

A Jubilee for the Earth

Introduction: *Francis Stewart*

This year's ecumenical Season of Creation takes its theme from an ancestry common to all Christians - that of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament laws of Leviticus. In chapter 25 of Leviticus, we read of Moses being commanded that a Jubilee is to be proclaimed every 50th year. The Jubilee was to mark the end of the cycle of Sabbaths, according to which, every 7th year, there should be neither reaping nor sowing on the land. On the 50th year, debts are written-off, slaves are freed and all return to their families to eat only what the land provides.

Taking inspiration from this custom of allowing the land to rest and restoring relationships, Pope Francis joined fellow Christian leaders around the world in calling for a Jubilee for the earth.

As we read in Leviticus, the Jubilee is a time of celebration, to be announced by trumpet-blast. Pope Francis, in his Message for the World Day of Prayer for Creation (September 1st), suggested as much: "A Jubilee is indeed a time of grace to remember creation's original vocation to exist and flourish as a community of love. We exist only in relationships: with God the Creator, with our brothers and sisters as members of a common family, and with all of God's creatures within our common home."¹

Remember, return, rest, restore and rejoice

In calling for our own time of Jubilee, Pope Francis calls for a truly comprehensive, integral change. He reiterates his calls for the cancellation of debts, an end to modern slavery, child labour and exploitation, and strong institutions that can hold global markets to justice and meet social and environmental goals. He pleads, "Today we need to find just and sustainable ways of living that can give the Earth the rest it requires, ways that satisfy everyone with a sufficiency, without destroying the ecosystems that sustain us."

From the perspective of the technocratic paradigm that prevails today, these words of the pope and the socio-economic vision that the Biblical Jubilee entails seem revolutionary. However, the prescriptions of Leviticus 25 had behind them a conservative theology concerned with the proper order of things - that of the Levites, members of a priestly class.² Injustice, poverty, workers being enslaved and estranged from their homeland, degradation of the land - these all offend and pollute the orderliness of God's Creation. As Christopher Bruno puts it, "the Jubilee restores kinship and land tenure systems that were part of Israel's covenant with God".³

So, what is being prescribed, in theological terms, is people and property being returned to their proper places, and the earth to be restored to its proper state. Pope Francis' own message also reflects this priestly theology in the 're-' words it chooses to characterize the Jubilee: remember, return, rest, restore, and rejoice.

Radical implications

¹ Message of the Holy Father for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation:, 1st September 2020 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html

² Kawashima, Robert, S. (2003) 'The Jubilee Year and the Return of Cosmic Purity' *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65. p. 371

³ Bruno, Christopher R. (2010) 'Jesus Is Our Jubilee... But How? The OT Background and Lukan Fulfillment of the Ethics of Jubilee' *Cedarville University: Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications* 3. p. 86

Notwithstanding this emphasis on returning to an original harmony, were the vision of Jubilee to be put into practice in our current situation, it would make some radical demands of our future.

Historically, the Jubilee laws were probably never obeyed. Demanding ideals conceived of in exile, they remained impracticable for the majority. As St Pope John Paul II pointed out, “the prescriptions for the jubilee year largely remained ideals—more a hope than an actual fact”⁴ and encapsulated a desire for a Messianic figure to bring redemption that echoes through the prophets.

When we consider the Jubilee laws beyond the context of a priestly concern for purity, we are left with the question of how to understand all the numbers, the strangely precise prescriptions. Must we count seven cycles of seven years, sounding the trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month on the forty-ninth year...? Take, for example, a passage that sounds like an impossible promise: “You may ask, “What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?” I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years.” (Leviticus 25: 20-21) What would a modern farmer think to such an outlandish instruction?!

Scripture scholars might tell us that numbers in the Bible usually symbolize something. The number seven being a symbol of completeness. So, returning to that seemingly outlandish promise of a threefold harvest on the 6th year, to compensate for the fallow seventh year, what might this symbolize? I am no expert on scripture, but, intuitively, this recalls the Creation of the earth in seven days, and the inclusion of a seventh day within this as Sabbath rest (Genesis 2: 2). Is this not a reminder that rest is not in opposition to fruitful work, but precisely what completes it and brings things to fruition?

