

# **The Kingdom of God and the Year of Jubilee**

## **1. Release: The Old Testament Vision**

Those who do not read the Bible tend to think that its moral and ethical precepts are largely concerned with sexual and personal morality since that is what the newspapers and many preachers constantly indicate.

How strange then that even a casual reader of the Bible will soon become aware that its ethical concern is in fact much more focused around riches, poverty and inequality. These are the matters which pervade book after book of the Old Testament. The Psalms, the Prophets, the books of the Law - each section of the Hebrew Scriptures sees the impoverishment of people by those who have riches as a central focus not only for human moral sensitivity, but also as a touchstone for God's acceptance or rejection of his people. Alongside idolatry a lack of concern for the poor is the next most important criterion against which Yahweh will judge his people.

Psalm 9 is typical: "But the poor will not always be unheeded, nor the hope of the destitute be always in vain. Arise, LORD, restrain the power of mortals; let the nations be judged in your presence." [v9ff] Or read in the prophets this characteristic passage: "The LORD opens the indictment against the elders and officers of his people:... in your houses are the spoils taken from the poor. Is it nothing that you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor?" [Isaiah 3: 14-15] And the legal books of the Old Testament do not stop at polite suggestions that we should care a little more for the poor but encode strict legislation against the rich. The Law states in Leviticus 25 v35 "If your brother-Israelite is reduced to poverty and cannot support himself in the community, you must assist him as you would an alien or a stranger, and he will live with you."

It was Moses to whom Yahweh God had entrusted the revolutionary Torah Law, and on bringing the Hebrew tribes out of slavery in Egypt a form of government was carefully

developed amongst the people which set this God-given law at its centre. There was to be no King by Yahweh God himself and they were to live in a land which God had entrusted to them as its stewards rather than its owners. As the pages of the Old Testament history turn, however, we see that great theocratic ideal diminish. Monarchy is inaugurated, the land divided into two feuding Kingdoms and the rich become wealthy on the backs of the poor. The prophets continually denounce this development as ungodly and unworthy of their inheritance since the people owe all that they have to the sheer generosity of Yahweh God. They will therefore have to accept the consequences of judgement and retribution, say the prophets.<sup>1</sup>

The canonical text of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, was brought into its final form against the background of this sad situation, and it therefore constantly seeks to bring the people back to an awareness of the essential qualities of that original revelation to Moses of the will of God for his people through his Torah Law. The text calls for repentance, for a return to their God, and for the re-enactment of this Torah framework in order to bring about a just society of equality under God.

One of the strands of tradition which can be discovered within the canonical text is that which appears to have been carried in the hearts and minds of the Levitical Priestly community. Scholars refer to this strand as the Priestly source<sup>2</sup>. It was probably written down quite late in its life, just before the fall of Jerusalem, and it laid emphasis upon the origins of the Temple cultic rites as being as old as the time of the wanderings of the Hebrews in the wilderness. Their text stated time and again that because the people belonged to a Holy God, then they themselves were expected to be holy. “You must be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” [Leviticus 19 v2b]

For that reason, right at the heart of their writing we find what has been called the “Holiness Code” which we can find in ten chapters towards the end of the book of Leviticus.[chapters 17 -26] As we might expect it has a high ethical flavour, teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Walter Brueggemann: The Prophetic Imagination. Fortress Press 1978

God's people to love their neighbour as themselves [ch19v18] Once again, it laid stress upon personal morality in terms of sexual, cultic and dietary purity, but also and particularly upon economic factors which were regarded as being essential to Holiness<sup>3</sup>. In the Holiness Code God demanded that the rules of the market place would have to be tempered by mercy if his people were to be holy as he himself was holy. So for example in chapter 23 verse 22, the Law demanded, "When you reap the harvest in your land, do not reap right up to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your crop. Leave them for the poor and for the alien. I am the LORD your God." So holiness and justice taught that it was not right to push a wealth-creating situation to its limit but that it was better to leave space for God's mercy to be remembered and enacted. And it was this call to allow space for God's mercy and grace that was at the heart of the whole theology of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was an essential mark of Judaism, its Law its practice and its people. It was so important that Exodus 31 v14 announced the death penalty for those who transgressed it. It was included in both Scriptural traditions of the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Exodus tradition relating the Sabbath to God's rest after his six days of Creation, and the Deuteronomic tradition connecting it with the release of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. Both traditions therefore offered the Sabbath as a time for minimal labour so that time for reflection upon the generosity of God to his people would bring them nearer to him in their hearts. Everything and everyone would therefore rest on this "Holy" day, and in that rest even the slave would find a certain God-given freedom and release.

