

5 CREATION CARE IS – JUBILEE MISSION

In the coming century, global sea levels are predicted to rise by up to three feet, threatening regions at or below sea level, such as Pacific islands, much of Bangladesh, the Nile delta in Egypt, the Netherlands, and even East Anglia and the Thames estuary in Britain. Storm surges – like the one that drowned more than 300 people in eastern England and 1,800 in the Netherlands in January 1953 – are likely to be much more frequent and catastrophic. The population of Bangladesh will double as its land surface halves.

“Inevitably the poor are picking up the tab. The poor are there when the hurricane hits, when the tornado comes, when freak weather conditions are there. Ninety eight percent of those killed and affected by natural disaster come from developing countries”

(Elaine Storkey)

Introduction

Hidden away in the largely unread depths of the Old Testament a jewel has long waited to be discovered. And that's what is beginning to happen as we search for new models of spirituality and mission which take seriously a vital responsibility for our environment. Whether or not this Old Testament 'jewel' ever found practical expression in Jewish life is unclear but that's an argument we can safely leave to the scholars. It's time now to pull it into the open, to catch its inspiration and to explore its potential for a firm commitment to the whole of creation.

We're talking, essentially, about the book of Leviticus chapter 25 and the wonderful concept of 'jubilee'. As it stands, the chapter calls for:

- a complete rest for the land one year in every seven
- a year of freedom and restoration every 50 years (or is it 49?)
- the cost of land, property and people (slaves) to be determined by this principle of freedom and restoration
- an understanding that harvest, fruitfulness and yield are related to spiritual integrity
- a radical new concept of ownership to change the way we use words like 'my' and 'mine'
- a commitment to take full account of the poor — in terms of care and provision

In other words, there are two overall challenges in Leviticus 25:
i to accept that commitment to God, to justice and to creation are inseparable
ii to be imaginative in the way we put that acceptance into practice.

It's a matter of:

- a taking God seriously
- b treating other people with full respect
- c offering special consideration to the poorest and most vulnerable
- d handling the whole of creation with selfless and long-term sensitivity

“Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God.” (*Leviticus 25: 17*)

I ask readers to consider with me what Jubilee means – politically, economically, and morally – for all of us, not only over-50 individuals but families, religious congregations, institutions, and nations. I ask how living the jubilee might affect our schooling, our economies, our families. I ask how it might affect the prisoners in our jails and the children on our streets.”

(*Maria Harris, Proclaiming Jubilee! A Spirituality for the 21st Century Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, p.2*)

Of course the word ‘jubilee’ is not new. It's been around for 3,000 years. But what may be new is a serious attempt to practise something like jubilee as it appears in Leviticus 25 (and as it is subsequently taken up by Isaiah and Jesus) with particular reference to the environment.

“Where human beings once exploited nature thoughtlessly or in the belief that no great harm could be done to the environment, the 20th century is leaving us with a transforming of such unconsciousness. We now recognise we have an intimate connection with air, water, soil, fire, everything...” (*Harris, 8*)

What is jubilee?

Let's take time first to read Leviticus 25 so that we can follow what we're talking about. In his description of ‘jubilee’, Chris Wright (*The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*) describes how the Jewish exodus from Egypt included vital principles of economic and social justice, freedom from oppression and appropriate acknowledgement of God. These were principles, which the Israelites were to adopt as a way of life, and it's this ongoing life of the people of God, which lies, at the heart of jubilee. They had experienced an amazing rescue from ruthless Egyptian exploitation and the Lord had led them into their own land. It was essential now to put procedures in place that would ensure they did not inflict another chapter of suffering on each other or on anyone else. And jubilee would be a brilliant way of doing this.

The exodus had spelt ‘redemption’; jubilee would spell ‘restoration’. The exodus was a one-off event; jubilee was to be a continuing way of life. The exodus created a people who revelled in being ‘redeemed’” jubilee produced an inescapable bottom line for the redeemed, “...the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants” (Lev 25: 23). Jubilee wrote humility into gratitude: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God” (Lev 25: 38). It made creation care central to covenant obedience: “The land itself must observe a Sabbath to the Lord” (Lev 25: 2).

In other words, jubilee throws down a challenge with a direct bearing on economic systems, social justice and religious integrity. It holds out to those most in need a double-pronged hope of change: for release and freedom (Lev 25: 35-43) and return and restoration (Lev 25: 13, 25-28).

