

# The Theology of Jubilee

presented by The Rev. Dr. Monrelle Williams

At the very heart of the biblical understanding of God is the concept that God *is a God who does*: he is a God who intervenes in human affairs. God's intervention is usually for different purposes: it could be a salvific and liberative act on behalf of the oppressed, as in Exodus, or to bring judgment upon those who take advantage of others as we read in the Prophets.

Along with this concept there is a collection of laws in the Old Testament which reflect this understanding of God: they speak of God's continual intervention in the community to ensure that the precepts of his will and purpose for the community are maintained. These laws make very real the intervention of God in every day relationships within the community. In essence it can be claimed that God's intervention is never a haphazard affair; he never operates by chance. These laws reflect the will of God and ensure that every member of the community shared in the benefits produced within the community and that justice was distributed within the community.

It is in this context that the laws governing the year of Jubilee are to be understood. The year of Jubilee is closely related to the Sabbatical year. The Sabbatical year was the seventh year of the cycle and the Jubilee year was the year following the Sabbatical year. Both the demands of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year support the understanding of the law as God's intervention into the affairs of the community. These demands emphasize the need to continually organize and re-organize the community so that the will of God is always reflected and obeyed.

In Leviticus chapter 25 we find what is perhaps the most comprehensive of these laws governing the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The first seven verses contain the stipulations governing the Sabbatical year. The central stipulation requires that the land be left fallow during that year. In verses 8-55 we have the provisions for the Jubilee year: the liberation of those who are held in bondage like slaves and debtors, and the return of ancestral property to those who were forced to sell their property because of poverty.

These two demands are aimed at ensuring the type of systemic intervention into the dynamics of community to address the violations of the rights of the poor which occur in every socio-economic order devised by human beings. These demands strengthen the Old Testament concept of a God who intervenes. These provisions for the Jubilee year are an excellent model than can be used as a pattern for life in community. It is claimed that in the context of the Old Testament they were the ideal and were never observed, and that the context out of which the book of Leviticus emerges supports this notion. But even so, this model has serious implications for the better organization of life within a community.

The context of which Leviticus comes is one in which the Jewish community in Palestine is struggling to make ends meet. The community was made up of Jews who had returned from exile and who were determined to re-establish the community. In effect it was a community in crisis.

It is out of this context that the writer of Leviticus 25 laid down the demands of the Jubilee year. He saw the survival of the community as being linked to the demands of the Jubilee year. This is a significant observation because of the link between the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year. The Sabbatical year called for the land to be left idle for a year, and yet here were people struggling for food and land and the writer asking for the demands of the Sabbatical year.

But this is understandable if one recognizes the idea of the centrality of the land in the context of the Old Testament. Basic to the theology of the Old Testament is the importance of having a country (a land) to call one's own, and the need to struggle to gain this land and maintain it. The book of Joshua tells us of various attempts and struggles to get the land. What Leviticus 25 is doing is indicating some of the necessities for the land to be re-occupied and maintained. It is essentially dealing with the second struggle to occupy the land. He is therefore re-introducing the old understanding of the land as God's land which he has entrusted to Israel and hence the land must be treated with reverence; it must be rested every seven years. This is a demand which comes from the book of Exodus where it is said: "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you

shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your land may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat.” Leviticus 25: 6 says that the Sabbatical year “...shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired servant and the sojourner who lives with you.”

In effect it is saying that the food which grows naturally in the Sabbatical year is to be shared with the landless. Therefore there is here a link between God as the giver of the land and food for the poor and landless in the demands of the Sabbatical year. This was a model to which the community was called to aspire. This for him was an “*ought*” which placed the less than perfect conditions in his community in their true perspective.

So what happens in the Jubilee year is the taking over of the old laws from ancient Israel and the application of them to the struggling Jewish community of his day. It is a reminder to the community of the need to extend liberation to those in bondage of any kind. Jubilee declared that the members of the community without freedom deserved the right to experience freedom at some point in their lives and that this right was seen as deriving directly from God. The observance of Jubilee’s demands to free the slaves was also an expression of the deep-rooted conviction that God intervenes in history to set at liberty the oppressed. It also suggests that human freedom was never to be left to chance nor just to the good will of the slave owners. Rather, it was supported by the written law which ensured that those who had lost their freedom, or never experienced it, were given a chance to live as free persons. The “ought” here is saying that no member of the community should exist without the experience of freedom.