The chapter towards the end of the Holiness Code [Leviticus 25] goes even further and describes the Sabbath not only as a rest every seven days but as a period of grace to be enjoyed every seven years, and at the end of seven times seven years a full year of Release would be ushered in by the sounding of the Ram's Horn (or *Jubel* in Hebrew) as the "Year of Jubilee". As the New Year celebrations began and the people's sins were brought to mind in the sacred rites of *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) so repentance

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<sup>2</sup> See the work of the scholar Oto Eissfeldt: *The Old Testament, An Introduction*. Blackwell.1965 p.205f

for past failings would be rendered followed by a year of reparation in the light of that repentance. It is important to note that this reparation was not merely making amends for personal sins committed but was designed to repair the offences to God's holiness which had crept into the very fabric of the society over the forty-nine intervening years. The sins of individuals were constantly addressed through those years but the Jubilee Year acknowledged that some sin was locked into the very structure of society and had to be addressed if the repentance of *Yom Kippur* was to be anything more than lip-service.

The essential element of the Jubilee Year of Release was therefore the enactment of forgiveness of debt. It reminded the Israelites that the land belonged not to them but to Yahweh their God who had distributed it to them when they had entered the promised land. If during these forty-nine years they had encountered difficult times and had entered into debt and had had to sell their birthright, then in the Year of Jubilee this debt was remitted, they could return to their ancestral home and could till the land once more. So whilst people could own, and were at liberty to sell the harvests from the land, the land itself was always to remain a gift of God to them, not to own, but merely to steward. They would remain always indebted to Yahweh, but only for a limited period of years to one another.

In the Jubilee Year, the same release that redeemed the Land was also announced release to the people themselves. No Hebrew could be the slave of another in Law but if debts were very severe then he was allowed to sell himself as an indentured servant, but only until the Jubilee. Then he would be released also from this debt and could return to his ancestral home.

So it was that the Holiness Code, and in particular the Year of Jubilee release, put justice and mercy at the very heart of Holiness. It attended to the immediate needs of those who had fallen into debt but it did much more insofar as it actually addressed the underlying structural causes of debt in their society. It demonstrated the essence of mercy in that it

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<sup>3</sup> op cit. p.233ff

drew a line under indebtedness and specified its limits. In effect it made clear what Margaret Thatcher unwittingly clarified for us, that “society” cannot be said to exist if there is no mercy and compassion evident within it. We see the same conspicuous strands of wisdom in Deuteronomy, chapter 15, where again the year of release is spoken of as a time when all debts are revoked. Even when debt is so severe that the poor are prepared to mortgage the tools of their livelihood, the line must be drawn and mercy must be shown so that, “no one may take millstones, or even the upper millstone alone, in pledge; that would be taking a life in pledge.” In these ways, the Law of Jubilee release from debt always maintained the existence of light at the end of every tunnel. No matter how gloomy and desperate today may be, tomorrow offered hope and made today worth the struggle - it was redeemable.

The Old Testament Laws remained singularly important through the years and into the time of Jesus in the first century of our era. The Roman Empire itself realised the importance of the Sabbath release to the Jewish people and did not exact taxes in Sabbath years even as late as AD66. But as worthy and beneficial as these Sabbath and Jubilee laws were intended to be, by the time of Jesus they were causing considerable problems to the poorer members of his society.

## **2. The Breakdown of the Jubilee System**<sup>4</sup>

By the time of Jesus, two factors were combining to bring both the Sabbath and Jubilee release legislation into disrepute. First was the increasing alienation and descent into poverty of the peasantry, and second was the abuse of the Sabbath and Holiness codes by the Priestly and Pharisaic classes who used the laws as an opportunity to control and subjugate the populace.

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<sup>4</sup> In the analysis which follows I am indebted to the work of Ched Myers. See *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis, 1988

First of all we must remember that Palestine at that time was in thrall to the Roman Empire which relied upon the imposition of heavy taxes and a slave culture to pay for its wars and its gigantic and inspiring enterprises. Palestine was a lucrative source of income for the Empire and it was the peasants with their subsistence farming and casual employment under absentee landlords who often paid the price. In addition, the Hebraic tribal system demanded tithes from all the land which, it was intended would then be distributed to the Levitical Priests who because of their priestly duties were themselves unable to work the land. Because the poor Levites living out in the villages could no longer afford the cost of the annual journey to Jerusalem to take the tithes to the collecting centre in the capital, the Jerusalem priests had set up a collection system which bypassed the poor local Levites. The contemporary historian Josephus even tells us of violence occurring between the poor village Levites and the slaves of the wealthy Jerusalem priests. So what was meant to be a just, re-distributive system became an oppression, and where the absentee landlords were themselves Priests, the bondage was doubly felt.

Yet it was these same Priests, already held in disrepute, who controlled the people by being the sole arbiters of the Holiness Code - or rather the "Purity Code" as it had by this time become. It is important for us at this stage to remember that the way in which the Holiness Code had been interpreted through the years had emphasised not the justice and mercy of God's freedom but the essential difference between what was clean and what was unclean, what was Holy and what was impure. We have seen that the Holiness Code had stressed that it was the people's duty "to be holy even as Yahweh their God is holy" and this because they were indebted to Yahweh God for his goodness to them in giving them the land and their special status as his People. By becoming holy, pure and "clean", they would redeem the debt they owed to him for these his gracious acts. The continuing ritual of sacrifice in the Temple was one evident way to pay the debt, but adherence to the Code of Holiness and Purity was also paramount.

