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Jesus and the Kingdom – A challenge for Church and State

The result of archaeological work in Palestine in the last 100 years some of it the result of purely secular research, agricultural and economic archaeology is that we know more about the political, social, economic, and religious context of Jesus time than any generation since the end of the first century.

The Galilee of Jesus was divided by tensions of a structural nature, social, political and economic - Jews/Gentiles, rulers/ruled, rich/poor. This was the result of **two imposed rules** - the Kingdom of Herod and the Reign of Rome.- When Jesus preached **a different Kingdom** he found eager ears among the mass of the people. But he also inevitably provoked serious concern in those who had vested interests in maintaining the other two "Kingdoms"(Cf. Crossan and Reed, pp. 51-97)

As a ***tekton***, a craftsman, Jesus and Josef may have taken part in the construction of Sepphoris 6 km from Nazareth. Destroyed in 4 BCE by Quintilius Varus it was reconstructed by Herod Antipas as a capital during Jesus lifetime, until he founded Tiberius in 19 CE as Galilee's new capital, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, as a much more secure escape route (Theissen/Merz 165). It had a theatre that could seat 5000 and a Basilica that bears a remarkable likeness to some of the larger Tesco's! Although its site bears witness to traditional Jewish ritual practices (e.g. **Miqweh**/ritual baths) it bore all the hallmarks of sophisticated Hellenistic culture (Cf. Carsten Peter Theide, 2004, pp. 13-32 who speculates what Jesus might have seen if he went to the theatre). His teaching certainly shows awareness of "**playacting/*hypocrisis***" (Math 6:2, 5, 16; Mark 7:6, Lk 13:15) of serious **banking** = the parable of the talents (Lk 19:11ff), and of **courts for debtors** which Josephus mentions as being based in Sepphoris in Ant.14,91 (Theissen/Merz 166). These are all specific to Hellenistic culture rather than Jewish. The silence of Jesus and the Gospels on Sepphoris as such remains fascinating.

The Land, the Rich and the Poor

The greater part of traditional Galilean economics depended on agriculture and fishing. **Ownership of the land** was a key element, as indeed it remains in any peasant society, except in Palestine there is the added religious significance that the Land is primordially **God's gift to Israel** and so belongs ultimately to God alone and to the Jewish people as God's chosen tenants. The archaeological findings in Galilee show a gradual shift from smallholdings to the emergence of **vast centralised estates**. Josephus speaks of these in his Vita ,71. There were great estates just north of Sepphoris, so in walking distance of Nazareth, and Josephus tells how the village around Gischala has to pay part of its harvest in Imperial taxes (Idem).

We know that members of Jesus extended family were smallholders as Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (3, 20,1-6) tells of how the emperor Domitian had the Grandsons of Jude one of Joseph's sons, so Jesus nephews, brought before him to question whether they were truly of Davidic descent, and to ask about the possible coming of Christ. They acknowledge their Davidic ancestry and give an account of themselves but the Emperor decides they are of no significance and lets them go. The reason? They had such little land and their hands and bodies were those of manual workers. So Jesus extended family included agricultural workers like most people. We hear so much in the Gospel of craftsman and fisherman because they were the only other significant types of workers. Jesus is a ***tektõn***, Justin Martyr (Dial 88) says such people made ploughs and yokes. They were craftsmen who could work either stone or wood, although there was little wood in Palestine.

The collusion of the Temple and the Priesthood

Its worth noting that although the people of Galilee had tax to pay to Herod and various duties on produce to Rome (cf. Powerpoint diagram of the Galilaean fishing economy) they were still required by the Priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem to pay tithes and offerings to the Temple and the priesthood. The Gospels start with a picture of Jesus as the devout son of devout observant parents who make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and that it is the most natural thing in the world for him to consult the priests and elders when he is 12 years of age, but as his public ministry

develops his critique of the temple and its manipulation becomes ever more severe. In this he is ahead of his time. The Talmud the later collection of post Temple Jewish wisdom has a famous lament:

> *"Woe is me because of the house of Boethus*
> *Woe is me because of the staves.*
> *Woe is me because of the house of Annas*
> *Woe is me because of their whisperings.*
> *Woe is me because of the house of Kathros*
> *Woe is me because of their pens.*
> *Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael ben Piabi*
> *Woe is me because f their fists.*
> *For they are High Priests, and their sons are treasurers, and their sons-in-law are temple overseers, and their servants beat the people with clubs."*
> (b*. Pesahim57a; t. Menahot 13:21)*

