

CHURCH OF NORTH INDIA SYNODICAL BOARD OF SOCIAL SERVICES

❖ *Theological Framework on Rights Based Approach:*

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# PROBLEMS OF A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK & A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR RIGHTS BASED APPROACH

## Introduction

In the first presentation, I will attempt to identify forces and people in the modern world who refuse to recognize, respect and incorporate the fundamental rights of the TRIBALS, DALITS, WOMEN and CHILDREN. They together constitute the vast majority of the poverty-stricken population of our country. The problem is both secular and religious, sociological and theological-ethical. I will focus on the latter.

Christian theology and ethics continue to be individualistic, otherworldly and non-relational. It is not related to and rooted in the ground, grassroots reality. Theology has been effectively privatized, dehistoricised and thereby depoliticised. I am not talking about 'politics' that is rampant in the church. Increasingly, the political realm has come to be recognized as the encompassing and decisive horizon of the human. In as much as we belong to the polis (city, town or village), we must assume responsibility for its socio-economic-cultural condition. To be political means to be practical, public and critical. We have not been able to make significant shift from orthodoxy to orthopraxis or to regard orthopraxis as the touchstone of orthodoxy. Therefore, we indulge in the misplaced debate between horizontalism and verticalism. The spiritual realm is still considered as some where else cut off from and to the exclusion of the physical-secular realm. Thus the unfortunate confrontation between the pseudo-evangelicals and the ecumenical in the Body of Christ. An authentic evangelical has to be ecumenical. A genuine ecumenical has to be evangelical.

The problem is aggravated by the rich and the powerful, both within India and those belonging to the 'First' and even the 'Second' worlds. Clearly, this means that we are living in a divided, broken and fragmented world. The Christian Right, the Bible Belt in the USA, do not subscribe substantially and structurally to the Rights Based Approach. Such an approach is an anathema to them. Added to these forces and people are the champions of neo-capitalism, for whom the mantra is Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG). After nearly fifteen years of Liberalization, the subalterns in India are not liberated. They continue in captivity in terms of health, education and general economic well-being. Thus the 'war' is not just between the NDA and the UPA but within the present government, between the Congress and the CPI (M). This confrontation or an encounter gives us some idea of the formidable opponents of the Rights Based Approach. Finally, there are leaders and other people in the CNI who cannot be easily identified either as friends or enemies of the Approach. They view this method or methodology as relevant (applications or implications) but not essential or crucial to the affirmation of the Christian Faith. These aloof,

elite Christians conceive of Christian religiosity in an exclusive, completely objective ways and thus losing the element of subjectivity. In such a context, the issue of relevance was relegated if not eliminated. For such people, the systemic relationship between this Approach and Christian theology-ethics was unthinkable.

## Biblical Perspective

The Bible is basically about human and divine power and politics. Thus we read about Egyptian Pharaohs, the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar, Persian Cyrus and Darius and of course the Jewish monarchs of the time like David and Solomon. In the New Testament there is the mention of the Roman rulers like Herod, Pilate and the Centurions. The religion of the Bible emerges at the intersection of history and historical figures. It is not an amorphous, abstract book. There is an active interface of God and the secular, human happenings of the time.

Jesus is not a sadhu or a sannyasin in the traditional understanding of the words. He is a first century Palestinian Jew, walking and working among His own People. He raised critical questions about power and politics of His time. He openly and honestly challenged the Jewish religious leaders particularly about the practice of the SABBATH, which was an ancient sacred institution, about the behavior in the Temple and the interpretation of the LAW. I will briefly look at three examples.

### 1. THE MAGNIFICANT – THE SONG OF MARY – Luke 1.46-55

It is a song of revolt, a political cry, anticipating the mission and ministry, the power and politics of God as demonstrated in Jesus. There are no 'ifs' and 'buts'. It is categorical and unequivocal in its condemnation of the power and politics of those in authority. It is an affirmation of God's politics, which is people-oriented. It is not rajniti but lokniti, the assertion Ganashakti. God is with the powerless people.

### 2. SHEEP AMONG WOLVES: SERPENTS AND INNOCENT DOVES : Matt.10:16

Jesus is not naive or simplistic in his perception of power and politics – complex reality of the world. Therefore on the one hand, he advocates DOVE ETHIC (see also Matt. 5:38-42). But on the other hand, Jesus talks about SERPENT POLITICS. A serpent is a symbol of prudence, discretion and wisdom. Jesus is not surrendering to the prevailing politics. But he realized that a dove ethic without serpent politics is a weak and serpent politics without dove ethic is a politics of deception, His supreme interest in and identification with the weak

and the vulnerable becomes clear in this metaphorical, parabolic language.

### 3. PAYING TAXES TO CAESAR – Mark 12:13 – 17

Jesus knew that the question posed by the Pharisees and the Herodians was a motivated, mischievous one. He realized the “hidden agenda’ as the religious leaders were aligned with the political power. As a Jew Jesus had to respect and obey the Roman colonial authority but without subscribing to Emperor-Worship. He definitely distinguishes between the power and politics of Caesar and that of God. This shows that Jesus essentially a prophet of God who stands for and advocates his/her justice and freedom. His priority, his preference for the helpless, voiceless, dalits, women and children is clear. Consequently, his understanding of transcendence is through immanence, God in terms of machinations of humans. He offers an alternative in terms of the KINGDOM OF GOD as against the power and politics of then world that deliberately marginalize the millions who are deprived of their Rights.

### THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR RBA

From the above Biblical perspective, it is clear that Jesus offers a powerful alternative. He demonstrated this in his life and action, in his person and work. He moved from sympathy to empathy – from samvedna to mukti for the subalterns. His words and deeds bear eloquent testimony to a liberative, empowering vision and mission. In this section, I will focus on the Cross-of Calvary.