So it was that the rituals and practices of holiness, which had originally set Israel apart from the surrounding cultures and their pagan practices, now functioned more as taboos to maintain internal order and control. This ideological system of purity or impurity, what was kosher or unclean, applied to every sphere of their existence.<sup>5</sup> The Land was ritually tithed and the table was surrounded by dietary stipulations; the household was circumscribed by sexual taboo and strict health regulations while the sanctuary and the synagogue were kept pure through rules against idolatry and blasphemy and the intricacies of the priestly cult. No aspect of life escaped these controls and it was the Priestly caste who enforced them.

It was ritual purity which had become, by the first century of our era, the determining principle in the division of Jewish society into classes.<sup>6</sup> The Priests controlled the Debt system both through the oversight of the sacrificial cult and through the collection of tithes, both understood to be channels through which the debt owed to God could be recompensed. The Jerusalem-based Sadducean party of priests maintained that the people of the land were so impure that the Holiness Code could only apply to themselves whilst the liberal Pharisees sought to gain a power-base for themselves outside the capital by enjoining all to participate in the quest for Holiness and kosher-cleanliness. Yet in seeking to be the friend of the poor, the Pharisees only increased the burden upon the peasantry by requiring them to obey the Codes to the furthest extent when clearly they were in no position to do so. The poverty of the peasants' subsistence farming and the oppressive burden of Roman tax and Levitical tithe all combined to make them detest the Pharisees' imposition of the Sabbath upon them since according to this legislation they were no longer allowed to work on the seventh day in order to make the income to pay off their increasing debt burden. This was a Catch 22 situation if ever there was one.

The hope was that the Jubilee Year of Release would set things straight every fifty years, but here again things had worked heavily to the detriment of the poor Palestinian

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<sup>5</sup> See Fernando Belo *A Materialist Reading of the gospel of Mark*, Maryknoll 1981

<sup>6</sup> See Oppenheimer., *The 'Am Ha-aretz. A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period.* Brill 1977

peasants. Because they were no longer allowed to work on Sabbath Days or Sabbath Years, the peasants were made increasingly dependant upon loans. These loans were not however readily available as the fiftieth year approached, for no money lender would lend at credit knowing that the debt would automatically be cancelled within a year or so. It was the famous Pharisee, the Rabbi Hillel, who therefore attempted to introduce a sliding scale system which he called the *Prosbul*, which by-passed the requirements of the Law of the Jubilee Release Year for lending purposes.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty was however that, just as with modern attempts to reschedule so-called Third World Debt by the IMF and World Bank, this only offered short term relief in exchange for long-term penury, and extinguished any merciful light at the end of the tunnel for the debtor.

As the poverty struck deeper and deeper, so the Sabbath Laws became more oppressive to the peasantry and the Temple, dominated by the priestly classes represented no longer the central store house for a re-distributive system of tithes but came to stand for the massive accumulation of capital wealth in the land. The Temple increasingly came to represent the “System” and the Jewish aristocracy - so much so that the peasants were not at all surprised when Herod the Great put an eagle, the Roman symbol of domination, over the gate of his fine new Temple.

### **3. Jesus identifies himself with Jubilee**

It is into this world of increased debt burden upon the peasantry and the abuse of the Sabbath Rest and Jubilee Release regulations as a means of their subjugation, that Our Lord comes. And at the very heart of the Good News which Jesus proclaims is the declaration of Jubilee Release from sin and debt and the plea for an awareness that the Sabbath brings the promise of healing and freedom, not hierarchical control. He offers

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<sup>7</sup> Horsley and Hanson: *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the time of Jesus*” Winston 1985 p59ff

atonement and holiness which are no longer bound to codes but offered through God's boundless, gracious generosity.

So it is that Jesus inaugurates his Kingdom and he speaks of it in Jubilee terms. But his Jubilee release is not to be one which is enacted each fifty years but is understood as a continuing state of mind (a *metanoia*, repentance) and as a new society where God's will is always done on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom he speaks of is a lasting celebration of the Year of the Lord's favour as "he takes away the sins of the world" [John 1 verse 29] and reconciles us with God the Father into an intimate harmony and holy communion [John 17 verses 21-23]

In each of the Synoptic Gospels too this Kingdom focus is very clearly spelt out as the crux of Jesus' teaching. In Mark's Gospel chapter 1 verses 14-15 Jesus proclaims his message in these terms: "The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent, and believe the gospel." In Matthew's account [chapter 4 verse 23] Jesus "travelled throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom..." But it is in Luke's narrative that the connection between the Kingdom of God and the Jubilee of Release is most succinctly drawn. For here we see Jesus, in chapter 4 verses 14-21, returning to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and reading from the Jubilee prophecy of Isaiah and proclaiming that in his own ministry the Jubilee Kingdom has arrived. He "was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the scroll and found the passage which says, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. He began to address them: 'Today', he said, 'in your hearing this text has come true.' There was general approval; they were astonished that words of such grace should fall from his lips." [Luke 4 verses 17-22]