“Optimism beats fear or despair anytime. There are excellent reasons to be encouraged. The global consciousness is higher at all levels. Revolutionary changes are taking place.” (*Amory Lovins, quoted in Guardian Weekend, 5 Jan 2008, p21*)

“...THE PENTAGON... SPENDS NEARLY A THIRD OF ITS VAST BUDGET ON MOVING TROOPS AND EQUIPMENT AROUND. IF IT INVESTED IN REALLY ENERGY EFFICIENT GOALS IN THE SAME WAY AS, SAY, IT INVESTED IN THE INTERNET, GPS AND CHIPS... IT WOULD SHIFT THE ENTIRE GLOBAL ENERGY LANDSCAPE. THE KNOCK-ON EFFECT WOULD TRANSFORM CIVILIAN CAR, TRUCK AND PLANE INDUSTRIES TOO. THE COST? ...ROUGHLY WHAT THE UK SPENDS ON ITS HEALTH SERVICE IN A YEAR.”
(FROM ‘AMORY LOVINS, PHYSICIST’, GUARDIAN WEEKEND, 5 JAN 2008, P21)

The biblical development of jubilee

The ‘jubilee’ described in Leviticus 25 has an important focus on the future. Chris Wright refers to its “built-in future dimension” (Wright, 300). There is little doubt that jubilee soon fell into disuse, even if it was ever put into practice, but its symbolism of hope and change continued to hold the imagination. We can see this at work in the prophecies of Isaiah and in their obvious importance to Jesus.

Isaiah

Isaiah 61 depicts the ministry of an anonymous servant of the Lord God, anointed for a wonderful ‘holistic’ mission which will demonstrate the nature of the kingship of God. The language of Isaiah 61 is jubilee language in terms of its announcement of the year of the Lord’s favour and its promise of release for the captives. Moreover, the vision of Isaiah 35 is for the transformation of nature which, somehow, is to express the wonder of the return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, through which God will vindicate himself and his people.

When we see how the jubilee vision and hope inspired prophetic passages such as Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61, with their beautiful integration of personal, social, physical, economic, political, international and spiritual realms, our own missional and ethical use of the jubilee must preserve a similar balance and integration, preventing us from putting asunder what God will ultimately join together.” (*Wright, 301*)

“BEHOLD HE COMES RIDING ON THE CLOUDS,
SHINING LIKE THE SUN AT THE TRUMPET CALL;
LIFT YOUR VOICE, IT’S THE YEAR OF JUBILEE,
AND OUT OF ZION’S HILL SALVATION COMES.”

FROM THE SONG:
THESE ARE THE DAYS OF ELIJAH

Jesus

When Jesus announced his own mission statement (Luke 4: 16-21), he did so in terms of a direct quotation from the very words of Isaiah 61 which were so strongly influenced by the concepts of jubilee. In this way he made it crystal clear that there would be what we have come to call a 'holistic' dimension to the mission of the kingdom which he inaugurated so vividly in word and deed. "His radical mission was the very mission of God found in the Old Testament proclamation of jubilee" (Hertig, quoted by Wright, 301).

"EXCESS AND DEFICIENCY ARE EQUALLY AT FAULT" (CONFUCIUS)
"HE WHO KNOWS HE HAS ENOUGH IS RICH" (TAO TE CHING)
"POOR, YET MAKING MANY RICH; HAVING NOTHING, AND YET POSSESSING
EVERYTHING" (PAUL)

How can we be a jubilee people?

This is a chance for the whole group to think creatively. It's always tempting to put too much material into a set of notes but here, at least, are some ideas which might stimulate imaginative thinking and should certainly fill whatever time you have available. They need a lot of fleshing out, but here goes:

- a Promote jubilee hope for the future**
- b Develop a jubilee spirituality of 'involvement' rather than 'withdrawal'**
- c Create a radical jubilee agenda**

- A Sabbath rest for creation
- A fresh impetus for 'community'
- A restored priority for the poorest and most vulnerable of the world
- A challenge to ownership, pocket, power, prayer, principles, resources, and energy
- A willingness to change

For example:

A group of university students came together at the end of their course and agreed a ten-point covenant. Take a look at three of the points which target justice and the environment and then have a go at producing your own 'community' covenant:

- To build businesses which emphasise the production and sale of affordable and durable goods and services in an ecologically and socially just manner, even if it means reduced profits and slower turnover of goods
- To promote community caring by 'buying local'; supporting renewable energy sources; recycling materials and organic wastes; not reducing biological or cultural diversity
- To support governments which help to ensure that our poorest and most vulnerable neighbours – at home and abroad – have enough food, clean water, clothing, shelter and political freedom to sustain health and to make a contribution to society.

"JUBILEE USHERS IN AN ERA OF FORGIVENESS, FREEDOM, JUSTICE, AND JUBILATION.
IT BEGINS, HOWEVER, WITH A NOT-DOING; THE DECISION TO PAUSE AND TO LET THE
LAND LIE FALLOW. IT BEGINS IN STILLNESS. IT BEGINS... WITH A SABBATH THAT
READIES US FOR THE NEXT DECADE, THE NEXT CENTURY, AND THE NEXT MILLENNIUM"
(HARRIS, 16)

And finally ...

- **What can a government do?**

Boost neglected renewable energies: solar, wave and tidal power. Properly fund and support renewable energies other than wind. These have vast potential to supply CO₂-free electricity but are under-developed. Oblige electricity supply companies to provide an increasing amount of their power from renewable sources.

- **What can we do?**

Use our own cotton shopping bags rather than plastic hand-outs from the supermarket. As we take small steps, green living stands a chance of becoming an instinctive and natural way of life.