### POWER AND POLITICS OF THE CROSS

The political expectation of the ancient Jews was bound up with the concept of MESSIAH. According to their anticipation, the Messiah would be a political leader who would come and overthrow the colonial power and establish a rule of peace and prosperity for the people. Jesus was considered to be the Messiah, the Christ, the ANOINTED ONE. But Jesus himself did not subscribe to that view or conform to their image as show in the Temptation episode (Matt. 4 : 1-11). His response to those who wanted to proclaim Him King disappointed them. (Jn 6:15). But Jesus was political in the sense that he was very much involved in and identified with the people, particularly the wretched of the earth. Therefore incarnation is the enfleshment, embodiment of God in Jesus the Christ – Emmanuel God. So the Christian God is not disembodied, isolated being living in solitary splendor. God in Jesus enters into the rough and tumble, the heat and dust of real life and living. Jesus was with the untouchable lepers, the hungry and the thirst, the sick and the maimed.

His mission and ministry did not impress the Jewish authority and the Roman rulers. He together plotted to murder Jesus. His death on the cross testified to the political thrust of His public life and ministry. Two classes of people were executed in those days – common criminals like robbers and political enemies. The Jewish regarded Him a blasphemer and the Roman rulers considered Him a political rebel. So they inserted “King of the Jews” on the top of the cross. In the theocratic context of the time, politics and religion were not separated. Therefore criticism of politics was considered as criticism of religion and vice versa. As mentioned before, Jesus advocated the politics of God, which was people’s politics and not power politics. Such politics expresses solidarity with the weak and the vulnerable. Jesus had political sense and so he was not indifferent to the political reality. That inevitably led Him to the Cross of Calvary, outside the city. He was crucified with the crucified people of the world. He exposed the hollowness and superficiality of power politics as well as the strength, determination and resilience of the victims of society in terms of their sacrifice, suffering and even death. That Cross becomes “the power and wisdom of God’ (read I Cor. 1:1-18 and 23-24: 4:10; 9:22’ II Cor. 11:30; 12:9; 13:3-4, 9).

Finally, a note about the Jewish Nationalist Party called the ZEALOTS. They engaged in subversive activities against the Roman rule. Jesus was not an official member of the Party but He was for resistance. Some of His disciples were either belonging to the Party like Simon the Zealots or Zealot-sympathizers. Jesus was the Messiah characterized by Zealotism. He wanted and worked for radical, structural, political transformation that would be conducive to the Rights Based Approach and Action. Faith and authentic politics are inseparable. Christian faith in Jesus must “radically dislocate the believer’.

**REV. DR. SOMEN DAS**

# AN AFFIRMATION OF JUSTICE

## JUSTICE VS. RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

*"WHEN THERE IS JUSTICE IN THE LAND, THE FIELDS AND FORESTS AND EVERY LIVING THING WILL DANCE AND SING FOR JOY (PS.96:11-12)"*

### 1. Justice Based Approach

#### 1.1 A free gift of God's Grace

"Biblically speaking, justice is a relational concept involving structures and behaviour based on trust, solidarity and mutuality versus those relying on betrayal, oppression and exploitation. When relations among God, human beings and creation are whole, peace prevails (Isa. 32:17)." (Ecumenical Dictionary, p. 627). The ecumenical family believes justice comes from God and it underlines the relations between God, human beings and creation. It is, therefore, holistic in nature as expressed in Isa.32: 16-18.

Justice is a free gift of God's grace that transforms human beings and creation, liberating them from sin and enslavement (justification). As a gift of grace, justice inspires a spirituality of resistance and alternatives to policies and practices which serve to increase the power and wealth of a few while neglecting the basic needs and the right to life of all. Transformative justice aims at human dignity for all people, a harmonious life with each other and the earth while walking humbly with God in righteousness (Amos 5:21-24). In this sense, justice is the means and the end, at the same time.

The best indicator for the level of justice achieved by any given community or society is the situation of the poorest or most marginalized of its members and of the environment. God who hears the cry of the people out of slavery and oppression does not leave any doubt that the option for the poor should be the yardstick for the common good. The voices of those marginalized as expressed by women, youth, disabled people, Indigenous Peoples and peoples struggling to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression will be the best guides for an analysis of injustice and a discovery of pathways towards just and sustainable communities.

Justice cannot be limited to the notion of *Justicia* as defined in the Roman law, which is atomistic and individualistic: each person is given his/her due (distributive or commutative justice). Transformative Justice, that is inspired especially by African traditions of restorative justice, emphasizes the

constructive task of building just and sustainable communities wherever human beings suffer from the consequences of oppression based on race, gender or religion. Promoting "righteousness" as depicted in the Hebrew Bible calls for the building of societies that

- will be genuinely participatory,
- are ready to correct mal-distribution of power and to overcome the gap between the rich and powerful and the people in poverty within and between countries (Economic Justice),
- accept humanity's dependence upon earth and support sustainable ways for Organizing and developing itself and the sharing of natural resources (Ecological Justice).

The fruit of justice is human dignity and peace.

## 1.2 Criteria for a Justice Based Approach

The JPC work is energized by this notion of justice as it struggles for justice with the marginalized people of the world in implementing its programme of the Ethics of Life and Alternatives to Globalization. There is deep belief that when people advocate for justice, they demand for human dignity and power sharing. This is more than merely demanding for their rights within the same power structures that oppress them. Their hopes and visions are rooted in their religious beliefs and in a spirituality that encompasses and nurtures all dimensions of their lives.

The experience of women, youth, Dalits, Indigenous Peoples, peoples struggling to eliminate racism, persons with disabilities etc. inspires the search for criteria for a Justice Based Approach. This includes the historic dimension of colonial oppression and imperialism that has marked their realities and continues to distort their lives and aspirations and today constantly emerges in new forms. The many ways in which patriarchy has historically conditioned the lives, cultures and even religions of communities and mal-formed the relationships between women and men is another crucial dimension impacting the present realities of our world. These historic and contextual factors are interconnected in people's lives. They have to be addressed within a Justice Based Approach, which responds to people's struggles for justice and dignity.

How can a justice-based approach be implemented by people? How can they use it to judge decisions taken and values promoted that indeed affect their lives and destroy their livelihoods? The wee has focused on the social vision of life in dignity in just and sustainable communities in its interventions to the debates on social and sustainable development. Ecumenical teams have used this vision as a yardstick if certain measures proposed and decisions to be taken empower or undermine the capacity of people and their communities to provide a dignified life for all in diverse social and cultural contexts.