In the Nazareth synagogue Jesus has selectively quoted the words of the prophet Isaiah, recorded in chapter 61, verses 1-2, (carefully leaving out the sentence referring to God's vengeance) so as to indicate that his platform is based upon the Jubilee release and the restoration of God's people. He has added in some words from chapter 58 verse 6 just to rub home the message that in his Kingdom it is freedom from all oppression that marks this gracious new time. And the local folk, on hearing him proclaim "the Year of the Lord's favour", a key Jubilee phrase, approve his gracious words.

A little later, he goes on, however, to announce that this promised Jubilee Release is promised by him not merely for those of Jewish ancestry but is to be a liberation "for all the nations." At this inclusivity they are not so approving, and become quite aggressive. They still see the Kingdom in terms of the domination to which they had become accustomed and cannot fully adopt the graciousness of the new mind-set (*metanoia* repentance) which this Kingdom release requires. But despite the opposition which this proclamation of freedom arouses<sup>8</sup>, he nevertheless proclaims the Jubilee 'Year of the Lord's favour' in no uncertain terms, and from then on takes it as his very model for his institution of the Kingdom of God. Thereafter, the gospel accounts set about narrating evidence of the fact that in the ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus we see the Jubilee release breaking in as his Kingdom is inaugurated.

The evangelists recount many episodes of men, women and children being released, at the hand of Jesus, from the constraints of illness and often these take place on the Sabbath and sometimes even in the synagogue to display how both the law and the liturgy partake of the release the Lord brings to his people. The hungry are fed repeatedly; both Jew and gentile are brought within the accepting, therapeutic community; the eyes of the blind are opened to awareness; and the ears of the deaf unstopped. In all this a new mind, a *metanoia* repentance, is called for as the Kingdom of Release is proclaimed as God's initiative - his gift to his people - to be received with thanksgiving. And throughout this manifestation of the marks of the Kingdom of God, Jesus proclaims the necessity for

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Fear of Freedom, Eric Fromm London, 1942

self-giving and sacrifice. He finally ends his life lifted up on the cross for all to see and marvel at, and through this self-giving act the underlying love on which the Kingdom of God is built is profoundly made manifest.

And we are taken up into the reconciliation which this life and death proclaim by being made one with him in this death: by virtue of the sacraments he leaves us, by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit with which he surrounds us, and by virtue of our living out the Jubilee day by day in the power of the resurrection, for his sake and the sake of his creation.

#### **4. The Structural Nature of Sin**

When we read the New Testament with Jubilee eyes we see the Release which is brought by the Sabbath Year of the Lord's favour writ large in the parables and beatitudes and in so many aspects of his teaching and ministry that we are summoned to repentance - to a *metanoia* - a new awareness and appreciation of how our relationship to God and to one another should be expressed. And this awakening in us, if we hear the biblical message aright, is not a call only to personal repentance but to social, national and collective repentance and reparation too. When Zacchaeus is welcomed into the Kingdom by Jesus [Luke 19 verses 1-10] he immediately sees that since he has now experienced Jubilee Release, he must in turn release those he has made indebted to him. He recognises that his own release is truly as an individual but is not individualistic or private. If he is now free then he is at liberty to become a full and responsible member of the society from which he had felt so outcast as a tax-gatherer. The released human being is not alone, but reconciled to God and to his or her fellow creatures in society, fellowship and community. Through Jubilee Release and forgiveness the individual is thus made a component of an even greater whole - their community. If the individual is to live in a state of salvation then that individual must enter into the fellowship [*koinonia*] of the Kingdom and must respond not merely as an individual to God's gift of freedom but respond as a responsible member of the wider saved community.

More than this, that response will recognise that the powers which seek to constrain and imprison us and which try to deny to us God's gift of release, are more than the power of the individuals involved. As the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world..." [chapter 6 verse 12. King James Version] For, to use a modern analogy, just as when the components of a television are put together they form something which is altogether in another league from the power they have separately, so also the powers of the structures, institutions and relationships we build as human beings take on an authority and might far greater than we know how to control. For this reason St Matthew's gospel relates how at the death of Christ on the cross the earth itself moves and quakes, and history itself is shaken to the core. In this way, Matthew expresses how the life, death and resurrection of Our Lord saves not only individuals but also addresses the fallen structures of our institutions, our formal relationships and our collective abuse of his creation. At the saving death of Christ, both individual persons and the very earth itself is shaken to the core and reconstituted.

