

## Land, wealth and provision for life in the Biblical tradition

*If we compare the current situation of housing and wealth inequality with the principles in the Biblical tradition, our practices and the circumstances we allow are called into question.*

### The Hebrew tradition

The ancient Israelites understood that God created a world which was good and which contained all that was necessary for the sustaining of life.

The world was God's gracious gift to humankind for sustenance and enjoyment but also for stewardship and responsibility. Bringing forth the fruit of the land was a cooperative work between humankind and God. Because the world was God's gift, not a human creation, all had an equal right to share in the diverse forms of wealth it provided. These principles shaped the Israelites' understanding of land.

- The land was a gift from God. The people were stewards of the land but did not own it. They were responsible to make use of the gift for their own benefit.
- Each family/household had a stake in the land. Land was distributed to specific families and their descendants to provide for their livelihoods.
- People were not to be alienated from their stake in the land. The law of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:10) meant future generations were protected from unwise, lazy or unfortunate ancestors who might lose the land. Eventually the land would be returned to the family.
- The vulnerable were protected. The poor - the widow, the orphan and the foreigner - had access to food (the gleanings, tithes) and to finance (loans without interest).

The law ensured a basic standard of living for the poor. It supported the principle that the wealth of the nation was to be shared by all. It was not to be concentrated in the hands of a few.

Unfortunately, the people of Israel did not live up to these ideals. They violated the understanding of the land as gift and their obligation to protect the poor. The testimony of the prophets was that when justice was rejected, exploitation, poverty and social breakdown were the result. It was not ownership itself, but greedy and unfair acquisition and exclusive possession that was condemned (Isaiah 5:8; Micah 2:1-2).

The prophets called Israel to recognise that their wealth came from God and was dependent on God. Israel never understood this to mean that human effort was unnecessary. Rather, to recognise that human effort alone did not create wealth, and that having wealth carried obligations to care for others.

### Perspectives from the New Testament

In the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus is seen as the establishment of a community which seeks to live in response to God's grace. This is particularly clear in Luke and Acts.

Luke expresses his understanding of the ministry of Jesus in Mary's song, his version of the beatitudes, and the parables. Jesus ministry brings into being a new community, based on an alternative understanding of society to that which prevailed at the time. In this new community those considered unclean, sinful or otherwise unacceptable were welcomed and had their needs met.

During his active ministry Jesus had no home of his own - he lived in dependence on others for his material needs. This dependence led others to share and offer hospitality - the women who accompanied him, Zacchaeus who gave half his wealth to the poor. Jesus uses the image of a great international banquet as a picture of the good news he was bringing and the reign of God his ministry was inaugurating.

In Acts, the early church is described as embodying the Old Testament vision and a renewed understanding of what it meant to be the people of God. It became a community in which wealth was shared and the needs of all were met. The early believers held all things in common (Acts 2:42-47). While private ownership of property was still present, the community responded to the needs of the most vulnerable members by selling land and houses as required. Mennonite writer Norman Kraus comments: "In the new order of things life is no longer lived for one's private advancement... life is together".

The church in Luke's day was small and had little power to change the social and economic order of the world beyond itself. But their way of life, their relationships and their use of money reflected the nature of the reign of God which had drawn near in Jesus. It is this vision of God's ultimate reign of justice and peace that still impels the mission of the much larger church of today. The scope of this mission is broad. It is about the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation, so it surely includes economic justice.

Our word 'economy' comes from two Greek words: *oikos-nomos*, which means the rules of the household. This reminds us that economics is not just a technical discipline but at its root is about the arrangements that affect people's everyday life and work. This concept embraces the single household, the wider community and the household of the whole Earth. Implicit in this is that economics is about the rules that will enable the household to function well and to flourish as a whole. The total wellbeing of the household is in view. The central concern of God's economy is on human life in community, rather than the application of a particular economic theory or a narrow view of wealth and what constitutes 'growth'.

### ***How do we respond?***

Faithful discipleship includes seeking ways to implement our understanding of economic justice. This involves questioning beliefs which define wealth too narrowly and restrict enjoyment of the many gifts God has provided. It also includes challenging those practices and systems that lead to brokenness and distortions in communal life and undermine the wellbeing of the whole. The growing division in the availability of decent, secure, and affordable housing has become such an issue.

In a democracy the church cannot and should not impose its interpretation of God's will (or its view of economics) on the nation. But we can remind our society that there are different forms of wealth and that we have received many of them simply as gift. We can also remind our society that our community wellbeing is put under threat when narrow economic goals become the guide for how our life should be organised. And when we think of housing we can argue for practices that better reflect the intention of the biblical tradition for all people to have a 'stake in the land' and for the whole household to flourish.

This means intentionally working for systems and policies that provide all people, regardless of whether they own or rent, with decent, affordable and secure housing.

### **Sources**

1. Most of this material was taken directly from the paper, 'Economic Justice - the Equitable Distribution of Genuine Wealth: A discussion paper prepared by the Uniting Church in Australia's Assembly Social Responsibility and Justice Committee, 1988.
2. 'Some theological reflections on land, housing and home', Social Justice Forum, 2015.