The Great Tradition Deconstructed

Jesus analysis was merely ahead of the game. What the quote points to is the use of violence, the keeping of records of debt, manipulation of Temple positions, the use of rumour to control. It is in his parables that Jesus begins to open this up. In doing so he challenges the "Great Tradition" that among the leaders of his people is the accepted account of how things are, history as it were from above, an imposed ideology that legitimises the domination of the masses by a wealthy and powerful elite. "Great Traditions" are nearly always urban based and written since the written text is always seen as more powerful and of course needs its interpreters, scribes. At the heart of the Great Tradition in Jesus time is the emphasis on ritual purity and the following of all the Sabbath laws, this is the sign of a true paid up child of Abraham. John the Baptist had already railed against this legitimised corruption of the national myth cf Luke 3:7:

> *"Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming retribution. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not start telling youselves*

"We have Abraham as our Father", because, I tell you, God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. Yes even now the axe is being laid to the root of the trees, so that any tree failing to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire."

Jesus will confront this elitist use of Abraham in the Great Tradition and subvert it in the Parable of Dives and Lazarus which we will look at in a moment. What Jesus is doing is picking up on what some scholars call the "little tradition" the oral tradition of the illiterate peasants which in however inchoate way they identify with, the tradition of the protesting prophets, and of the Creator God and his covenant with Creation. Always he seeks to sharpen and deepen what they already know. In doing so he is awakening them to areas of their faith that have been underplayed or forgotten, he is giving them back their own history, a sense of themselves under God. But not the God they have access to via the manipulation of Jerusalem's Temple authorities but rather the creator who is as close to them as a beloved Abba and who establishes them as wanted children. He is trying to break the negative picture they have had imposed upon them by those who control them and which they have partly internalised e.g. the rich are blessed by God and the poor are poor by the will of God.

The result of this work, has been to give a completely new resonance to a great deal of the teaching of Jesus which can now be seen in a richer multi-layered context. What is revealed is a world undergoing major political and economic transformation within the power play of Roman Imperial policy. The Romans were only the last of a series of conquerors of this region but as with all those who had gone before they put their stamp upon their rule. They applied the same principles of control and economic coercion that they applied throughout their empire, hidden though it was by a very clever collaboration with the local authorities in Jerusalem and with the sons of Herod the Great among whom they divided the region.

Effectively they controlled by manipulating mass debt and patronage through an oppressive system of taxation using local officers to bear the brunt of the local

populace's hate. They were involved in deliberate and consistent social engineering such that the people of the Land were being divorced from the land. The new taxes still a vestigial memory in Lukes's gospel chapter 2 "When Quirinius was governor of Syria.." and which Josephus speaks of as heavy and burdensome were all part on f the imposition of a new economics which involved money rather than bartar. The people of the Land had not only to pay extra taxes in kind, and new import and export taxes on all produce entering the land and for the privilege of using the new roads, to do so they had to borow to meet the new taxes, eventually mortgageing the land, and then being forced to sell it when they fell behind with their payments. Many became day labourers, and land once collectively owned became organised into large estate *latifundia* under the control of absentee landowners who lived in the new Greco-roman cities of Caesarea, and Sephoris.

Behind them thy left stewards (economoi) to run the estates, collect produce and dues. We have texts from the time that tell us exactly how the estates should be run and what these Stewards were like (Cato's (234-149 BCE) De agricultura and Varro's (116-27 BCE) Rerum Rusticarum, Varrin 1st BCE, Columella 1St CE) and what they speak of as good roman practice is reflected in the stories we hear of good and bad stewards throughout the gospels. In Jesus stories we have his perspectives on this whole process. If you merely take his stories about Stewards and their Masters and their practice and place them within this now detailed economic map of his world you have a whole social analysis on the part of Jesus and the provocation to an alternative vision and praxis which he summarises under the title "the kingdom of God. "

The Parables of the Alternative Kingdom

Lets take a few of Jesus parables and read them against this backcloth. Its worth remembering he taught these parables to groups, crowds, communities. They were intended to provoke discussion, conversation, raise awareness. They were **the starting point** of a process not the end. They got people to a possible shared "light-on" moment which could then have further consequences. If a group saw the implication of a parable then they saw their world differently and had a choice to

make:- whether to stay with the way things were or to step out into this new "kingdom" way of looking at things.