So it is that Jesus inaugurates not simply a new experience of salvation for his individual children but a "Kingdom", a political entity no less - a liberated fellowship - in which God's will actually reigns supreme across all the complexity of interpersonal and societal relationship. Thus the forgiveness of sin and debt which his Jubilee release ushers in is not only to be expressed in the lives of those he saves but also made manifest in the structures of his new society. When his Kingdom comes, his will is done "in earth" as it is in heaven - and even the earth's ecosystem finds its salvation. The Lord's Prayer could never have begun "My Father in Heaven..." since such an individualistic notion of salvation could not lead into the petition that God's Kingdom should come<sup>9</sup>. The individualisation of the concept of salvation is not true to the biblical account of Jesus' ministry or teaching but is a notion which is more in keeping with the ideology of our own fallen western society.

So it is that Jesus' teaching and ministry address not only the sin and debt of individuals but also the sinful structures which enslave them. This is typical of the Leviticus Holiness Code, for there the divine injunctions which issue in personal holiness, in turn find expression the wider society as a communal integrity tempered with the mercy and compassion that gives the word "society" its content. Likewise personal righteousness is mirrored in the justice of the right relationships which must prevail in the Kingdom Jubilee society.

It is as well to notice also that Jesus' Jubilee proclamation is aimed not so much at sinners as at those who are sinned against. It is because sin can become structural that it produces social inequalities and for this reason society will need periodic restructuring so that the poor, broken-hearted, the captives, the blind and the oppressed can go free. The Kingdom *metanoia* repentance will reorganise the sinful structures that oppress rather than oppress yet further those who sin. The sinner and the sinned-against are both somewhat captive to the fallen structures in which they operate, but God's forgiveness and release operate thereafter at the levels of both personal and structural sin so that all may find release. This was the underlying principle of the original Levitical Jubilee codes.

## **5. Jesus engages the structures of Sin**

So the actions and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels address the personal sin, guilts and debts of individuals who come to him, but also the structures of the society that enslave them all. Let us now look at some examples of how he puts into action the release which he proclaimed in his Jubilee Kingdom preaching.

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<sup>9</sup> cf. St Cyprian on the Lord's Prayer. "When we pray it is not as an individual but as a united people, for we are indeed all one." On the Lord's Prayer 8.

We must remember that when Jesus encountered sick people they would have thought of their illness as the consequence of sin - either their own sin or that of their forebears. The only way that illness could be totally cured was therefore for the originating sin to be forgiven, or in other words, for the debt of their unholiness to be remitted. All this was related in the popular mind with the Purity Codes which understood the sin to have issued in the illness and both sin and illness were thus seen as causes and signs of impurity, that is, distance from the holiness of the creator. Not to be clean or pure was to be profane and therefore outcast, whereas the holy or sacred was whole and sinless and therefore rightfully belonged within the community.

So when a man with leprosy came to Jesus for cleansing the code made it perfectly clear that the debt and moral impurity must have been very great to issue in an illness so contagious that anyone touching the leper would themselves become also impure and contaminated, probably issuing in their own infection both with the disease and the guilt it signified. We therefore more easily understand why it is with anger that Jesus responds to the leper when he comes to him wondering whether Jesus will want to cure him of his illness and release him from its causal debt of sin.. [Mark 1 verse 40f] far from not wishing it, Jesus yearns for the Jubilee release to be manifested in him. It is recorded that Jesus actually touched him and that far from being contaminated by the leper, the leper received healing by his touch and thus was welcomed again into the community. He is sent away by Jesus to be acknowledged by the priests as clean and pure according to the codes, but it is clear that this is only to certify a healing and wholeness that is already evident.

This simple healing makes a simple point which is then reiterated and enlarged upon immediately by the narrative which follows. At the beginning of the second chapter, Mark records that a paralysed man is then brought to Jesus by friends for healing and there is such a crowd in order to get to him they have to break up the roof and let the paralysed man down to Jesus on his stretcher. Jesus responds by going straight to what it is which binds the paralysed man to the bed. It is the burden of sin, the heaviness of his

debt to God, which immobilises him. But as Jesus pronounces the man's sins forgiven some scribes, whose responsibility it is to interpret the codes to the people, accuse Jesus of usurping the authority which only God can have, since the debt of sin which caused the illness is owed to God alone. Jesus proves his authority by asking the man now to walk, and in doing so usurps not God's prerogative but the authority which the priests had taken upon themselves to pronounce what was clean and what sin or debt was to remain unforgiven. But Jesus is now seen not merely to have alleviated the debt but to have totally forgiven it. This is not simply a remission but a lasting transformation. He is asked by Jesus to demonstrate that the full release has occurred by taking up his own bed and carrying it. By doing so he is made to demonstrate that his debt of sin is so completely expunged that he is no longer dependent, not even upon those who in the past were good enough to carry him. This is not some form of rescheduling of the debt but it is the total release and forgiveness of which Deuteronomy and Leviticus speak where the structures which bind are remitted rather than merely their consequences.