In the work on justice, the wee raised the following questions, which help to apply a Justice Based Approach in essential dimensions of societies that impact on the economic, political and social conditions of peoples lives:

- Does economic globalization realistically promise to meet the fundamental psycho-physical needs of human beings without destroying the basis of life for all?
- Are these needs met equitably? Is there reasonable equality of access to the resources of society?
- Do the dominant economic, political, social and cultural systems allow and actually ensure power sharing and participation?
- Are the decisions taken close to the problems arising and do they support the downward distribution of power?
- Do the dominant economic, political, social and cultural systems enable people to achieve a sense of their own worth, freedom and capacity, rather than being completely vulnerable to decisions of others?
- Is the dominant system ecologically and socially sustainable over generations?
- Do the dominant systems promote the prospects of peace built upon the foundation of justice?

Brought into dialogue with the experience of the marginalized and excluded these criteria and questions will resonate with their specific contextual perspectives and aspirations.

## 2. The Rights Based Approach

### 2.1 The Concept

The Rights Based Approach to Development emerges out of the current push to implement the United Nation's Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESC rights) as advocated for by the United Nations themselves and by many philanthropic and governmental and non-governmental organisations dealing with Human Rights. The debate on the Rights Based Approach is first of all promoted and driven by international development agencies in respect of their development programmes and activities in the South. It involves three stakeholders (the donor agencies, the governments of the South and civil society groups in the South) and promotes good governance, transparency, accountability rule of law and democratization (at times also corporate social responsibility) as criteria conducive for the implementation of ESC rights at local and national levels.

### 2.2 Some basic questions

As an emerging concept, the Rights Based Approach is not yet fully defined and still allows for different interpretations of its goals, objectives and

methods. Nevertheless, some very basic questions and concerns have to be raised from the perspective of the ecumenical focus on justice.

Because justice is a gift of God's grace, it inspires, but also challenges and transcends the language of rights that belongs to the legal profession and the political dimension of life and is therefore exposed to possible abuse by the powers. The obligation to promote justice and the well being of the neighbours is not based on rights. It is rooted in the grateful and free response of human beings to God's gift of life and the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Christian theology speaks of justice and human dignity, of love and compassion. The language of rights only flows out of such basic theological affirmations regarding the relationship between grace, justice, justification and human law. What does this imply for the relationship between a Justice and a Rights Based Approach?

While people all around the world push for the indivisibility and the enforcement of different generations of human rights, there is still a gap between official statements supporting the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the reality on the ground. The difficulties lie in the silent rejection of ESC rights as collective rights by powerful countries like the USA that has not even ratified the UN Covenant on the one hand and outright inability to create enforceable mechanisms on the other. Other reasons are due to lack of resources for their implementation particularly in poor countries. The lack of implementation of ESC rights reflects the denial of justice as the basic fabric of human relationships. How does this impact on the possible results that can be achieved by the Rights Based Approach?

If the distance between legal and constitutional provisions and the realities of the daily lives of people is a reason to look critically at the Rights Based Approach, some blind spots in the concept, which does not address the obvious tension between the collective character of ESC rights and the predominant role of strong individuals in the prevailing "free market" economic paradigm, motivate even more critical concerns regarding the internal coherence and consistency of this approach. Why is the prevailing economic and development paradigm not more intentionally challenged? Does this mean that the profound critique of the development paradigm that is raised by women, Indigenous Peoples and many social movements is no longer relevant? What is the task of the churches in the critique of the forced integration of local and national economies in the dominant global economy?

The criteria of good governance, transparency, accountability, rule of law and democratization (at times also corporate social responsibility) give the impression that the implementation of ESC rights is only hindered by the performance of individual governments and administrations (and perhaps corporations) at national and local levels in the South. The silence concerning the critique of the prevailing development paradigms matched by silence concerning structural injustice in the economy and at international levels, e.g. concerning the International Financial Institutions, the World

Trade Organisation, the role of the UN etc., and by the total absence of any ecological concern. Does the Rights Based Approach sufficiently address structural injustice at all levels? It has been a hallmark of WCC interventions in the various fora for the debate on social and sustainable development that the discrepancy between publicly stated laudable goals and inadequate means to implement them. Ecumenical Teams in such fora have stated again and again that: Social and ecological goals cannot be achieved as such by concentrating on economic growth and improvements of the market mechanisms. These are often the main reasons for the deterioration of the conditions of life. Justice requires amore profound reshaping of social, economic, political and cultural relationships at local, national and international levels. It requires alternatives as underlined by social movements and ecumenical groups gathering at the World Social Forum. Does the Rights Based Approach provides a satisfactory response to the most pressing questions discussed at the World Social Forum?

### 2.3 Justice the Heart of the Matter

There is no compelling reason to move away from a Justice Based Approach. The common journey of ecumenical social thought and action has always centered on justice as the central theme and has continued to explore its relevance in view of new challenges, notably the environmental threats to life. It has been the strength of the ecumenical movement to dig deeper and look for the root causes of concrete problems and challenges that require the analysis of interrelated and inter-locking power networks - political, economical, military, social, cultural, religious.

From the perspective of a Justice Based Approach, the implementation of ESC rights in many societies is to work with the people in forming movements for justice not just withal focus on local administration and national law, but as a decisive mark of all social, cultural, political and economic relationships in society. It entails supporting them in their efforts to reveal and confront the causes of their problems by tracing their national and global interlinking history. Their problems must not be treated as pure local and apolitical in nature but must be linked to geopolitics in the world and the role played by rich nations in history and in the present word-disorder.

A Justice Based Approach cannot only focus on poor countries. It questions the sources of wealth in rich countries. It poses a question: Where does this wealth come from? Are there links between some being rich and others being poor? Is it morally just to consume400 times more of the resources than other people? If some are rich at the expense of the poor and the environment, how do we resolve this problem? Is the Rights Based Approach the right tool in addressing this?

ESC rights are an important tool in the struggle for justice. But they need to be seen in the broader perspective of the transformation of societies into

conducive environments for life in dignity in just and sustainable communities. Any Rights Based Approach needs to function within the framework of a broader Justice Based Approach.

### 3. Justice and the Unity of the Church

The constitution of the World Council of Churches states: "The primary purpose of the fellowship of church in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe."