The second requirement of Jubilee is the return of ancestral property to those who were forced to sell. This is of course related to the importance of land ownership in the Old Testament. The land was a manifestation of God’s goodness and every Israelite had a right to ownership of a part of that land, and this takes us into the idea of yet another model. There are several places in the Old Testament where the violation of land rights of the vulnerable is condemned. The prophet Isaiah says: Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field until there is no room..... The prophet sees this as a violation of the

ancient right of each Israelite to the land. Micah also has injunctions against the violation of land rights of the vulnerable. (Micah 2: 1-2)

Therefore the Old Testament speaks not only of the condition of landlessness as a violation of the rights of those who are landless, but also as an affront to God who owns the land. Jubilee therefore becomes a response to the conditions of landlessness and seeks to reverse these conditions. It keeps ownership of land central to the experience of God's goodness.

The prophetic Isaiah, at a much later period, picks up this notion of Jubilee proclaiming: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the day of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. (Is. 61: 1-2)

This passage speaks to the total salvation of God's people: bodily, spiritually, individually and socially. It says that the messianic Jubilee has arrived. In a situation where morale is low, the prophet is projecting an ideal in the form of Jubilee: he is asking the community to respond to it. Those who were to experience this Jubilee were the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives and the prisoners: all those who were locked in the oppressive conditions of the community. Therefore the call for Jubilee is a call for a change in social conditions. These are all indicators of the dawning of the messianic age, an age born of the struggle between what *is* and what *ought* to be; the *now* and the *then*. The prophet is saying that when the messianic age dawns these things, these oppressive conditions, will cease to be.

This is the same context in which the writer of Luke's gospel must be understood as he has Jesus proclaiming yet again a Jubilee year. It is placed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry indicating his ministry as an experience of Jubilee: it is a breaking in of justice and righteousness into conditions of oppression and hopelessness. Again we have this proclamation of an ideal situation: that confrontation of what *is* with what *ought* to be.

In Luke, therefore, the proclamation of the Jubilee becomes the mandate for Jesus the Messiah, and secondly it represents the breaking in of the kingdom of God. Significantly,

therefore, God's kingdom and God's presence become identified with the transformation of the socio-economic and socio-political conditions of the community. What Luke seems to be indicating here is that the experience of Jubilee must be seen as an integral part of the eschatological experience to which all history is moving. It is something that has already broken in through the ministry of Jesus. John Yoder, in *The Politics of Jesus*, speaks of this as representing a "...visible socio-political and economic restructuring of relations among the people of God achieved by his intervention in the person of Jesus [p.36] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972)."

Significantly, none of these things which Jesus spoke about in that passage actually happened in his country during his lifetime. Hence again, this passage represents an ideal. But there is another critical dimension to this passage which we must not miss which maintains the understanding of God upon which the Jubilee is built. This passage shows God as a God that intervenes in the community to correct socio-economic and socio-political imbalances. Therefore, throughout Luke's gospel, we see Jesus constantly intervening in the lives of the poor and drawing them into the experience of the Kingdom of God as part of his ministry. This treatment of the poor and outcast becomes their experience of Jubilee, a foretaste of the experience in the Kingdom of God.

Understood as an act of Jubilee, Jesus' ministry becomes a dramatic act of God's liberative power at work. It links the experience of liberation with God's Kingdom and the need for intervention in the life of the community. Hence, human liberation is not something that will just happen naturally; it is something that must be interjected into the life of the community.

Any reading of the miracle stories and parables in Luke constitute some of the best examples of this understanding of the Jubilee: Jesus takes the initiative in the miracles whereas in the parables which are peculiar to Luke, one of the characters goes out of his way to take the initiative that would correct the imbalance. This is surely Luke's way of indicating that the ministry of Jubilee was at work in the ministry of Jesus. Think specifically of two well-known parables in Luke's gospel: the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and remember the idea that the Jubilee model is the ideal of what *ought* to be. Both these parables reflect

the *ought* rather than the *is*, and even though the parables do not speak directly to any specific economic or political condition, they carry implications for both. The parables could very well be explored along the lines of “inversion of power” for this is what Jubilee is all about.