Dives and Lazarus: the filthy Rich and the dirt Poor Lk 16:19-13

Here we have a representative of the powerful in the land in purple clothes, which cost a fortune and imply a royal or imperial official, whose fine cotton is imported, then as now, at great cost from Egypt. Lazarus meanwhile is described as ***ptokõs*** - destitute, corpselike, almost carrion for the wild dogs. Although in fact they alone are kind to him, licking his sores which are the result of malnutrition. The difference between the two protagonists could not be greater and to underline this Jesus emphasises the great gate that keeps Lazarus (whose name ironically means "God helps") excluded. If only the gate had been open everything would have been different. The rich man dies and is buried with honour.

Up to now we have the Great Tradition's view of the order of things. But Jesus continues the story and the order unravels. Now in paradise, like a privileged dinner guest, Lazarus reclines on the breast of Father Abraham and Dives is in torment in Hades; not Hell but the place where you await the resurrection and learn the lessons you should have done in life. But what has Dives learnt? He asks Abraham to command Lazarus to bring him water but Abraham reminds him of his life and that this is the consequence. There is a play here between the gate Dives could have opened at anytime to have comforted Lazarus and the great gulf which now separates them. Next Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers so they can avoid his fate . Abraham points out they already have all they need the teaching of Moses. Again notice how Dives speaks of Lazarus - as an insignificant slave. He has learnt nothing. And then that extraordinary ironic sentence *"If someone goes to them from the dead they will repent*." And Abraham's retort if they have ignored Moses and the prophets, who spoke God's word, why would they listen to one resurrected.

Throughout Abraham seeks Dives recognition of Lazarus as equally a child of God. The language he uses of Dives is ***teknon***/child and Dives indeed calls Abraham

pater/father but he remains within his own class and family consciousness he only cares about his brothers. He cannot see Lazarus as a child of Abraham and therefore as his brother, which is the teaching of the Torah. In which the land is for all, its produce must not be hoarded but shared, so that even the widow, the stranger and the orphan have enough (Lev. 25; Deut. 15:1-18). In telling this story Jesus places himself squarely in the prophetic tradition of Isaiah 1:16-17,5:7;, Jeremiah 5:23-29; 21:11-14; Amos 2:6-11; 5:10-24 and Micah 3:1-3, 9-12 condemning the exploitation of earlier generations of Kings and oppressive royal officials. It also reveals how class and family interests within the new economy have undermined the sense of solidarity of the people.

The parable gives the people a way of interpreting the two tiered society of the time with Herod and the elite landowners in Galilee and the aristocratic Priesthood in Jerusalem and Judaea. That such a great divide could have opened up between the rich and the poor is the direct result of serious interest on loans, of high taxation and their consequences. The parables open up the reality but they also provoke thought - what could make a difference? In the parable of Dives and Lazarus Jesus allows Abraham to be the teacher. What is required is the re-establishment of a sense of mutuality, of fundamental relationship or kinship. Without this it is possible for the rich to continue to exploit the poor, seizing land and building great estates through the manipulation of debt (Roman imperial policy – ***Latifundia*** mapped out by Cato 2nd BCE, Varrin 1st BCE, Columella 1st CE) The shared space that they all once inhabited as Israel, the people of God, has been undermined. But not only undermined but **re-interpreted**. The poor are to believe this is God's will/blessing.

As Jesus tells the story the situation unravels - the destitute on the street becomes the honoured guest at the heavenly banquet. How is this possible? Either something is wrong here or something is wrong in the afterlife. The story is strange since it includes the ordinary everyday world, a beggar at the door, with the world of the elite super-rich who are not part of the everyday - but in telling this story Jesus listener's begin to see the relationship between the stellar wealth of the minority super-rich and the growing poverty of the masses. And they have an insight into

what might change things - a rediscovery and re-embracing of the vision of kinship and hospitality of Moses and the prophets. It is particularly fitting that Jesus should have used Abraham, who the elite had used as the symbol of their class and its ethnic purity and, who in a certain sense legitimated their rule (Lk 3:7-9). But in Jesus story Abraham is now the one who restores true kinship and hospitality to the destitute.(Lk13:28-29)

Lets take another example:

Workers in the Vinyard : Solidarity Lost and Oppression revealed. Mth 20:1-16

Here we have day labourers , some of whom would have been smallholders trying to implement their subsistence living, some landless and destitute without the support of extended family or local community, some would be wandering and so strangers to the locals so here we have differing working groups vying with each other for limited work. Any sense of **solidarity and identity** has long gone. Normally it would be a steward hiring them, as the land-owners tended to live in the new cities and had little to do with the day to day running of the estate but Jesus deliberately includes the owner here, to again make the link between those at the top of society and those at the base. The normally invisible elite are here made present and, as such, accountable. (Horsley 2011)

They are harvesting grapes and the harvest is a bumper one, the owner must harvest at the optimum moment for the fruit and so goes back again and again to the marketplace until he has enough labour to bring in the harvest. The owner offers the first group a denarius, a reasonable amount, but not generous, for a day's work - enough to keep a small family fed and housed. When he comes back he just tells the next group to go to work and he'll give them what is right. There is no negotiation. The next are told to go without any reference to pay, similarly the last lot for an hour – throughout the landowner has total control.

The owner tells his steward to pay them **in reverse** but orders him to give them all a denarius rather than a proportion of the daily wage equivalent to their hours. The

owner is playing with them, it is a gesture of contempt, an insult implying those who have worked all day are no more valuable than those who have worked for an hour. So shaming is the insult that the workers protest, if they don't then the value of their work in the marketplace is undermined and implicitly they are accepting his right to pay less the next time.

Note the owner does not address the group, **he makes an example** of one labourer, "I do you no wrong , did you not agree with me for a denarius?" As though there has been a mutually agreed contract. Then he expels the labourer "Take what is yours and go". He is sacked he will not be hired again. The seemingly generous boss is revealed as something quite different, cynical and manipulative.

He turns to the group and gives his justification: "I choose to give to this last what I give to you first lot". The money is now his gift , no longer a wage earned. He says their complaint is evil in response to his goodness (literally "is your eye evil because I am good?"). He speaks as though the land is his and he controls its fruit and profit, but the Torah teaches the land is God's and God alone distributes it to the people of the land. The Torah demands re-**distribution** in times of need and condemns hoarding for profit. Even the denarius he so generously gives is a subsistence wage. Jesus story takes his listeners into the heart of **the covenant and its liberation**. It heightens the perversion of the covenant by the powerful rich but it also shows up the **lack of solidarity** among the poor themselves - the rich man can isolate one worker and silence their initial protest. The debate after this parable must have gone on a long time!

<u>The vulnerable whistle blower: the Talents (Mth 25:14-30/Lk 19:11-27)</u>

You all know the traditional interpretation of this parable. God has given us Talents and we will be judged on our use of them at the last judgement. But is that the meaning Jesus intended. The head of household in Luke is ***eugenes (Lk 19:12)*** **,** an aristocrat, heis going off on business and leaves his most powerful servants a huge amount of money, each according to their power (dynamin) to make him profit while he is away. The amount of money is on a fabulous scale, 5, 2 and 1

talents. The investment possible e.g. lending to peasants with high interest rates to plant crops and with the land forfeit as collateral, or buying up essential supplies and selling on at profit to those in most need. Remember the peasants in Jesus time are already paying a large part of their produce in tax in kind to the Romans and to the Temple , so the stewards extortionate and exploitative profit making is on top of already heavy taxation. Again this all buys into the process of alienating the peasants from the land so that they become dependent on the new elite large estate owners. In Luke the Aristocrat departs a nobleman and returns a King. There is a memory of Herod's sons rushing off to Rome to claim the throne. With Herod Antipas returning as King of Galilee.

Look at the praise poured out on the first two stewards, for these few things!... but what would the original audience have thought of them ? And then amazingly the third Steward tells it as it is. He has safeguarded his master money but refused to collude with the iniquitous practices of his fellow stewards. He cuts through the seeming virtue of their service and names and shames his master as strict, cruel, harsh and merciless, as a n exploiter of the labour of others. He exposes the structure of exploitation and gives a prophetic judgement on it. His reward is exclusion, poverty, misery, gnashing of teeth with the cold of the homeless and night . He is being excluded from the luxury of his master household into the daily struggle of the day labourers.

This is a dangerous story because it makes those at the top and the bottom think what would happen if retainers, stewards, no longer colluded with their master but took up common cause with the landless and powerless masses?