The different functions of the World Council of Churches are held together by the search for "koinonia in faith and life, witness and service". The essential interconnectedness of the search for visible unity of the church and the quest for justice, peace and integrity of creation has been underscored in recent decades in many ways. The 1983 Vancouver Assembly embarked on the Councilor Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation with the deep conviction that these concerns are intrinsic to the Eucharistic vision of the church.

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (para 20):*

"The Eucharist embraces all aspects of life. It is a representative act of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world. The Eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the CME family of God and is a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationship in social, economic and political life (Matt.5:23f; 1. Cor. 10:16f. 1. Cor. 11:20-22; Gal 3:28). All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ."

The breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine in the Eucharist is the most profound symbol for the centrality of just relationships for Christian faith and the community gathered around the altar.

The Faith and Order study on Church and World and the joint study between Faith and Order and the Unit III Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation on Ecclesiology and Ethics further explored this intrinsic link between the unity of the church and the renewal of human community on the basis of justice, peace and the care for the earth. The church, it was said, by the study on Church and World was to be an effective, prophetic sign of the Basileia of God and for a renewed human community characterized by just holiness. The Ecclesiology and Ethics study even dared to say that individual churches are not fully church if theirs is not an ecumenical quest for justice, peace and creation's integrity.

It is for these reasons that the Justice Based Approach that includes the concern for the integrity of creation and peace needs to inform the ethical engagement of the fellowship of churches that gathers in the World Council of Churches.

#### 4. Mission for Justice

The central Christian commitment to development is to build a truly human society, one, which creates space for life in dignity in diverse just and sustainable communities. The WCC Harare Assembly emphasized that the logic of globalization needs to be challenged by an alternative way of life of community in diversity. It stated: "It is our deep conviction that the challenge of globalization should become a central emphasis of the work of WCC, building upon many significant efforts... We should not subject ourselves to the vision behind globalization, but strengthen our alternative ways towards visible unity in diversity, towards an oikumene of faith and solidarity". Our mission is, therefore, that of seeking alternatives to the current economic globalization that continues to breed massive poverty, exclusion, unemployment and ecological damage.

Implicit in the search for justice is a clear emphasis on the mission of the church that is called to expose, critique, resist and correct whenever possible current economic, social, political and cultural evils. This mission is focusing on Christian practice, relating economics, social and cultural aspects to salvation, clarifying the link between structural injustice and sin, and addressing the role of Christians as major players in the current system who are called to change their ways of life. This mission is focusing to a large extent on the role of the rich and global economic players because the problem is not poverty as such but avarice and unjust wealth creation.

The charter of Christian practice is given to us in the second commandment, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Obedience to this commandment of love means the pursuit of justice. Christians, therefore, must do everything in their power to create a more just ordering of economic life. It is claimed that the business communities and institutions could not learn from this Christian rule of love because it is an imperfect technical implement for use in the world of commerce and fails to answer the hard questions, whose to be loved? How is one to be loved? How much is one to be loved? Churches in their mission to the economic world need to emphasize that Christian practice is inseparable from economic practice. A good Christian refrains from avarice, usury, ostentation and monetary gain, which ignore his/her neighbour. Issues of debt, speculation and unequal terms of trade are a result of lack of justice or loving the neighbour.

#### 5. The role of the Churches and the World Council of Churches

As economic globalization unfolds, the main players have devised new methods for co-opting churches and other social movements. Rather than to

struggle for alternatives, they should concentrate on enhancing the process of globalization. But at the same time, economic globalization continues to place unprecedented power into the hands of a few individuals, states and corporations while the majority of people in the South, and a growing number in the North fall into greater poverty. To deal with this problem churches will have to revitalize their common witness and service to the world in such away that it clarifies the impact of economic globalization. Transformative Justice should be at the centre when churches respond to the main players of economic globalization. It is increasingly important to plan jointly and work together as WCC teams in implementing our mandates. Still we can begin to plan together, articulate the various concepts and work with churches, agencies and other ecumenical bodies on how we can develop and implement the Justice Based Approach.

# SELL MY INHERITANCE? ..... NO! NEVER! THE DAY I SELL IT, THAT DAY WILL “I” DIE!

## *THE STORY OF NABOTH (I KGS 21:1-16)*

In the Statement of the Annual Enclave of the SBSS at Mumbai in 2004, a declaration is made that three core sectors have been identified as strategic thrust areas in order to impact sustainable change in the communities, namely, Right to Livelihood, Land Rights and Identity/ Social Exclusion. It is in the context of such a concern that the following Bible study is presented.

1. In 1Kgs 21:1 we are introduced to a person called “Naboth the Jezreelite”. This means “Naboth the man from Jezreel”. What a different way of introducing a person! We talk of “Amitabh the Super Star!” or “Sachin the Master Blaster!” or “Nehru the Prime Minister” or “Dr. Arun Mehta, MBBS, MS, FRCS”. People are usually introduced by their accomplishments. However in this Bible story, a tribal person is introduced by the land to which he belongs. Land was the basis of his identity.

Similarly let us look at John 1:45-46. How is Jesus introduced there? Yes, Jesus is introduced as “Jesus of Nazareth”. Nazareth was the basis of the tribal Jesus’ identity. So much so that Nathaniel mocked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Land was the basis of Jesus’ identity. For many poor people, particularly villagers and especially tribals, their life derives meaning from the land in which they have grown up, the land of their inheritance.

2. Since we are talking of Naboth the Jezreelite, we have to ask ourselves, “Where is Jezreel?” Jezreel was a very fertile place southwest of the Sea of Galilee (then known as the Sea of Chinnereth) and west of the Jordon River as it proceeded from the Sea of Galilee on its way to the Dead Sea (then known as the Salt Sea or Sea of Arabah). This plain land of Jezreel was between Mt. Tabor and Mt. Gilboa. So fertile was this land that it was called “Jezreel”(yizre’el) which means “God sows” or “God makes fruitful” or “May God sow /make fruitful”.

An allusion to the fertility of Jezreel is made in Hosea 2:21-23. Even in our times our Keralite friends call their fertile land as “God’s own country”. Naboth came from fertile Jezreel.