In the first parable, the “Good Samaritan” the power rests in the hands of the Samaritan. This constitutes a dramatic reversal of power. The reality of life in Jesus’ time is that the Samaritan was in many ways an outcast for the Jew, but in the parable the Jew is de-powered and helpless. Salvation in its most concrete manifestation now rests not with the Jew but with the Samaritan. There is here an inversion of power, the type demanded by Jubilee, which is full of social and political implications.

Power in this parable is removed from the hand of the Jew to the Samaritan, but the Samaritan uses it not as the Jew would, but as a means of intervening into the life and condition of the wounded Jew. The action of the Samaritan supports the conviction of Jubilee: the conviction of the need for intervention to correct conditions of imbalance.

In the second parable the same conviction is present. Power rests in the hands of the father but he puts it at the disposal of his two sons. Although the prodigal misuses his, yet the father was prepared to put his power at the disposal of the son a second time. On this occasion he institutes a dramatic intervention into the life of his son. The father runs out to meet his son and throws a grand welcome home party for him. The life of the son is transformed through the intervention of his father.

But there is an inversion of power here as well, though not as dramatic as in the first parable. The destitute son is returned to his rightful place as heir and he experiences once again the benevolence of his father. The father, on the other hand, regains his son and his impaired status as father is restored. Both son and father experience an inversion and each is restored to his rightful place.

In both these parables Luke illustrates the transformation which the ministry of Jesus has ushered in. Conditions of powerlessness are transformed into conditions of power, thus indicating that the experiences of Jubilee are at work in the ministry of Jesus. The despised

Samaritan becomes a person of worth and a person who could exercise power, and the estranged son is restored to respectability within his family. The intervention of the father and the Samaritan restore balance to the imbalanced condition of the alienated son and the wounded Jew.

These parables reflect the *ought* of human relationships and are therefore true to the spirit of Jubilee. The tensions between Jew and Samaritan, restless son and compassionate father, were things quite relevant to Jesus' society. The gap between the ideals of Jubilee and the oppressive conditions of the landless poor were also a reality. The *ought*, as set out in Jubilee, was far removed from the *is* experienced each day by the poor. We could be tempted today in reading and hearing about Jubilee to dismiss it as a dream that never came true, but to do so would be to miss the nature of the biblical ideals. The biblical ideals are not dreams but challenges. The Jubilee is not a dream but a challenge. It is a challenge that needs to take seriously the conviction that there will always be the need for periodic interventions into the flow of the socio-economic life of the community so that the ills and the imbalances of the community can be rectified.

The demands of Jubilee are therefore enshrined in scripture. Those who wrote these demands looked forward to the time when the people of God would be living in communities controlled by the laws of love and compassion. The world seems as far away from this condition in our time as it was in the days of the biblical writers. But the hope of Jubilee lives on and it is a challenge to us in our time. It is a challenge that impels us to direct our attention to the weak and vulnerable in the community. The presupposition behind Jubilee is that there will be the weak and vulnerable in every human community and that they will need special attention. Jubilee is therefore a challenge which stands over the structures of the community: the social structure under which we live must be challenged and changed to reflect more fully God's justice. Jubilee, therefore, is a reminder that our human task is to deliberately and consciously work to ensure that what *is* is being guided toward what *ought* to be.

The Jubilee is a challenge to oppressive economic laws and structures. It demands the periodic examination of economic laws and structures in relation to the conditions of the

vulnerable in the community. There will always be a need to adjust the structures and systems on which economic life of any community is built.

One of the basic demands of Jubilee is the freedom of slaves and the remission of debts. The challenge is to release any members of the community who are caught in an economic stranglehold which gives to other persons ultimate control over their well-being. The premise upon which this challenge is built is one that insists on the value of human freedom and dignity, but denies anyone the right to have a perpetual economic stranglehold over their fellow human beings.

When we think of the economic structures of our modern world, we need to look at the many economic strongholds which enslave the vulnerable of the world. At the international level there is the economic grip which the developed world has on the Third World.

The countries of the Third World are constantly calling for a better deal in the international market place: it is a case where the ones who produce the bulk of the raw materials that keep the economic and social machinery of the developed world turning, are not necessarily the ones who are able to influence the rules of the game. The rules governing the price of commodities, their supply and demand are all set by the developed world. The countries of the Third World are disadvantaged in the market place.