I think the essence of this promise and prescription has something very pertinent to say about our global model of development. Though we would be unwise to tell farmers to expect a bumper harvest every 6th year based on strict ritual observance, maybe giving the land a rest from relentless extraction, allowing for a ‘fallow season’, would be more fruitful and productive? The “fruit” of integral rest and restoration of the earth, enshrined in a sacred code like the Levitical laws, would not only be rich soil but fertile ecosystems and a better harvest in the long-run.

Taking a socio-economic perspective, is this not also a programme of social-economic resetting? The enshrining of a time of rest and restoration in this way could make it so that every economic transaction would have to be executed in light of the coming time of Jubilee.⁵ We could be talking about a safety-valve to prevent endemic oppression, to stall growing poverty and alienation of people from their communities. Although the numbered years might be more symbolic than practical, we must retain the *sacredness* of such programmes of solidarity. It cannot be something that depends on the charitable whims of wealthy individuals or the showy gestures of career-politicians.

As is the belief in various indigenous cultures of Bolivia, and as Pope Francis himself has sometimes alluded to, humanity can live in reciprocity with the ecosystems of which we are part. If I may borrow some language from the economists, caring for our common home ‘pays back with interest’.

Integral ecology in action pre- and post-pandemic

At this point in reading some might find themselves objecting that the Jubilee model of economy so far proposed is as impracticable as were the Levitical laws themselves. In a final appeal for

⁴ St Pope John Paul II (1994) *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Apostolic Letter to the Bishops Clergy and Lay Faithful on Preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000. 13

⁵ Bruno, Christopher, R. (2010) ‘Jesus is our Jubilee...’ p. 88

credibility, I now hand over to a practitioner to reflect upon an example of *doing* integral ecology in a way reflective of the Jubilee rest.

Reflections on Jubilee in Brazil: Kezia Lavan

Reading about the biblical Jubilee, this 'resetting' brought to mind a very different and profane tradition, the Brazilian Carnival. Every year, in the few days before the start of Lent, the usual rules are suspended. Men dress as women and vice versa, politicians are pilloried with puppets and masks, the rich dress in folk costumes, the poor leave the favelas to dance on the paved streets of the rich neighbourhoods, and sophisticated urbanites go down to the mangrove to cover themselves in mud as their crab collecting grandparents might have done. And so, for one day of the year, everything is allowed. And then Ash Wednesday comes and everything goes back to normal, as if nothing had happened. The laws of Leviticus may have stopped social, economic and environmental injustice temporarily, but after the year was up presumably those with power returned to enslaving, ransacking and indebting. Happily for us, farmers in northeast Brazil can show us a very different model of what a Jubilee for the earth might look like in practice, even and especially, in a time of Pandemic.

Between March and writing this article mid-September Brazil saw 4.3 million COVID cases and 132,000 deaths, making it one of, if not the hardest hit country in the world. The poorest and most vulnerable are suffering most from the impacts of the virus and the accompanying social and economic crisis. Black, mixed race and traditional communities are disproportionately getting sick and dying. Elderly indigenous leaders, the guardians of knowledge about the environment, are being lost. Inadequate housing, poor health services, environmental governance failures, chronic health problems and difficulties – all symptoms of the malaise of gross inequality – are major contributing factors. Mixed messages from different levels of government had left many people feeling confused about the seriousness of the virus and what measures to take. Whilst state governors and mayors installed local lockdowns, the President repeatedly played down the gravity of the situation, insisting that the virus was 'a bit of flu', promoting unproven treatments, and leaving the country without a permanent health minister after losing two in the space of a month.

Hunger has been a visible sign of the crisis in Brazil, particularly in Brazil's sprawling peripheries. Many people lost their jobs and livelihoods overnight, as city centres shut down, markets were forced to close and domestic workers were dismissed. The poorest soon exhausted their meagre savings, and whilst the government announced emergency payments – many very poor people found themselves unable to access them due to delays, impenetrable bureaucracy or flawed criteria. As a result, millions of families across Brazil, particularly urban and rural informal settlements, found themselves without means to feed their families.

