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**Theological Reflections**A God of Justice

***These are some notes and reflections to whet the appetite for preparing talks and sermons related to the World Development Appeal. They are not intended to be a fully rounded treatment of God’s justice.***

The issue at stake in Malen Chiefdom, Sierra Leone, is **injustice.** Those in positions of power and authority in the community have connived with a multinational palm oil company to lease the land for 50 years. Much of this was done over the heads of the people who farm the land; subsistence farmers, many of whom are women. Compensation has been minimal, and often based on significantly distorted acreage, to the benefit of the multi-national company. Further, it is clear that the chief and his cronies are benefiting directly from pay-offs from the company. In short, they are prepared to exploit their own people for their own benefit.

As we talked to people impacted by the take-over of the land, they blamed different parties. Some blamed the chief and village elders. Others blamed the company for its practices. Still others blamed the government and law-enforcement agencies for not ensuring that the laws of the land were properly applied.

In reality all are guilty of perpetrating injustice, either by direct abuse of their position, or by turning a blind eye to the abuses. However, it is easy to point the finger. All of us buy products which contain palm oil. To what extent is our consumption (unwittingly) contributing to these injustices?

**Justice in the Bible**

Justice is a major theme of scripture. Isaiah tells us that “the Lord is a God of justice”. (Isaiah 30:18). God is the ultimate source of power and authority, and He is the One who uses that power rightly to administer justice to all.

We’re told that God loves justice (Isaiah 61:8), in the continuation of the passage read by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4).

**Injustice**

However, there are many warnings about perpetrating injustice. The prophets frequently remind the people of their responsibility to administer justice, and there are strong reprimands for those who abuse their power and position to deny justice to others.

One of the best known examples of this is the visit of the prophet Nathan to David in 1 Samuel 12. Nathan rebukes David for his abuse of power, compounding his sins of coveting, adultery and murder. David, in taking what is not his, has perpetrated a horrendous injustice.

Gary A Haugen in his book *Good News About Injustice, (IVP 1999)* writes“injustice occurs when power is misused to take from others what God has given them, namely their life, dignity, liberty or the fruits of their love and labour”.

**Justice and Land**

Justice and the land are inter-twined in the Old Testament.

God intervenes in the lives of a nation of slaves, delivering them from slavery in Egypt and bringing them into a land of their own. In that land all but the Levites receive land, each family allocated a portion which delivers the means for them to provide for themselves. They are no longer slaves but free people. But the land is not theirs primarily. It is God’s. ‘“the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.” (Leviticus 25:23) The people are essentially stewards of the land, and their remaining on the land is conditional on their obedience.

**Justice is a prerequisite for living on the land**

Justice is frequently highlighted as a prerequisite for living on the land. “Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:20 NIVUK))

Jeremiah and other prophets frequently bring the people back to the connection between the land and justice:

**5**If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, **6**if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, **7**then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your ancestors for ever and ever. (Jeremiah 7:5-7 NIVUK)

Chris Wright writes, “The prophets simply would not allow Israel to get away with claiming the blessing and protection of the covenant relationship for their society while trampling on the socio-economic demands of that relationship.”C.J.H. Wright, 2004, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God,*Inter-Varsity Press, Illinois, 2004, p. 98

(One of the most outrageous acts of abuse of power and of God’s provision of land for His people is found in the story of Naboth’s vineyard. (I Kings 21))

**Justice to ensure people have access to land**

Significant laws are given to the people to ensure that everyone has access to the means to provide to provide for themselves and for their families. Levities 25 introduces three things designed to ensure this:

**Jubilee, Redemption, and Protection of the Vulnerable**

**Jubilee** reflects God’s heart for ensuring that everyone enjoys freedom and has the means of generating a livelihood for themselves and their family. In a world of brokenness, selfishness and greed the concept of Jubilee is an expression of God’s desire for all of creation to flourish. It’s radical, countercultural and prophetic – then and now.

Jubilee is a God given model for a community living well according to His will. Jubilee enables people to thrive as individuals and as a community and, in so doing, shine as light to the rest of the world.”

The concept of **redemption** is perhaps best illustrated by the story of Ruth and Boaz. A near relative can buy back the land that has been sold to pay a debt or in the event of death. In so doing the “kinsman redeemer” ensures that the family is protected.

Interestingly, the introduction to the Book of Ruth suggests that jubilee, redemption and protection of the vulnerable was not happening. As the refrain of Judges puts it “everyone was doing what right in his own eyes”. (cf Judges 17:6 and 21:25)

It is worth noting that Naomi warns Ruth to stay in Boaz's field – “because in another field [she] might be harmed” (Ruth 2:22). Where there is vulnerability we also see people willing to exploit that vulnerability for their own ends. So, when God puts provisions in place for those who are vulnerable to be provided for - He is doing so to protect them.

**Protection of the Vulnerable**

There is a clear requirement for the freed nation of Israel is protect the vulnerable. The basis for this is God’s liberation of them from slavery in Egypt. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.” (Leviticus 25:38)

There are three groups who are considered particularly vulnerable; the orphan, the widow and the stranger. All three have essentially no one to stand up for them. God calls His people to ensure that they are protected, and the prophets frequently remind them of their responsibility. This is a matter of justice. This is a reflection that they are the people of God, a God of justice.

One of the most significant laws in this regard were the gleaning laws, illustrated by Ruth. Leviticus 19:9-10 lays out the principle: ‘“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.”

**Jesus**

Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of God’s justice. He starts His ministry by applying the words of Isaiah 61 to Himself. He comes to bring justice, liberty and good news to the poor. He lives a life of addressing the injustices of religious ritual, healing brokenness and restore people to fullness of life.

He calls out the Pharisees for concentrating on religious observance while neglecting “justice and the love of God”. He concludes His parable of the widow and the unjust judge with the words “will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’ (Luke 18:7-8)

Jesus’ definitive act of justice on behalf of all of us, was to give His life to reconcile us - and indeed all things (Colossians 1) - to Himself. In His death, itself the ultimate injustice, He deals with the evil and injustice of a sinful world.

Jesus calls us, as His followers to live out our faith, seeking justice for the oppressed, liberty for the captive, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. As His people, liberated from slavery to sin, we are to be people who seek His justice for others.

This is highlighted in Matthew 25 where Jesus tells His followers that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

The context of Matthew 25 also reminds us that there will be a future day of judgement when the righteous judge – Jesus - will judge the earth. On that day every injustice will be addressed as all people stand before the throne and give account.

Psalm 96:13:

He comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in His faithfulness.