The Unjust Judge and the Widow: a critique of the practice of Justice. (Luke 18:1-8)

The parable in Luke and in most interpreters is related to a sequence of Jesus teaching on prayer. Persistent prayer gains God's attention. But that presumes the judge is the God-figure, but the parable refers to him as "fearing neither God nor public opinion" - he is corrupt "***ho krites tes adikias***"a judge of injustice". Beyond shame.

Read it again. She is a widow, she is appealing for justice. This implies she has no male relatives to plead in court for her. The implication is that whatever of her late husband's estate is hers has been alienated possibly by the bribery of the judge by her adversaries who are implied but not named. In the pure Torah the widow , the Orphan and the Stranger are protected people in the new Israel – God's liberated people. Its clear by Jesus time this was being avoided by clever manipulation of the law itself.

So here we have a powerless woman caught up in the manipulation of others and the corruption of the law. Her case frankly given the organisation of society at the time seems hopeless. But she refuses to collude with the injustice – all oppression involves some form of collusion- she refuses to allow her situation to be decided and determined by others. What would have been regarded as her shameless behaviour however ends in a just decision, admittedly given under duress. Had she stayed in the condoned social boundaries of the day she would have remained oppressed an d her future remained bleak. It's a disturbing parable with disturbing implications.

Reflection:

Note again what Jesus is doing in these parables. he is drawing on the **experience of the people**, provoking them to see their world clearly but from a renewed perspective, "the kingdom of God", and inviting them to become **subjects of their own history**. He **empowers** the exploited and oppressed to re-claim their history, to **see it anew**, and to **participate** in creating it. There is a danger when we read these texts in church that we spiritualise them and tend to take away a personal message – what do they mean for me? We miss their essential provocative nature and their call to renew our **collective vision** of a creation under God where all are of equal worth and where the distribution of the goods of the earth, and the sharing of them, and solidarity in service, are at the centre of our collective concern rather than accumulation for profit and personal security. Above all these are texts to provoke collective reflection, renewed imagination, discussion and debate, starting from the conflicted reality we find ourselves in.

Jesus life did not offer an alternative based on abstract ethical demands. It is not a worked out system. But it does provide some basic principles for an alternative critical practice - the practice of the reign of Abba, based on a common life of mutual compassion, forgiveness and engagement. His life inspired his disciples to prolong the logic of his practice in the new historical situations they would have face. The only reason for the church to exist is to bear witness to the possibility of that practice of Jesus continuing in the world.

These stories are part of an ongoing critique at the heart of the gospel of a political, religious and economic order that is undermining the rule or kingdom of God, is destructive of the dignity of God's children, has broken the solidarity of Israel, and is perverting of the central institutions and structures that were to manifest and realise the merciful and abundant goodness of the Creator. They re-evoke the Debt codes in balance of the ritual and purity codes. They show a choice on Jesus part of specifically religious emphasis. Read against this background the gospels become a radical source of provocation to engagement in the equivalent analysis and decision making and community building. It is a work yet to be attempted. But from the grass roots, in the Brazilian BCC's the South African…., the Young Christian workers Gospel enquiries it has been happening for nearly 40 years and is being refined all the time.

There are no answers in the gospel to the immediate problems of our age but there is wonderful inspiration to engage and reflect and together to live and act the rule of God in our time. There is a provocation to thought and action which I do not find immediately in much CST. A provocation to engage critically with society and religion and in solidarity to provide alternative models. The church's history has many , such models monasticism, the Beguines, the Jesuit missions in S America, the Christian worker houses of Dorothy Day, JPII provided a critique of both the materialism of Soviet style Marxism but also of open market capitalism but the critique needs deepening and sustaining and there needs to be some envisioning of alternatives. To

do this requires greater collaboration with forces extraneous to the church, other religions, both genders, a vulnerable planet…..

It is always dangerous when the teaching of Jesus becomes the texts of an elite – ordained, bishops, theologians, etc, because then they can too easily be co-opted into other Great Traditions which often have little to say to the reality in which the mass of the people find themselves. It is always a risk when the Community of the kingdom of God finds common cause with a political great Plans, e.g. the Fascism of the 30s and 40s or for that matter Mr. Cameron's – Big Society.

As the old saying goes: When you sup with the devil you need a long spoon.

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