Meanwhile, small family rural farmers had a different problem. When COVID arrived in Paraíba, north-east Brazil, farmers in João Pessoa and other towns were left without a market as customers stayed away from the markets which then shut altogether. Women and men who would transport their fresh organic produce by truck, motorbike and bicycle to the city each week suddenly found themselves with no buyers at the peak of the harvest, the time when they should be earning most of their money for the year. Tonnes of beautiful papaya, oranges, beans, sweet potato, cassava, corn, watermelon and bananas – so carefully tended - were in danger of rotting in the fields and gardens and the farmers were facing ruin. Many would have despaired.

But these were no ordinary farmers. For the last 20 years, CAFOD's long-term partner the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) of João Pessoa has supported poor farmers to adopt agro-ecological principles of environmentally friendly farming, form associations, and work together to strengthen the quality and quantity of their produce, develop new markets and lobby local government for support with logistics and access to technical support. As a result, these farmers have opened a

total of 60 regular organic fairs in the region since 2000, won important public contracts and sold direct to buyers. This support has transformed the quality and quantity of production, improving food security and enabling farmers to double their incomes in the last three years, and ensure the continued social and economic viability of rural communities.

Rather than see their produce go to waste, these farmers have joined with local church groups, unions and social movements to organise the donation and distribution of 15 tonnes of fresh healthy produce for vulnerable families living on the 'periferia' - on the edge of cities - and their neighbours in poorer rural communities. Using skills in lobbying and advocacy that CPT helped them acquire, they successfully persuaded local government to purchase 48 tonnes of their produce for distribution as emergency aid to poor families. At least 5000 people, including refugees from Venezuela, the sick, and vulnerable families in informal rural encampments and favelas have benefitted. Those vulnerable people who would have gone hungry after family members lost their jobs due to COVID have been able to survive this difficult time. Farmers who might have gone under have been able to find a market for their produce, and their organisations and communities have emerged with greater resilience.

Recently CAFOD funds were used to purchase Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to enable the farmers to reopen their fairs safely.

What has made this 'jubilee' possible has been the vision of a '*terra sem males*' (land without evil) and long-term accompaniment to farmers by CPT.

Pope Francis' 're' words resonate very well with the way in which CPT has supported the farmers. Farming on agro-ecological principals is a whole-system change. Farmers avoid using chemical fertilisers, conserve and protect water sources and carefully restore natural vegetation around springs. This is all essential in an arid land which - whilst always subject to cyclical drought, soil degradation and seasonal pests - is increasingly battered due to climate change. The adoption and making real and operational of agro-ecological principles has come about through trial and error, farmers' trying new things, learning from neighbours, taking part in meetings, working alongside and persuading government, not by revolution. Agro-ecology consciously values existing knowledge - Afro-Brazilian and indigenous farming practices (the return) - and mixes them up with new innovations (the renewal). CPT's support to communities is never simply technical, every meeting and training session will include a moment of spiritual reflection and an act of remembering of those martyred for defending the land and environmental rights of the poorest, a celebration of local culture through music, dance, poetry and food (rejoicing), and conversation about the importance of working together for common goals.

Pope Francis also talks about people and property being returned to its proper place. Many of the farmers who showed such solidarity once lacked formal land title, living for sometimes decades with the constant threat of eviction and violence from powerful landowners. CPT's legal and organisational accompaniment helped them gain legal title to the land that they now farm. Structural barriers of injustice in access to land and resources also have to be overcome if we are to be able to care for the earth.

As a result of the work of CPT and many other like-minded organisations, Paraiba has become known as a leading example of economically viable, environmentally friendly farming. Farmers and researchers come from all over Brazil to learn how one of the poorest states in Brazil has achieved this, and amidst the current health, climate and biodiversity crises, the world still has much to learn from them. The continued support from CAFOD's supporters and partners ensures that this is a Jubilee that keeps on giving.