3. Not only were Jezreel a fertile place it was also important as a centre and avenue for trade and commerce. It was the major corridor through the rugged hills of Palestine. It was interlaced with routes from the Mediterranean on the West to Beth-shan, the Jordan Valley, and the Tran Jordanian Plateau on the East, and from the hill country and

Egypt in the South to Galilee, Syria, and Phoenicia in the north. Therefore the city of Jezreel was a place of commercial significance. It was something like Guwahati in the Brahmaputra Valley. Guwahati receives the products of the fertile Brahmaputra Valley and is an important Gateway between Northeast India and the mainland of India.

And so Naboth came from Jezreel, the fertile and commercially important place. But as indicated earlier, his relationship with Jezreel was much deeper and intense.

4. The city of Jezreel was included among the places granted to the tribe of Issachar as an inheritance. Issachar as we know was the son of Jacob and Leah. His family came to be recognized as one of the 12 constituent tribes of Israel. After the Israelites occupied Canaan, the land was divided among the 12 tribes. Let us look at what land was inherited by the tribe of Issachar. Let us read Joshua 19: 17-23. Notice in verse 18 that Jezreel is the first city-village inherited by Issachar.

So Naboth belonged to the tribe of Issachar. The property that he occupied was the land inherited by his “fathers”.

5. The first verse of 1Kgs 21 tells us that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel. Along with the olive and fig trees, the grapevine is one of the most characteristic plants of Palestine. They are “naturally” related to the land. The three are mentioned together in Jotham’s fable. Elsewhere they symbolize the fruit of the land. Let us see Joshua 24:13

In biblical times, many individuals had no other means of livelihood other than their vineyards. Naboth too seems to be in such a condition. If his land were to be taken away from him, Naboth would be as good as dead. His life was inseparably bound with that vineyard. Even in our times for tribals as well as for villagers, the place where they have grown up, their land (including water sources and forests) is the basis of their livelihood. Displace them and they are as good as dead!

6. In 1Kgs.21: 1 we are given some information about the location of Naboth’s vineyard. Where was it situated? Yes, it was beside the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria. This information also tells us something about the period in which Naboth lived and the historical situation of the time.

King Ahab was the son of Omri, a very able person who ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel (consisting of 10 tribes) from about 880 to 874 BCE. He recaptured the military strongholds, which Israel had

earlier lost, and built Samaria as his capital (1Kgs16:23-24). Ahab succeeded him (1Kgs16:28) and ruled for almost 20 years from about 874 to 853 BCE. We are told in 1Kgs16:30-34 that Ahab was attracted to the popular fertility cults and religious practices of the time. His marriage to Jezebel was symbolic of his love for sensual pleasures and worldly accomplishments.

More significant for our study is that while Ahab had his royal official palace in the city of Samaria, he also had a country palace in Jezreel. Perhaps he might have had similar palaces or vacation resorts in other towns and villages as well. But Jezreel was an important place because of its fertility and commercial richness. And so he valued his property in Jezreel very highly. Don't we have similar parallels of wealthy people and their multiple properties in our society today? The lives of these rich people do not depend upon their farm houses, beach resorts and forest cabins. Yet they are not satisfied. They want more and more in terms of property, money, luxury and pleasure. This is exactly what happened to Ahab.

7. The multi-propertied Ahab wanted to get possession of Naboth's only inheritance, his vineyard. Of course Ahab was willing to give Naboth a good deal. What does he offer Naboth? See verse 2: *"I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give its value in money."* Yes it was a very attractive offer! And for what purpose did Ahab want the vineyard? Look again at verse 2 *"For a vegetable garden."* Note that carefully. He wanted to convert Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden. Is it that the king wanted to have some physical exercise by cultivating a vegetable garden? Is it that the king wanted to supplement his diet with vegetables? Perhaps the desire to have a vegetable garden was only a lame excuse to enlarge his holiday resort. Or perhaps there was a business motive. While grapes were easily and cheaply available in Jezreel, King Ahab could make money by selling vegetables. Remember, we had seen how Jezreel was located strategically on a junction of trade routes.

Do you see parallels to Ahab's behaviour in our society today? Have you noted how shrewd people discern that the value of land in a particular place will go up in the future, and so they buy the land from the villagers and later sell it to builders /industrialists at a higher price? Have you seen forested hill slopes being converted to tea gardens? Have you seen paddy agriculture being converted to commercial aquaculture?

The poor people eagerly give their land to rich individuals or to multi-national companies because of the tempting money they offer and the pictures of prosperity they conjure. However, eventually the rosy dreams become thorny realities; earth and the quality of life deteriorate. Short-term boons give rise to long-term banes.

Did Naboth get attracted to Ahab's offer?

8. What does verse 3 tell us about Naboth's response to Ahab? Yes, Naboth refused to give his land to Ahab. What was the reason he refused to do so? Naboth was firm in saying that there was no question of giving land, which was inherited by his "fathers". For the Israelis the land that their tribes and clans occupied was God's gift to them; no one could lay claim to own the land. Why did they say so?

Yes, the answer goes back to the book of Genesis. Abraham, whom the Israelis (and even the Arabs) consider to be their primary patriarch, was a nomad. Nomads, as we all know, are people who do not have any land, which they can call, as their permanent homeland. They keep on moving from place to place. It was to Abraham and to his descendents that God promised to gift the land of Canaan as their land of permanent abode. In other words this land was their inheritance from God. It was to be the basis of their identity as God's children, belonging to God. If the nomadic Israelites were to get land as their permanent abode and a mark of identity, God would have to act in history. This is exactly what God did. He liberated the Israelites from their political and economic bondage in Egypt, and enabled them to occupy the land of Canaan. Let us look at Exodus 32:13. Similar thoughts are expressed in Deuteronomy 4: 37 – 39

9. The concept of **inheritance** means that the land is given to Israel; it is not won, acquired, or conquered. Therefore the admonition of God in Leviticus 25:23, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine". Land belongs to God. Perhaps some of you know what Psalm 24:1 says. Let us look at it.

However what God allowed Israelites to do in dire circumstances was "leasing" of land. But even in such a situation the land would have to return to the original inheritor at the time of the Jubilee Year. Kindly read Leviticus 25:13-17. Yes, land and all creation belong to God. We are only trustees of it.

In our times what is the ideology of the rich and multi-national corporations regarding land and all that it contains?

