

THE TRUE JUBILEE

SOME BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

"You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" is the kernel of the first and most lengthy section about Jubilee - in LEVITICUS CHAPTER 25. Behind all the injunctions is the experience of liberation from Egypt, described in Exodus.

This experience was to be remembered by the nation not remembered correctly as the beginnings of a deliverance that was to be continually reactivated in society, rather than as a past triumph that was to be occasionally marked. The escape from bondage was within the power of an eternal God so that its significance could not be localised but had an eternal meaning for all people. For the nation to have any oppression within it was to fall back into a state of slavery similar to the one their forefathers had experienced in Egypt. The Hebrews - not a cohesive nation but a crowd of the exploited - were to use their liberation as a means for all peoples to discover that same dignity: they were not to develop into a chosen elite.

The subsequent history of Israel in the Old Testament outlines a struggle between those who wanted to remain faithful to the vision of a continuous creation of freedom and those who wanted to freeze a past occasion into a sign of special privilege.

Leviticus goes into fine detail about how the nation was to remember its history and the YEAR OF JUBILEE was to recall the nation to its priorities and to initiate a determined effort to alter its social structures to be more consonant with the nature of God.

The Jubilee Year was to begin on the Day of Atonement (a day of penitential sorrow). All debts were to be released, if land had been sold it was to return to public ownership ("For the land is mine" says the Lord'). There was to be no exploitation in work, in buying and selling, in food prices, and in financial dealings. The reason for this social

upheaval was that they themselves had once been exploited and had been "brought forth out of the land of Egypt".

It is unlikely that such a year was ever observed but its retention in Leviticus makes it more than an interesting historical trifle; it is evidence that the people of God felt that they needed to be reminded regularly as a nation of their faith and its social consequences.

The "year of the Lord's favour" is a direct reference to Jubilee in ISAIAH 61:1-4. This proclamation came out of Isaiah's anger at the disparity between correct religious observance and the divisions within society. He recalled rulers to their obligations: the poor were to have good news brought to them, release proclaimed to captives, sight given to the blind, and the brokenhearted comforted. "For I the Lord love justice and hate robbery and wrongdoing". This is a statement about social policy, not about crime statistics, and it is the classic prophetic call, asking a nation to read the signs of the times and realise that social injustice is incompatible with faith in God. The presence of victims of any kind, the acceptance of poverty and discrimination, was to reduce themselves to that level of indignity that they had had in Egypt - only this time as oppressors not oppressed.

Isaiah asked for a Jubilee, "an acceptable year", because without that programme there could be no true dignity for anyone.

In ST LUKE 4:14-40 Jesus inaugurates his public ministry by reading the above passage from Isaiah and so declares himself the fulfilment of the Jubilee aspirations. "Today" he said "in your very hearing this text has come true". No longer a special year or a temporary civic strategy, but a new era, of pardon, healing, emancipation, and self-sacrifice. The aim is the same - good news for the poor - but the means becomes immediate as well as potential.

Jesus brings a hope that is present and substantial, no longer do the weakest in society have to wait for a future freedom, it can begin now, in the actions of all who live according to Jubilee. The weakest in fact cease being the weakest, they become the locus from which truth and deliverance can begin.

It is highly significant that this public affirmation occurred immediately after Jesus had resisted severe temptations which had been concerned with options for different styles of leadership. In rejecting them he rejected actions which would appear to be incontrovertibly good - turning stones into bread, leaping off high towers to land unharmed, and claiming the throne. It was the desire to be seen clearly doing the positive thing for the largest number of people.

The synagogue address described in Luke resulted in a fracas outside. Why? Because Jesus reaffirmed that Jubilee was for all who were broken, his justice was to benefit those outside the self-selected bounds of 'goodness' or 'worthiness'. Jesus, claimed by some to be the long-awaited monarch, showed in his ministry that his realm was for the weak not the strong, the poor not the rich, the outsiders not the establishment.

THE CONSEQUENCES

(1) PENITENTIAL SORROW - public expressions of confession and repentance, and action for penance and reparation will be part of any Jubilee. This is to acknowledge where the nation is guilty of victimization, of blaming selected deprived groups, of divisiveness, and to admit the evils that have stemmed from past international relations.

(2) TRUTH FROM THE POOR - Jubilee is for the poorest and weakest. It is they who responded to Jesus. From their experience of society comes a truth and judgement that is rarely heard and often ignored. The Jubilee programme will be based on their history.

(3) AUTHORITY WILL CHANGE - Those in authority

have dignity only insofar as they respond to the needs and hopes of those excluded from "the good life". Rulers, experts and professionals are to give their skills so that all people can be creative. It means a radical change (i.e. repentance) in the workings of all institutions.

(4) SIGNS OF HOPE - these are to be identified, and widened and made more secure. For the Jesus of Jubilee brings hope for a present realisation of fulfilment. There are reasons for celebration - wherever there are indications of new possibilities - for self-respect, dignity, solidarity in love.

(5) THE CHURCH MUST CHOOSE and place itself unequivocally on one side in this struggle. There can be no room for "influence" from a position of power. The church will want to share the experiences of the pilloried, the neglected, the ignored and the blamed - because this is what Jesus did. Only then can the Jubilee people speak from what they know - when its own reputation is tied to the future of all deprived groups. So that the only victory possible for the church is their victory.

IAN HARKER
Anglican Chaplain,
University of Newcastle
upon Tyne.

Reprinted by THE JUBILEE GROUP in EAST LONDON, St Matthew's Rectory, Hereford Street, BETHNAL GREEN, E2 from an original paper from AN ACCEPTABLE YEAR, 18 St Thomas Crescent, Newcastle upon Tyne.

FEBRUARY 1977.