

10.1 Jesus' Message of the Jubilee

The Poor in the Kingdom
Dangers of Wealth and Property
Covetousness
Jesus, Work and Rest

The theme of the Jubilee becomes central to the New Testament, and as such, central to our understanding of the nature of the gospel. In the central passage around which Luke builds his gospel and the Acts, Luke 4:18, Jesus declares his mission and as he does so, he inaugurates the Jubilee eternally.

Here Jesus declares his commission and ours, his gospel and ours. It was to be good news for the poor? But what could be good news to the poor? What is the master talking about? What is the content of the gospel?

He describes it as a proclamation of freedom, as a release from oppression, as the coming of a special year. What do these phrases mean? These are allusions and references to the Old Testament idea of the year of Jubilee. He is declaring that the Jubilee has come - forever. The rest from oppression, slavery is here, forever.

The scroll he had been given in this little synagogue in the little Jewish enclave of Nazareth, (amid so many foreign villages), contained a passage in Isaiah 61:1 - one of the servant songs, four prophecies about the coming Messiah (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). He speaks of the year of the Lord's favor. The Jews had been exiled because of their disobedience about this year. For 70 years the land was left fallow to recover from 490 years of use without rest. And their expectation was that when they returned, the land would again be blessed by God.

But the expectation was not fulfilled and 400 years of silence from God settled on the land as they awaited a Messiah. So when Jesus quotes this verse he is saying he is the Messiah, the one who brings the Jubilee.

Isa 49:8 calls this year, the time of my favour, the day of my salvation. This day would be a day of covenant, this day would be a day of restoration of the land. This day will be a day when captives, slaves, oppressed people will find their chains fall off. Paul in 2 Cor 6:2 tells us, *now is the acceptable time, now is the time of my favour*. We live in the now of the Jubilee. This is good news for the poor.

A Liberating Gospel

The command to blow the trumpet to announce the Jubilee has never ceased. Wherever we declare this good news we create the chaos of liberation, and with liberty comes celebration. Whenever people experience conversion, and the entrance of the Holy Spirit into their lives we find this great release of joy, this immersion in the Holy Spirit can be uncontainable. Whenever Jesus healed or delivered, whenever Pentecostal brothers and sisters heal or deliver there is unending joy.

This is also the reality of the bride of Christ, the historic church. I recall when I was setting up our first Protestant missionary apostolic order in New Zealand, tracking down a rotund Anglican Franciscan Friar. He was the epitome of what we consider St Francis was, always joking, enjoying life in the midst of chosen poverty. To be set free from slavery is surely to become a celebrating, worshipping, joy-filled person. The Jewish calendar had three and then four holidays where people were to celebrate. In a schizophrenic post-modern society epitomised by Madonna, how desperate is the need of true celebration. And indeed the Sunday worship and feasting of our four thousand churches reverberates weekly through our communities in New Zealand.

And when those who are more staid bring these principles of liberation into the structures of society, the groans of the people also are transformed into celebration. Does this mean we are to espouse Liberation Theology? That theology is different to the liberty, to the freedom that Jesus talks of here. But it has its roots in these passages. It builds from both Marxism and Jesus, so when we work alongside those trained in its thinking we

find ourselves aligning with the good of those who would incarnate among the poor and seek justice through people movements and structural reform, and rejecting the bitterness and social analysis of the evil of Marxism. As Christians we are to outdo such commitment.

An Ecological Gospel

The Jubilee is the restoration of the land, a restructuring of the human-land relationship. We are to manage the land not to abuse it. To manage, to steward, is to care for, to protect, as well as to develop the productivity of the land. Jesus aim is to bring all of creation out of its bondage and set it free (Rom 8:21). As the good news of the Jubilee is preached, so the land is allowed to rest. Christians restore the land, they manage the land. But more than that Christians wait for the promised land, the return of the Messiah to rule for 1000 years and bring right relationships to the land.