This imbalance is made that more acute by the large debts which these countries owe to lending agencies in the developed world. This dependence which these countries have on the developed world raises questions about human freedom, integrity and sovereignty. This goes against the very spirit of Jubilee and creates bondage instead of liberation, slaves and debtors instead of free persons. As one scholar puts it "...heavy economic dependence can lead to and intensify other forms of external dependence – diplomatic; geopolitical; security; cultural; psychological and intellectual (William Demas, "Consolidating Our Independence: The Major Challenges for the West Indies", Paper delivered at the Institute of International Relations, St. Augustine, Trinidad June 1986, p.11)."



The kind of situation described here is one that requires drastic readjustment. In the context of Jubilee it indicates a need for intervention to correct the imbalance. It is a call to understand and grasp the spirit of Jubilee. Even as we meet today there are many countries locked into an international economic system in which they are invariably disadvantaged. The challenge of Jubilee, as directed to the economic laws and structures governing these countries, can therefore be seen to exist at two levels.

Initially there is the international level where small states are part of the international economic structures controlled by the developed nations. The need for Jubilee-like interventions to correct the imbalances which exist between the North and the South have been voiced over and over again. There is a need for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to make some dramatic changes in the way it relates to these poorer countries. It needs to articulate a monetary system which reflects the employment and development needs of people living in different material conditions, social conditions and cultural environments. This call is a reflection of the challenge of the Jubilee.

Those countries which are still caught in the slave/debtor trap need this change more than ever. The financing of the Third World development deficits and acute needs calls for a massively increased and qualitatively improved resources transfer that goes beyond the capacity of the IMF. The industrialized countries, both East and West, must recognize their obligations in this respect.

The call is therefore on for the international economic system to readjust the flow of international economic tide which is working to the disadvantage of poorer countries. This embraces the spirit of Jubilee. Economist, the late Wendell McClean, speaking to the situation in relation to islands in the Caribbean, made the point that “the call for a New International Economic Order is a call for the developed countries to be less selfish in their dealings with the Third World; that is, to be less capitalistic in their international economic relations (“Moving into Freedom”, Davis K [ed] edar Press 1977, p.77).” This is in effect a request that the businessmen in the developed capitalist world should display a greater generosity of spirit towards foreigners than they do towards their fellow citizens. It is also essentially a request that businessmen in the Third World should obtain more generous

treatment from their counterparts in the developed world than they are willing to accord to their fellow citizens.

This is a call for more equitable conditions which are a reflection of the *ought* rather than the types of interventions that will be necessary to bring about these conditions. The main concern here is to be the great need to redress the imbalances in the prevailing international economic order.

When viewed from the point of view of the challenge of Jubilee, the call for opportunities to the people for the acquisition of economic power and for access to social justice seems to be a call for the type of intervention that will bring an end to the slave/debtor conditions which may exist within the community. The acquisition of economic power which can bring with it a significant measure of dignity and liberation was one of the major expectations of the biblical Jubilee. The slaves and the debtors, who had lost this power and were at the mercy of other members of the community, were to be empowered and put on the road to the recovery of their worth and dignity. The Jubilee is intended to bring about a dramatic reversal in the present condition because it institutes a movement from economic bondage to economic freedom.

The freedom and the recovery of the dignity of the enslaved person cannot be left to the charitable good will of the rich and powerful. Rather, they are demanded in Jubilee laws governing the community. There seem to be two important points being made here which carry implications for the poorer nations of the world. The first point is about the danger of entrusting the poor and disadvantaged totally to the charitable good will of other members of the community. Those who formulated the Jubilee laws in Leviticus 25 were very well aware of the fact that this hardly ever brings the type of freedom and dignity that this group deserves and to which they are entitled. The law of Jubilee acknowledges the reality that persons in positions of power do not readily or naturally share their power with others. This is a harsh reality of human existence. This reality points to the necessity for periodic interventions into the economic systems to ensure the recovery of freedom and the dignity of the poor and the disadvantaged.

The second point is that, in the context of the poorer nations, the responsibility for these interventions will rest heavily on the shoulders of the government. While morality cannot be legislated, those who hold the reigns of government can at least institute policies that will save the economically vulnerable from being crushed out of existence. Even though morality cannot be legislated, its presence can be cultivated and encouraged.