Jesus has restored the man to wholeness, to the community, and to self-reliance, and so has wrested from the scribal and priestly class their authority on earth to release from debt and sin and has declared it to be the free gift of Yahweh. He then goes straight out to take table-fellowship with other sinners and so demonstrates again that to forgive one has to engage, and that forgiveness is at the very core of the nature of the God who has sent him to his people.

It is just such table-fellowship in which Jesus engages with Zacchaeus the tax-collector. [see Luke 19 verses 1-10] It is a cause for sorrow that in our modern society fewer families gather together around the table for their meals, but it remains true that table hospitality continues to be one of the fundamental signs of fellowship in the near east. In making it very clear that Jesus was pleased to share in this intimate way with a sinner at his table he signalled that in the Kingdom the old taboos about food and company were no longer applicable. All were now welcomed in, and the bigger the debt the more

spectacular would be the remission<sup>10</sup> - such hospitality even being inclusive of women and outcasts of other races. On meeting Jesus, this sense of his own forgiveness and release is so great that Zacchaeus engages immediately in the Kingdom agenda of forgiveness and emission for others and for the structures that hold them beholden and bound to him. He enacts the Holiness Code of release by paying back what the system has allowed him to gain over others. And on seeing this *metanoia* repentance, Jesus then welcomes him as a “Son of Abraham”, as one who is truly saved through grace and has returned to his ancestral inheritance as the Holiness Code dictates.

It is today being argued that the new regime in South Africa should not be expected to be responsible for the debt incurred by a former and very different regime. In the time of Jesus however it was considered natural that the sin of one generation would be visited upon the next. So when, as recorded in John’s Gospel chapter 9, Jesus meets a man who had been blind from birth, the question with which he was confronted was, “Rabbi, why was this man born blind? Who sinned, this man or his parents?” [verse 2] Jesus counters by saying that it simply is not the point to argue about fault. The glory is that he is to be healed and the debt of sin, whoever it might belong to, is to be forgiven. From being cut off from the wider community by sin and debt, he is healed and liberated into his future so that he himself can be the subject of his own history and not merely the object of another’s credit. (How pertinent this reply is to our South African situation) In verse 41 Jesus addresses the accusing Pharisees and explains that their real guilt is that they are more aware of their responsibility in this matter than they pretend. If they had been less aware of what they were doing then they too could be forgiven but, says Jesus, “Because you claim to see, your guilt remains.” They had taken a Law which had been designed to foster justice and used it as a means to drive the poor into yet further subjugation.

So Jesus proclaims in word and action that the future is given back to his children, that their guilt and debt are released and the broken victims go free. The repentance and

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Luke 5 verse 31 & Luke 7 verse 47 Only the sick needing a physician & woman who serves at table

reparation of the *Yom Kippur* atonement day is stated in both word and deed, the *Jubel* ram's horn is sounded and the Jubilee enacted. The Kingdom of God is at hand indeed!

## **6. What then must we do?**

*“The Kingdom is both experience and hope - experience of forgiveness, of transforming love and of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit; hope of fulfilment in the midst of the frustrations, fragmentations and ambiguities of history, in the midst of suffering and death.*

*“While we walk with this experience and this hope, we are called to provoke temporary and partial jubilees, “moments of justice”, here and there, in the Church and in society. Even if the world is resistant and the Church frequently opaque, we must not let the dream go stale. Because when we dream, it is God who dreams in us. Our mission is to inaugurate new ways, new experiments, new signs of the coming Kingdom. And we are called to start with ourselves and with the Church, adventuring in new styles of life, new gestures, new beginnings.”*

So writes Aloys Opiyo<sup>11</sup> in an article in which he spells out why he sees a relationship between the Kingdom Jubilee which Jesus proclaimed and our own confrontation with the international debt of the poor countries as the third millennium approaches.

It is certainly clear from the recorded teaching of Jesus that he did not expect his followers to be passive in the fight against sin and debt but to engage both with its symptoms and its causes, in ourselves, one another and in our society. In the Lord's Prayer, for example, he teaches us to say: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” [Matthew 6, verse 12, King James' Version] Likewise, in Matthew 25 verses

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11 Aloys Opiyo Towards a Just Millennium in The Millennium Jubilee CAFOD 1996 p.35.

31-46, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats thereby making it evident that we are to be judged according to our response to the generosity of God in his being in the world in the lives of the hungry, thirsty, homeless alien, naked, ill, and the prisoner. In response to the Christ event we are now expected to play our part in the Jubilee way of life and seek to transform the world of sin through enacting passionate Signs of the Kingdom. Our engagement with the powerful structures of sin and debt in the world will be the authenticating signs of our own salvation. As committed Christians there is now simply no way that we can allow ourselves or our churches to await the Kingdom's consummation in "idleness, destructive consumerism and social irresponsibility, but by caring behaviour and responsible stewardship."<sup>12</sup>

The Early Christian Church sought to rise to this challenge and we read in Acts chapter 4 verse 34 that, "there was never a needy person among them, because those who had property in land or houses would sell it, bring the proceeds of the sale, and lay them at the feet of the apostles, to be distributed to any who were in need." We may feel that the Church today is more like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who was more concerned with his own well-being and inheritance than with freedom and release for his brother. But the Church is called to be the privileged instrument of the Kingdom, participating in the breaking in upon history of the liberating will of God. We should therefore be in the forefront of every call to see sin and debt released from those who are down-trodden by it, and in our age we have a striking example of just such a need that we cannot remain silent.