Evangelism this decade will hinge on Christian leadership of urban and rural environmental issues. As we are working to establish housing for the poor, or to enable a community to raise a sustainable food supply, the reason for our care for the land becomes the center of our conversation.

The way that the created order can be reinstated to God's original purpose depends upon the proclamation of the Good News (Mark 16:15). Creation groans until the message of the gospel has penetrated to every nation, every person (Rom 8:19, 20).

A Celebrating Gospel

In the Jubilee, life becomes a celebration. Even within the simplicity of Jesus' lifestyle, he did not consider things as evil. Jesus knew how to enjoy dining with the rich, yet for the sake of the Kingdom of God, he chose to come to a family who could not afford the dedication offering of the poor (Luke 2:24). He was accused of being a party-goer - and he was. He loved life and people. This is where he did his evangelism. For as the proclaimer of Jubilee, he was calling people to celebrate.

Our task is to bring the joy of Christ into situations of darkness, the hope of Christ into situations of despair.

A Reconciling Gospel

Immediately after declaring his mandate, Jesus began to talk about ministering to Gentiles. It seems like it was a big mistake! The talk turned from respect for this local son to murder. They tried to murder him! His home town Nazareth was a little Jewish village in the midst of a multicultural context, only four miles from Sapporis, a large Roman centre of about 10,000 citizens, complete with its amphitheatre and public baths. Nazareth had survived by prejudice. His message of God's love for non-Jews went down like a lead balloon, threatening the very foundation of village values.

The Shadow of the Cross on National Economics

Which leads us to the centrality of the cross in economic discipleship. For in the cross is the reconciliation of man to God and man to man; in the cross is Jesus' ultimate detachment from things of the earth, losing even his own life for the sake of others; in the cross is the principle of love, of laying down one's life for others, including laying down our possessions; in the cross is the ultimate work of God, leading us to consider that works of redemption and reconciliation may be of a higher order than many of our mundane jobs; in the cross we enter into the community of faith, that economic community of sharing; in the cross is our rest, for the anxiety of guilt and sin is laid to rest; in the cross is the principle of giving away, what we have called redistribution, giving away even our own lives; in the cross his ownership of the earth is manifest for he not only redeemed us as and reconciled us as individuals to God but through that the whole creation groans, awaiting his redemption to be complete (Rom 8:38-39). All economic principles are integrated in his sacrifice for not just redemption of humanity but the restoration of the earth. It is the most profound economic act of history.

This cross we must preach to those dealing with economic principles and economic power. These ten principles we have described are central to our message of the gospel. Each calls to repentance. Each calls to obedience to Christ. Each calls to new life, for these ten principles are inherent in the resurrected lives of his people across the nation and hence infiltrate its systems to bring the gospel of liberation from economic sin, and the impending tragedies such sins cause, and a resurrection to an alternative economics, individually and in terms of new structures.

Liberation through Reconciliation

In New Zealand, along with some good Indian friends, Chacko and Susan Thomas, we developed a home group among Indian migrants. It grew from four to at times fifty. Culturally isolated, jobless after being successful professionals in their home country, this became the place of love for people. I remember one Hindu lady saying, "I am not a Christian, but this is place where I feel loved each week. And when we pray, your God answers prayer!"

The Poor in the Kingdom

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18, 19).

This was the announcement of Jesus' public ministry in Nazareth. With this choice of scripture Jesus makes clear the job of the herald of the Kingdom and those who are in the Kingdom. Jesus was the incarnate God here to free the poor and proclaim the Kingdom. In this, Jesus lets us know what the Kingdom is about. It is with this announcement we get the first taste of Jesus' economic agenda. The other information that points to Jesus plan are the actions that followed this announcement, namely Jesus ministry. Jesus' ministry following this announcement was exactly like he predicted. Jesus spent most of his time with the poor. He spent much of his time healing the sick and helping the blind see. If we look back on our Old Testament word studies, Jesus, a first century Jew, would know that this scripture from Isaiah was not talking about the spiritually poor, but about those who have been forced into poverty with no way out.

