

Beginnings of the Jesus Movement: The early context.

The Peasant Farmer: Debt, Taxes and Bread for the day.

Jesus was keenly aware of the crushing hardships experienced by the Jewish people in Palestine. Their daily lot was to endure grinding poverty and to be subjected to constant, acute anxiety about their very survival. The peasant farmers of first century Galilee were the victims of an almost crippling dual taxation system imposed by the racially and religiously suspect Herodians or the Roman occupiers. Most of the bread winners in Jesus' Galilee worked the family plot or sharecropped and, in order to make ends meet they took on any other available work. Jesus is called a *tekton*, which is a generic term for any kind of worker or labourer who was prepared to do any manual tasks. He and Joseph probably worked a small plot of land in order to produce food for the family and picked up any paid labour they could find. People had to do things like this in order to lessen the impact of the debt burden.

Zero Sum or *Limited Good* economics prevailed throughout the Ancient world. With the exception of the few who were born into wealth, riches were usually not accumulated by just or honest means. People who enjoyed political power or patronage were often in a position to exploit people who were socio-economically vulnerable, especially peasants who might need money to pay a debt. Often the terms of the financial transaction ensured that the debtor would have little or no chance of clearing the debt. In the process, they alienated their land title in exchange for cash or loans. Their birthright was the little collateral they might have. People were literally gambling on their identity, their future and that of their families. This unjust system of economic coercion and exploitation was the principal focus of the prophetic outrage and protest of Amos, Elijah and Isaiah. Jesus saw himself as part of that tradition.

Tithes and debts constituted a constant burden on the rural poor in the time of Jesus. Temple scribes estimated debt levels, Levites collected the Temple tax, the tithes of first fruits for distribution to the priestly caste. These tithes were recurrent so peasant farmers had to make provision for yearly surpluses. This burden in turn generated a vast sub-current of popular rage and protest.

Unfavourable economic times put added pressure on those peasant farmers who still owned their own land. Drought and civil strife periodically disrupted agriculture so people were unable to pay their taxes. To make up for this, they would go deeper into debt, and in extreme cases would be thrown into slavery or debtors' prisons. The three main options for peasants who did not own their own land were to work as tenants paying a fixed rent to their landlords or to pay a predetermined portion of their produce to their owner or to join on with one of the great *latifundia* (large privately owned estates). This meant that the peasant farmer became equivalent to a slave.

It must have sounded like a huge ironic joke for his audience to hear Jesus say:

“Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on....” (Mt 6: 25; Lk 12:22)

In reality, peasant farmers cared intensely about their livelihood and especially the permanent double bind state of anxiety and dependence into which they were locked. It was an inescapable preoccupation and the empty stomachs of their children were a constant reminder.

When Jesus taught his followers to pray they would have instantly understood the integral link between the bread of daily subsistence and debt: ‘Give us the bread for today and forgive us our debts.....’ The availability of bread and indebtedness were inextricably linked for the subsistence peasant farmers of Galilee. (1)

Pleading for daily bread was not the only prayer of the subsistence tenant farmer. There was the ongoing necessity to produce enough grain in order to a) have seed for the next crop, b) enough to feed draft animals, c) enough to sell for cash or barter d) enough for first fruits offerings and e) enough for family celebrations such as weddings and other communal festivities. It was a duty of the Levites to collect the Temple tax, the tithes on first fruits and those which contributed to the immediate upkeep of the priestly caste. These imposts generated the primary need for the surpluses.

E.R. Wolf explains the need for production in excess of immediate household needs:

‘Over and above these necessities for the sustenance of family or village life from one year to the next, however, peasants were expected to produce more, namely, a ‘surplus.’ The reason for this

surplus was that peasants ‘are rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn.’ (2)

It was precisely this endless cycle of institutional, systemic debt that crushed, dehumanised and stripped the honour away from struggling peasants. When Jesus spoke about sin, what he was getting at was the oppressive burden which stripped people of their humanity and forced them into behaviours normally alien to them. He did not trivialize personal sin but he put it into its proper perspective. He made a clear distinction between individual ‘sins’ and collective, societal *Sin* and this was completely congruent with the prophetic tradition. (3)

The prayer Jesus taught his disciples not only welcomes in the Reign (Kingdom) and the realisation of God’s will on earth as in heaven. It also incorporates a pleading for the daily bread of subsistence and also for that other basic human necessity, forgiveness. The traditional English word used for the object of this forgiveness is *trespass*. The original Greek word in Matthew’s narrative is *opheilemata*, ‘debts’. The constant prayer of the peasant *subsistence* farmer in the time of Jesus was pleading for a speedy relief from the crippling burden of debt.

The Mission of Jesus: The permanent year of Liberation.