As the twentieth century draws to a close we are confronted by one of the most heinous assaults on the poor ever known in history, and from which each citizen of the rich countries of the world significantly benefits to the detriment of the poor. It is a new form of slavery or bondage, which was initiated when very cheap and substantial loans were cultivated among poor developing countries by the owners of petro-dollars. This surplus petro-dollar capital derived from the super-abundance of oil in the world market, and rich

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid* .

bankers became keen to find any opportunity of reinvestment of these surplus moneys, even at comparatively low rates of interest. However, with the world oil crisis of 1982, these petro-dollars dried up whereupon the debtors saw their future dry up too as the financial conditions under which they had incurred the loans changed radically in favour of the rich creditors. According to World Bank figures, this indebtedness by the poor to the rich world now stands at more than two thousand billion dollars, and despite all their attempts to repay such heavy loans, they are finding the task impossible. The debts are still rising because, among other things, changes in the currency values are manipulated to the advantage of the rich countries so that, although the poor countries produce more today than in past years, they receive less additional income for their exertions. It is indeed a form of slavery. In 1995 for example, the developing countries were due to pay \$1 billion more to the International Monetary Fund than they were due to receive from it, even though such a transfer of wealth to the rich contravenes the IMF's purposes.

The rich countries through the IMF and the World Bank, together with their influential control of the Paris and London Clubs, are aware that it is not in their own financial interest to squeeze the poor world until they suffocate and so they themselves are beginning to speak of restructuring the debts so that the immediate burden is lifted a little. How very alike this is to Rabbi Hillel's *prosbol* restructuring of the Jubilee release from debt that we considered as we studied the Levitical texts. Just as then, so the IMF's proposal to re-finance old loans with new loans merely pushes the poor into a no-hope, long-term commitment to be enslaved to a debt that they know they can never pay. As with the man born blind who met Jesus, there is much argument as to whether the debts were incurred by the present generation of the poor or were wished upon them by previous regimes, but while that debate rages, the grave need for remission escalates. In Africa, for example, spending on health care is just a quarter of that now spent on debt repayment, with AIDS education, clean drains, lavatories and water pushed into subservience to the priority of servicing the debt to the rich world.

The way in which the rich world manages the debt is itself a grotesque replay of the way in which the priests and Pharisees of first century Palestine used debt to keep their peasants subservient and quietened. If a poor country asks for help or remission, it is visited and advised by the world's rich bankers, through the Bretton Woods institutions<sup>13</sup>, and made to reorganise their economic strategies internally and externally. Only if they abide by these stringent monetarist conditions are they given assistance, but the price is very high. Usually it is demanded of them that they cut back on expenditure on vital services such as education and health and devalue their currency which in turn increases the costs of imported medicines and food.

When rich countries offer loans they naturally incline towards assisting countries that are stable, but this often means that dictatorships are preferred to democracies which, by definition, must be less stable due to electoral changeability of government. The United Kingdom has therefore lent more to Nigeria than any other country and Mr. Abacha, its dictator, is known now to owe us more than 2.2 billion dollars.

In addition to a preference for dictatorships, the rich countries usually tie their loans, so that only specified goods can be purchased with the money, usually of course to be spent in the country from which the loan originated. It is interesting to note that for this very reason, no less than 96% of debt owed to Great Britain by the poorest countries of the world is owed to our Export Credits Department! It has also been noted that the goods which the credited countries are expected to purchase with the loans are often at substantially higher cost than would otherwise be available on the open international market.

It is this slavery to International Debt which stands head and shoulders above other forms of contemporary oppression and which comes most obviously to mind when we compare today's issues with the theological and ideological engagement of Jesus in his day. International Debt is crying out for justice and above all Release. There are, of course,

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<sup>13</sup> The Bretton Woods Institutions are the International Monetary Fund & the World Bank, so named

many other examples of structural sin evident today but I suspect that by engaging in this most obvious of strangleholds on the world's poor we will in turn be taught to become more sensitive to other forms of oppression both at home and abroad. Engagement with this issue will raise our social awareness of the nature of our corporate sinfulness and bring us that *metanoia* repentance of which Christ spoke repeatedly. We will become more aware of the burden of debt shouldered by the poor of our own land, by the squalor in which many are expected to live and bring up their families, by the alienation and fragmentation in our own society, and above all, we will become more aware of the underlying debt of sin that upholds these conditions. Once that repentance is forthcoming it then becomes much more possible to seek out the causes and act accordingly. This is Kingdom awareness and Kingdom Release action.