In Israelite experience and faith, land was not only an inheritance but it was also essentially expressive of the **identity** of the person. By continuing to occupy the land of one's "fathers" one was not only linked with them but also with their history and the God of their history. If a person's land were taken away from him/her, his/her identity itself would be destroyed. In Numbers 27:1-11 we have the episode in which the daughters of Zelophehad are very anxious to maintain the identity of their father: "Our father died in the

wilderness... and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his family, because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brethren" (Num27:3-4). In the story of Ruth, one of the reasons why Boaz marries her is to perpetuate the name of her dead husband, Mahlon in his inheritance. See Ruth 4:10-11.

Today, in the name of development, we are uprooting tribals and villagers from their homelands. Their land is submerged by the waters of gigantic dams. Their forests are cut down and bulldozed. In this process their identities are lost, their way of life or culture is adversely changed, and their socio-economic means of subsistence and community living are destroyed. They may physically survive in another place, but they are living as dead people! Do you know of any such people from your own experience or knowledge?

Don't you think that Naboth was justified in not giving his land to Ahab?

10. Yet cruel injustice was done to Naboth. 1Kgs 21:5-16 narrates to us the wickedness of Jezebel, Ahab's wife. We are aware of what she did, how false charges were brought against Naboth, how he was put to death, and how Ahab takes occupation of Naboth's land

Jezebel should not be blamed exclusively. Her husband gave his quiet consent to what she was doing. Isn't this story familiar in our day-to-day lives? Don't we see government leaders or persons in authority giving their quiet consent to the treacherous plans and activities of the rich and the powerful? Such injustice is not the handiwork of only one or two individuals. It involves a whole network of people. In Naboth's case, not only the two base fellows, but also the elders and nobles were involved in the unjust trial and murder of Naboth and the usurpation of his land. Even in our times we are faced with a vicious system, which has widespread tentacles.

11. How does God respond to such evil? Let us look at Isaiah 5: 8. So also let us see what Micah 2:1-2 says. In both these passages what do we discern?
  - God condemns greed that makes human beings selfish.
  - God's anger rages against the unethical and cruel means used by the greedy rich.
  - God's serious concern for the poor and the oppressed.

It is in such a context that we need to look afresh at the Nazareth Missionary manifesto of Jesus in Luke 4: 18-19

# BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE AND HOPE

## *Insights from the First Epistle of Peter*

When Christians reflect upon their life-style and mission in society, many of them get caught in a dilemma: how should they respond to the challenges in society? A traditional pietistic reading of passages such as John 18:36 where Jesus says, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight ...” implies that Christians are not to be engaged in political, economic and other matters in society. However, there are other biblical passages, which seem to exhort people to be actively engaged in society. For example Jesus himself is supposed to have committed his life to the scriptural commission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...” (Luke 4: 18-19). Hence the predicament of people engaged in church ministries of social concern: How do we get congregations to become involved in giving expression to the gospel in society? How do we encourage the churches to build communities of resistance and hope? Let us, in this Bible study, see whether we can get some insights from the First Epistle of Peter.

This letter is supposed to have been written by Peter while he was in Rome during the early sixties. Peter may have written this letter around A.D. 64, not long before his martyrdom and shortly before the outbreak of the persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor Nero. Peter was writing this letter in particular to the Christians living in the region of Asia Minor, somewhat equivalent to the region of modern day Turkey. His objective was to comfort and strengthen them in their Christian life and commitment especially as they were facing persecution: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold ... may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (I Pet. 1:6-7).

Most probably the Christians were suffering persecution at the hands of their neighbours who “are surprised that **you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy** (of living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry), and they abuse you” (cf. I Pet. 4:3-4). Peter exhorts the Christians, “Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to **account for the hope that is in you**, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear...” (I Pet. 3:15-16). Peter was calling Christians to be communities of **resistance and hope**. In other words, Peter was encouraging Christians to live responsible lives in society.

However when Christians live responsibly, they are bound to face persecution. Peter would have been reminded of the words of Jesus: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

(John15:19) Christians were called to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people in society to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the values of the reign of God on earth (cf. I Pet.2:9-10).Those whose interests clashed with the message of the gospel - they might have been some sort of hedonists, or staunch adherents of the prevailing religions or cultures of the times or leaders who wielded power in society - framed false charges against Christians, labeling them as "wrongdoers" (cf. I Pet. 2:12).It is not clear whether these persecutors had the tacit support of government officials. In fact Peter seems to be expressing deep faith in the government. In I Pet. 2:13-17 it is written, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right... Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor."

We experience a similar situation in India. The Church is a minority religious body, the members of whose various denominations are scattered all over the country just like the Christians who were dispersed all over Asia Minor in Peter's time. Christians and other minority communities as well as organizations and movements standing for justice, human rights, liberation from different kinds of bondages, etc., are time and again subject to hardships and persecution. There are several social, political, economic and religious factors behind such afflictions. Political parties, whether they are constituent members of the ruling central and state governments or not, quite often seem to be involved in such activities. Yet on Republic Day or Independence Day we often hear this text I Pet.2:13-17 read in churches and assemblies of Christian organizations. Another popular scripture passage is Rom.13:1-7 which begins with the words "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God ..." In such a situation how are Christians to be part of communities of resistance and hope?

It is so very easy to quote Bible passages to suit one's particular perspective and exhort people to follow the teachings from God's word very faithfully. Most Christians seem to be living by a confused theological faith. They at times operate from a dichotomous perspective of this world and the other world. This world is influenced by principalities and powers which are opposed to God's purposes (Eph.6:12). The other world is heaven where God rules and everything is perfect. So what matters to them is the salvation of their individual souls, securing for themselves a room in the Father's house above (John14:2). Many Christians also believe that everything that happens in the world is by God's will. Therefore emperors and governors are installed, and political election results are all determined by God's will (Rom.13:1).So also God allows persecutions and killings to take place. Passages such as Luke 4:18-19 where Jesus talks of preaching good news to the poor are interpreted in terms of charity which eventually adds merit to one's soul and could make one fit for a better place in heaven. Thus resistance is understood exclusively in terms of individual piety by virtue of

which one does not fall into temptation (I Pet. 2:11) or in terms of faithful adherence to one's ecclesial doctrines so that one is not tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine (Eph.4:14), and hope is visualized solely in terms of life after death.