After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus returned to Nazareth. On entering the Synagogue, he was invited to read the passage of Scripture on that Feast of *Yom Kippur*. This was no ordinary year. It was the beginning of the *Shemithah* or Year of Release (every seventh x seventh). The Jewish People is observing it now (Sept 25, 2014 –Sept 13, 2015). The Isaiah passage refers to the God’s intention for the Jubilee Year:

At the end of every seven years you shall grant release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbour. He shall not exact it of his neighbour, his brother, because the LORD’s Release (Shemithah) has been proclaimed..... (Deut 15: 1-4)

The text Jesus read was from Isaiah 61: 1-2 refers directly to the proclamation of the *Shmetiah* and, in Luke’s narrative, forms the statement of intent for the mission of Jesus himself:

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 release to the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty whose who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Lk 4: 18-19).

When Jesus had finished reading he boldly announced: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Lk 4: 21)*. When he explained clearly what this meant, it nearly cost him his life. Later on, as a result of the final confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, he did indeed pay this price.

The message of Jesus understood and lived in the Church after the Apostles.

“Generation after generation, leaders in the Church would call the people back to find their ministry rooted in gathering around the table to be fed and to share the life they had found together by feeding the hungry. One of my favourite examples of this is seen in the preaching of John Chrysostom, who teaches:

“Of what use is it to weigh down Christ’s table with golden cups, when he himself is dying of hunger? Apply this to Christ when he comes along the roads as a pilgrim, looking for shelter.... Do not, therefore, adorn the church and ignore your afflicted brother, for he is the most precious temple of all.” - *On the Gospel of Matthew*, (Hom. 50).

Similarly, Basil offers the following wisdom: “The bread that you store belongs to the hungry (*Homilies*). In these words, the fathers instructed the Church to view what they hold as given to be gifted. The Christian bread is always to be broken and shared. The hungry are always to be viewed as icons of Christ to be cared for.”

Over and over, the fathers of the Church raised their voices, declaring:

- To ignore the hungry is to ignore Christ.
- To withhold food from those who need it is to steal from God.
- To feed hungry people is an act of high worship and a participation in the Divine Liturgy in the Holy of Holies.’ (3)

In future articles, the sources for the conflict between Jesus and the teachers of Israel will be examined. Specific attention will be given to the hostility Jesus experienced as a result of the authority he claimed and exercised in interpreting the Torah and the ways this was discontinuous from the Scribes and Pharisees. Other topics treated will be Paul of Tarsus, his Gospel and the inclusion of the Gentiles. The final articles will deal with the eventual estrangement of the Jesus Movement from the mother lode of Judaism and the Church in the very early post apostolic period from the end of the first century to late in the second century CE.

Endnotes:

- 1) “Since all goods exist in limited amounts which cannot be increased or expanded, it follows that an individual, alone or with his family, can improve his social position only at the expense of others. Hence any apparent relative improvement in someone’s position with respect to a good in life is view as a threat to the entire community. Obviously, someone is being deprived and denied something that is his, whether he know it nor not.” Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World. Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. London, SCM, 1981, 75-76.

Following is a representative view from the neo-Con *Acton Institute*: “The ancient economy is best described as what is called a “zero sum game.” The pool of economic resources was relatively fixed, so that when one person became wealthy, it was usually at the expense of someone else. Stated differently, the economy was like a pie. When someone took a larger piece, someone else received a smaller piece. This set up numerous opportunities to attain wealth abusively by theft, taxation, or extortion.” Scott B. Rae, “Views of Wealth in the Bible and the Ancient World,” *Religion and Liberty*, 12 (2015) 6. (Linked [here](#))

- 2) *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966, 68.

See also: C.L. Blomberg, , *Neither Poverty nor Riches. A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999, 91. ‘If the climate or the economy proved unfavourable for too long, the peasant farmers who still owned their own property would be unable to pay their taxes, would go deeper into debt, and in extreme cases would be thrown into slavery or debtors’ prisons. The three main options for peasants who did not own their own land were to work as tenants paying a fixed rent to their landlords, to pay a predetermined portion of their produce to their owner, or to join on with one of the great *latifundia* (large privately owned estates) and be functionally equivalent in status to a slave.’

- 3) Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World. Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, London, SCM, 1981. See Malina’s treatment of “The perception of limited good,” 76-79.
- 4) Billy Kangas, “The Moral Scandal of Hunger,” *Millennial. Young Catholics, an Ancient Faith, A New Century*, July 14, 2014. (Linked [here](#).) See also Nicholas Seneze, “Jon Sobrino, theologian of the cry of the poor.” ‘Is the Church ready to run the same risk as Jesus?’ *La Croix-Global Pulse*, 24 March, 2015. (Linked [here](#)); David Timbs, “The Sacrament of the Neighbour,” *v2catholic.com* 30/12/2012 (Linked [here](#))

