vision. While there are many other examples in the New Testament of these types of slavery, the consistent thread is that all people should be treated justly regardless of their position or power. To drive this home loud and clear, Jesus offers a radically new model of servant leadership when he washes his disciples' feet before the Last Supper in John 13:1-17.

Jesus continues to repeat the distinction between the Spirit and the Law in his reversal of all relationships that have become enslaved by the Law. This is supported in John 1:17 – “For the Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” and in John 4:23-24 when John states that “the time will come when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth”. It is developed by Paul in several ways as he separates the outward appearance of a person and their compliance with the Law from what is in their heart and in their actions in Romans 2:28-29. Paul shows that obeying the Law – the “letter” was good and gave life, but it had no power to save the sinner from judgement at death. For this, the Spirit gives eternal life through Christ which fulfilled the Law rather than abolished it in Romans 8:1-4.