If such were the case why did God (in the book of Exodus) not allow the Hebrew people to suffer bondage under the Egyptian pharaoh and grant them a land flowing with milk and honey in the other world? Why did God institute the Jubilee Year of ecological and socio-economic justice (Lev. ch.25)? Why did God raise prophets calling for reform in society? Why should Amos have declared God's word, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24)? Why did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego not obey the King's decree? Why did Jesus who had said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt.5:39) not practise what he preached when an officer struck him at the trial (John18:22)? In fact Jesus retorted, "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" (John 18:23). Why should Jesus have been so obsessed with the kingdom or reign of God being realized on earth and to teach that prayer, "Your kingdom come, *your will be done on earth* as it is in heaven" (Matt. 4:17; 6:10)? Surely there is more to resistance than simply adherence to individualistic piety and sound doctrines! Surely there is more to hope than merely holding on to a futuristic other-worldly experience! Surely there is more to resistance and hope than these being only 'individual' exercises!

Today we are living in a country where corruption, nepotism, fundamentalism, communalism, and oppression have become so much a part of our daily life that instead of resisting these evils we are submitting ourselves with resignation to these forces. We take recourse to, and comfort in, our traditional doctrines of a future world of justice and peace and adopt the policy of minding our own business on earth. At the time when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared emergency in India some of our church leaders expressed support for her action. When Indira Gandhi lost the elections and the Janata Party (whose members had opposed the emergency) came to power, the church leaders expressed their support to them as well. Keeping in mind its vested interests of comfort and security as a minority community, the Church failed to take a responsible stand. However in the light of the questions raised and comments made in the previous paragraph, we need to take a fresh look at our Christian stance and witness. In fact James warns us, "Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." (James 4:17). Resistance requires a Nathan-type boldness to stand up to a king and say, "You are the man (who has sinned against God and society)! (2 Sam.12:7). It calls for a Peter-and-John-type courage to tell the religious authorities, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20).

So when Peter says, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by

him” Peter is expecting the rulers to be just and to be faithful to their task of punishing those who do wrong and praising those who do right (I Pet.2:14). Moreover he implies that if earthly authorities go against God’s will then our primary responsibility is to obey God. In other words the state and all earthly authorities are divinely appointed to protect the weak, render justice to them, and devise the welfare of all in society. When they fail in their task, the Church has the responsibility to resist, to work for reform, and to commit itself hopefully to this mission. It is in a context of individual, social and structural sin that the gospel of salvation, liberation, and the reign of God has been given to us. Therefore Christians cannot but bear witness to it. Let us not limit ourselves to the problem of individual sin and the gospel of individual salvation!

It is very significant that Peter concludes his letter by referring to the church in Rome as the church in Babylon (I Pet. 5:13). In New Testament times Rome had taken on the characteristics of the classic example of a world power hostile to God - Babylon, whose king, Nebuchadnezzar, had destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple in 587 BCE. Babylon had become the proverbial symbol of devastation, exile and bondage. The book of Revelation has verses of terrible judgment reserved for Rome symbolized by the name Babylon: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion” (14:8); “Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, ‘So shall Babylon the great city be thrown with violence and shall be found no more...’” (18:21). Therefore if the churches in the Asia Minor region were living as the scattered diaspora, as minorities in exile, so the church in Rome was living in similar conditions under the ‘Babylonian’ rulers of society.

Therefore the exhortation of Peter, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” should not be understood in a superficial literal sense; one has to interpret those words in a contextual and deeper sense. For any society to function smoothly there should be law and order in the society. The principles of law and order and the values of community development and peace are usually enshrined in the constitution of the country. To the extent that the ideals of society are just and the social machinery functions to ensure proper administration, Christians should be responsible in facilitating the process of law and order in the society. When authoritative or powerful people within the structure start behaving like ‘Babylonian’ rulers then persons who are faithful to their Christian calling and responsibility in society are bound to face hardships. So while in the idealist sense one has to be subject to every human institution, the ground reality is that the church is living in a ‘Babylonian’ situation. Christians are facing persecution. In his brief letter, Peter talks about persecution at least four times: 1:6-7; 3:16-17; 4:12-19; and 5:9.

It is not simply a matter of living an inner virtuous life, but of being responsible in your life, work and relationships in society. An inner self-righteous spirituality may not give rise to opposition in society. Usually

passive accommodative churches do not suffer persecution in the society. It is only when their commitment to the total implications of the gospel are expressed that persecutions begin. When people of Christ-like integrity impact the society through their life and work, they will encounter opposition and hostility. It is in such contexts that Peter tells Christians that they have to be courageous and persevering enough to resist and stand up for what is just, responsible and wholesome in society. *“Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.”* (I Pet. 3:16-17)

Nobody resists if he/she is not convinced of the worthiness of the cause. A person does not risk his/her life unless the person realizes the righteousness of the matter in question. That itself is the basis of their hope. Hope is not simply a conviction about future expectations, but the very essence of the motivation and commitment of a group of people. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as they faced the fiery death, said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defence to you in this matter. If our God is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” Such a hopeful conviction in standing for what is just and responsible does not go in vain. This is what Peter also assured the churches about: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (I Pet. 1:3). And so Christians are called to be communities of resistance and hope.

This hope will one day see its fruition. This is Peter’s conviction: “But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you will be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed”(I Pet. 4:12). A group of freedom fighters had been arrested, tried and sentenced to death. The jailor who was to lead them to the gallows asked them why they had wasted their life for a fatal cause. One of the freedom fighters drew the attention of the jailor to a sapling that was growing in the compound. He said, “True we will be dead and gone. But we have planted a sapling of freedom. One day this sapling will grow into a great banyan tree of an independent nation. We have that joyous hope, and so we go to the gallows in peace! We will live through our future generations in the land of freedom!” Jesus had similarly said, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John12:24-25).