## **6. Some Ready Responses**

As we approach the Millennium celebrations, Christians and other people of goodwill are together pressing for a remission of the international debt owed by the poor to the rich countries of the world. This would indeed be a fitting Jubilee to celebrate 2000 years of our era.

The organisation *Jubilee 2000* is mobilising forces to co-ordinate with sister organisations around the world, calling for remission of all “inert debt” incurred since 1973 in those years of the oil decade when loans were pressed in expectation that they would be wisely used and that rates of interest would remain low. Jubilee 2000 offers careful calculations of what precisely counts as such “inert debt” and how we can measure “ability to pay”. They hope to see a massive international petition, possibly in June 1997, allied to a massive publicity drive on the issue. Jubilee 2000 welcomes new supporters and can be contacted at P.O.Box 100, London SE1 7RT. (0171 523 2169/2171)

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because they were initiated at the Bretton Woods Conference 1944

The Pope has written an apostolic letter entitled *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* which looks to the turn of the millennium as a great opportunity to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. In Paragraph 51 he exhorts Christians “to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not cancelling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations.” The Pope then sets out an agenda for the three years running up to the year 2000 AD in which Christians study in turn the three persons of the Holy Trinity with the year itself designated as a Eucharistic year of sharing.

Many other initiatives, great and small, will also be crucial to the overall success of this Jubilee mission. The influence of the United Nations is being sought and the British government is considering how to respond to the requests for debt remission. The Anglican Church is hard at work in South Africa and Britain and the timely Lambeth Conference of all Anglican bishops, planned for 1998, intends to speak out on the issue. Already the General Synod of the Church of England at its meeting in November 1996 has thoroughly endorsed the campaign of *Jubilee 2000*, and ‘Churches Together in England’ are forging proposals to further the work.

The new President of the World Bank, Mr James Wolfensohn, together with his IMF colleagues, are presenting proposals to member states for a scheme to remit the multilateral state debts of highly indebted poor countries, and the World Bank has pledged \$500 million to start the project, the IMF indicating a similar amount. Huw Evans, the British Executive Director of the World Bank and IMF has already announced, “I am pushing hard to secure progress. I believe we are making good inroads into this problem but we all need to go on pushing.”

Everywhere educational work is being done and key personnel in the media are being asked to concern themselves with the issue. Many Christian caring organisations are gearing themselves up to look again at the part debt plays in the particular issue upon

which they focus and are even now producing study material and action programmes to assist us. Efforts are being made to clean up our language about the issue, questions being raised about the suitability of the term “Third World” for that part of our human family in most financial need.

It is exciting to feel that there is a possibility that the voice of the world’s poor may be heard as the twentieth century draws to an end and although we may find it difficult to accept, in return for these initiatives the poor countries of the world will bestow upon us many gifts and privileges. First, they will give us who are rich a new realisation of the truth about ourselves and the basis of our wealth. This is the first stage on the road to *metanoia* repentance. Second, they may well forgive us as we release their debts. So a two-way mutuality of release will occur. Third, they will renew our vision of the world as a place where simplicity, solidarity and compassion can have pride of place. And finally, as the parable of the sheep and the goats promises, they will help us see God in the poor.<sup>14</sup>

## **7. Some Preliminary Conclusions**

1. The Holiness Code of the Old Testament was visionary but in a time of great inequality was used as an oppressive tool to keep poor peasants indebted. We must pray for the awareness which Jesus clearly had which will allow us to see when systems that on the surface are there to assist become themselves institutions which mar the face of God in his creation.
2. We cannot remain comfortable with personal salvation if we do not go on to fulfil the second clause of the great petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors.*”

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<sup>14</sup> These four elements are taken from the writings of Jon Sobrino SJ. See his article Jubilee: An Appeal to Conversion in *The Millennium Jubilee* CAFOD 1996 p.72ff.

3. Jesus takes the Jubilee Year of the Lord's Favour from the Hebrew Scriptures and identifies his Kingdom with its compassion and justice. This is however a new mind-set, a *metanoia* repentance, which is not only to be celebrated in every fiftieth year but must inform us constantly as we seek to bring integrity and holiness to society. Although the Millennium is an ideal opportunity to enact a year of compassionate Release, every waking moment should be a Jubilee and this millennium initiative a Sign of a growing awareness of structural sin and the thrall of its debt and oppression wherever it holds sway.
  
4. Let us learn from our biblical enquiry that there can be no Holiness nor full Salvation without the commitment to enact the requirements of his liberation, justice and compassion in society. Jesus has inaugurated his Kingdom and we must live it to the full.
  
5. A fulfilled Christian life will hold in balance the spirituality of the inward journey of prayer and devotion on the one hand and the outward, apostolic journey of effectual love for our neighbour. In recent years the Christian Church has concentrated remarkably well on the first of these elements - to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. This Jubilee study should draw our attention afresh to our need to find effective ways to love our neighbour with as much vigour and determination as we love our selves.

8600 words

Second Draft

+Laurie Green

Bishop of Bradwell

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