Jesus spent most of his time amongst the poor of his day. It is this and Jesus' teachings that cause James to declare that they, not the rich of this world, will be the heirs of the Kingdom (Jam 2:5). Jesus taught that it was possible for the rich to enter the Kingdom, but that it was very, very, difficult (Mark 10:25)

Some of his disciple were poor as well when he chose them. They were called to give up everything for the Kingdom. Jesus also taught his disciples that those who do not care for the poor were not going to be part of his future Kingdom (Mat. 25:31-46). Concern for the poor is not an option for the children of the Kingdom it is our central mandate. It is to this standard that we will be judged in the end times.

Dangers of Wealth and Property

*The poor are blessed,
Poverty is a curse.
The rich are cursed,
Riches are a blessing,
....but very dangerous.
Therefore we should give them away again.*

Worshipping Possessions

Jesus gave us a choice. In Matthew 6:24 he tells us that we cannot serve God and money. It is a choice! But cannot (!) It is an impossible impossibility! Both require 100% commitment. You either love the one and hate the other or you are loyal to one and hate the other. Money never satisfies!

Jesus made the choice. He could have come as rich man or as emperor. But he came to a stable. He could have chosen to be a rich Sadducee but he chose to be a poor wandering scribe.

The rich young ruler made a choice. He could choose wealth or Jesus. He knew it was an either/or choice. He chose his trinkets. He went away sorrowful. *How hard*, Jesus explained to his team, *How hard it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God* (Luke 18:24).

Covetousness (Luke 12:15; Ephesians 5:5; Exodus 20:17)

In the New Testament there is a word used 19 times. It means striving, desiring material things. It is a greedy compulsion to acquire more and more, the desire to acquire. Col 3:5 tells of *covetousness which is idolatry*.... Why is it idolatry? We desire the thing rather than the creator. Paul commands that we don't even have lunch with another Christian who is ...greedy (1 Cor 5:11), and tells us the love of money is the root of all evils (1 Tim 6:10). You cannot serve God and money.

Spiritual Blindness to Other Needs

Riches are a protection for the rich from the realities of those around him (Prov 18:10). They may cause him to ignore the needy around him. It was because of this sin that God condemned the rich man in the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). *If anyone has this world's good and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?* (1 John 3:16). You cannot love God and money.

The cares of the age and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. (Matt 13:22) But even within the simplicity of Jesus' lifestyle, he did not consider things as evil. No, even though *the Kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit* (Rom 14:17).

Jesus, Work and Rest

Christ like the Father, placed a high regard upon work, by labelling himself a worker (Jn 9:4, 4:34, 5:17). He called his disciples to work, to fish for men. He prayed for labourers (Matt 9:36-39). He also is very familiar with the jobs of the poor and the rich of his time. The use of these parables enabled him to teach in a way that he would be understood, but it also places a high regard upon work. If our work gives glory to God or it serves humanity then it can be seen as a Kingdom job (Ryken, 1987, pg. 87).

Rest is also a key part of life for those who are part of the Kingdom. Leisure can be defined as a time free from the constraints of work and other obligations of living. It is a time to cultivate an enriched state of being.

Jesus was the herald of the Kingdom and he taught us what resting in the Kingdom should look like. The first and foremost leisure time for Jesus was his time of prayer in a lonely place. Jesus, in order to enrich his state of being, turned to his relationship with the Father for help. He knew that this was the priority of the Kingdom when it came to rest. The other form of rest came in the form of fellowship. Jesus loved to spend time both with friends and his disciples. This for him, many times, was his way to rest and he called his disciples to rest with each other (6:31).

He had a habit of attending the synagogue on the Sabbath. But in numerous acrimonious debates, he de-legalised the cultural restrictions on rest that the Jewish rabbis had developed in their detailed expansion of the essential command. *The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:27)