The welfare of those who will most likely experience the harsher side of the economic laws and structures of the community is therefore never to be left to chance, to charitable institutions or the natural flow of the system. Neither should the escape of a few persons from poverty and hardship ever be cited as justification for not initiating a process that will work for the welfare of the majority who are trapped in the slave/debtor conditions of their community.

This latter point is important in the context of Jubilee. There are persons in some developing countries who started out in this debtor/slave condition and have moved on, and have acquired wealth and prestige. But several others are still trapped in the condition.

The Jubilee law, therefore, is not about making the condition of slavery more palatable and comfortable, but about abolishing it. The spirit of Jubilee is not so much about coping with socio-economic hurdles, but about removing them. The important bases upon which the individual's integrity was constructed within the community were to be rebuilt. The individual can only experience and maintain and enjoy the freedom granted if he/she is provided with a firm base upon which he/she could develop the means to maintain that freedom. Therefore the challenge of jubilee is not only about the granting of freedom but the creation of the conditions that will make it possible to maintain and experience genuine freedom. It is about the removal of the impediments to the creation of these conditions.

The intention of the jubilee is to challenge and to break the cycle of the poverty trap. The Leviticus passage (which has been the basis of our discussion) is primarily concerned with one particular condition that can become one of the greatest impediments to freedom. That is the condition of landlessness.

The concern here is not with the possession of a piece of real estate that one can call one's own, but the concern is about having the means to remove the impediments to genuine freedom. In Leviticus the possession of land represents the means. The Jubilee intervention to restore a person to the land is at the same time a restoration of the most important foundations upon which genuine freedom can be constructed.

Jubilee is therefore a challenge to provide people with the means whereby they will be able to maintain their dignity and integrity. The reality is that the dignity and integrity of the vulnerable can very easily be eroded. Therefore there is a need for periodic interventions into the socio-economic system to stop and reverse the erosion. But the intervention is at the same time the provision of the means whereby the vulnerable are able to stem the erosion. The restoration of land to the people places power at their disposal. It is this power that will prevent them from sliding back into the state of being without the means to safeguard their dignity and integrity. The lack of this power is one of the greatest impediments to genuine freedom.

Those who formulated the Jubilee laws were convinced that these rights did not just happen in the flow of community life. Those who found themselves in poverty could not easily extricate themselves; therefore, the need for jubilee intervention. The landless cannot depend on the welfare and good will of the landed. Walter Brueggemann, commenting on the facts of history and human nature as reflected in the laws of Jubilee, writes:

Landed people are tempted to create a sabbathless society in which land is never rested, debts never cancelled, slaves are never released, nothing is changed from the way it now is and has always been ("The Land", p.65).

What Jubilee is intended to do is to challenge the "landed" to transform the "now is" and "always has been" into the *ought*. We can go beyond this and say that it is a challenge to the set up the type of socio-economic mechanism in the community that will move the *ought* into reality and that will ensure that this transformation process is kept alive.

The challenge of Jubilee -- the eradication of poverty or even its reduction -- calls for decisive action: it calls for the decisive intervention into the flow of the socio-economic system. Jubilee rejects any notion that the poor and the disadvantaged in the community can improve their lot without giving them the socio-economic power to do so.

The biblical notion of Jubilee is very much a challenge for us today: it is a challenge to end the vicious cycle of poverty which is still at work in the world and to provide the vulnerable of the community with some socio-economic power to get themselves out of the poverty trap. It is a challenge to those who control the power in our world, especially those who control political power. It is a challenge to governments to be ever conscious of the need to break the poverty trap in which many of many are caught.

The best way to use power must surely be the manner in which Luke attributes to Jesus, a use which is firmly rooted in the biblical Jubilee:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the day of the Lord's favor (Luke. 4: 18-19).

What we need to be asking ourselves over the next few days is:

- Whether the biblical Jubilee can still function as a challenge to the socio-economic structures in our world?
- Do we see the need for periodic interventions in our societies that Jubilee envisages? And if we do, who do we think are responsible for these interventions?
- What would the poor and marginalized need if they are to grasp the opportunities that will enable them to recapture their worth and dignity?

(The Rev. Dr. Monrelle Williams was keynote speaker at the Jubilee Training Event held May 15-18, 2008 in Scottsdale, Arizona.)