*Likewise, God is calling us to be communities of resistance and hope!*

**REV. DR. ROGER GAIKWAD**

# JUSTICE: ITS THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY AND EQUALITY

*(Gist of the Bible Study presented by Rev Dr Sunil Caleb, at the Annual Conclave of CNI-SBSS held during September 24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> 2004, at YMCA, Mumbai)*

## JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY

It is indeed appropriate that the CNI-SBSS has chosen the theme ‘*Let Justice Roll*’ for its annual conclave and in tune with its task of ‘building communities of resistance and hope’. Not only from the sociological and developmental perspective, theologically, building communities recognizes the human nature of social beings. Things that human beings share in common, binds us together. It is not only difficult but impossible to live alone. For our sanity, for our safety and for our spirituality we come together as a community. We worship God that is Three person, the Holy Trinity is a community. The basic language of Bible is collective. Spirituality in the Bible is not about philosophy and metaphysics; it is about relationships between human beings and God’s creation. As Emmanuel Levinas a Jewish Philosopher points out, “Moses and the Prophets were not concerned with the mortality of the soul, but with the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger”

The people of Israel understand community in a rather exclusive terms shutting out those who were not of the Hebrew faith. Instead of a community that sought to bring light and justice to others it sought its own self-preservation. Jesus’ coming was in order to establish an inclusive community of people devoted to doing the will of God. The preaching of Jesus and his mixing with sinners (Zaccaeus, women (Samarita) Gentiles (the Centurion and Syro – Phoenician women) touching the dead (widow of Nain’s son) lepers and others ritually impure people (woman with flow of blood) showed that he was going against the exclusiveness of the Temple and the religious elite of his day, who sought to confine God to only those who were ritually pure in the way of the defined and controlled. Jesus’ desire to build an inclusive community is seen in the way that he built a community of followers who supported one another. There was diversity in inclusiveness even in the twelve apostles. For there were fishermen, a tax collector and a freedom fighter, Galileans, Judeans and even one with a Greek name (Philip). There were not only twelve apostles, who were all men, but as Luke tells us there were a group of women who were also part of this close knot community.

Religion is never a bar for those who want to join the kingdom of God, or the community of those who do the will of God. Therefore the community

building work of the SBSS too, while emerging from the baptized followers of Jesus Christ, cannot be confined to them alone but rather must have as its goal, the formation of a community of those obedient to the will of God which was the work of Jesus Christ. That the community building and community consciousness is central to the Christian way is proved by the fact that the Church is compared to the body of Christ. This comparison affirms 'community with diversity and differentiation'

We have seen how the building of communities is central to the Christian task. Let us turn briefly to the question of how even Justice is seen in the Bible mainly in community terms. It is not an abstract term but is seen to be carried out in a community. We think of judgement as being something to do with a court, with acquittals or with sentencing. However, as Duchrow and Liuedke, points out 'the biblical words for 'to judge' have rather the connotation of 'to arrange' 'to put in order again'. Shalom is the experience of a process that is designated by the 'judge'. The judge is the one who establishes justice and consequently peace in the community. God's act of judgement is an active saving of broken relationship. During the time of Amos it was prosperity for the rich through international trade. However the prosperity came through the exploitation of the weak and the vulnerable.

Justice in community then means justice in relationships. Relationships can never flourish in the face of large economic disparities and inequalities. In a world where eventually everything is owned by God and where every person is made in the image of God, large economic inequalities are a sign of injustice.

### Justice and Equality:

The Biblical account of creation itself gives us the firm basis for equality in the community. Ancient Israelites were either escaped slaves from Egypt or lower class Canaanites in revolt against Canaanite city-states. They viewed Yahweh as the one who liberates slaves and that at least the adult males, were politically, socially and economically equal. As economic inequality is very damaging to the sense of community, one of the most important ways to build community unity was through checking the natural human tendencies towards hoarding and showing off material superiority.

The concern for economic equality in the Hebrew Bible is seen in the provisions regarding the forgiveness of debt and the manumission of slaves. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus we see the many instructions regarding debts. All these are made so that a person may never get into debt trap, the kind that we see in our country where people who have taken a small loan of even a thousand rupees to meet medical expenses have ended up a bonded labour. With regard to the attitude towards slavery, commands for the release of slaves are found in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The provisions on keeping slaves lies a view that all people are equal in the sight of God and it is unnatural for anyone to be a slave of another.

When we look at the views of the prophets in the Torah, their primary criticism was of the rich and their accumulation of wealth. This was mainly because they saw the injustice and exploitation that lay behind the accumulation of land, slaves and houses, for by the eighth century BC, in the times of Amos, Micah and Isaiah, many of the small holdings had been absorbed into the large landed estates of a new aristocracy.

Even in the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles we find that the call to community and to economic equality is very strong. This is seen in the fact that if there is one commandment to 'love one's neighbor as oneself. The emphasis by Jesus upon building a community is so full of love and generosity with no expectation of a return. Not only is there encouragement for us to recklessly share, but also on the emphasis upon punishment for those who refuse to do so. The parable of the Labourers in the vineyard though usually interpreted as a parable about the calling of all people into the Kingdom, can also be interpreted as an example of the kind of equality that Jesus is calling for, an equality where it could be said that each person must give according to his or her ability and each person has a right to receive according to his or her need. Thus in the parable the laborers have all offered their service; they have given or will give according to their ability.

The ideal for economic equality was one that is not confined to biblical writers alone. It was very significant element in the teaching of the early church fathers too. Just as it is absurd for us to buy and use shoes that are too large for our feet, so we should understand that it is wrong to keep wealth above our essential needs. We live in times of extraordinary inequalities of income. The biblical way and the just way is to redistribute income from those who have more than they need to those who have less than they need.

We work well and relate well with those of a similar economic standing. Hence, if we want to fulfill our mandate and God's mandate of building communities of resistance and hope we need to address the economic equality issue as well. This is a justice issue as well as an issue of building loving relationships, for Jesus said "love your neighbor as yourself"

### Women and Equality:

We know from the story of Mary and Martha in the Bible, that Martha was busy in the kitchen while Martha was listening to Jesus. They have differences in the choice of their profession. Martha was busy trying to serve and attend to Jesus while Mary was listening to the teachings of Jesus. And Jesus does not hesitate in teaching the woman. This tells us that Jesus give equal importance in spiritual teaching to woman too. He gave teachings to Mary – the part that Mary had chosen.