

# Proclaiming jubilee justice

## Moment of opportunity

*Maria Harris*

### *The force of the times*

**W**E ARE MORE THAN SIMPLY TOUCHED by the times in which we live. Our times shape and direct us, they make moral claims on us and often bring forgotten issues back to centre stage. 'Thank God our time is now when wrong/Comes up to face us everywhere', wrote Christopher Fry a jubilee-time ago, describing an era when '... The frozen misery/Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move ...'.<sup>1</sup> To use a metaphor of Martin Buber, such times 'inflict destiny' on us; they act as 'words demanding an answer happening to us'.<sup>2</sup> Given the great issues of our time – economic and political cries for liberation; globalization; poverty throughout two-thirds of the world; given the presence of apparently limitless scientific, technical and artistic imagination, how shall we respond? How shall we fulfil what John Paul II refers to as 'the duty to sanctify time'?<sup>3</sup>

Jewish and Christian traditions provide an answer that already influences millions today, not least those who formed the human chain of protest against debt in Birmingham, England, in May of 1998 and in Cologne, Germany, in June 1999. We are to respond as jubilee people. Traditionally, jubilee is a sacred *time*, set apart as the 'Sabbath of Sabbaths'. And, although the question whether it has ever really been tried is periodically raised,<sup>4</sup> jubilee nonetheless offers a living blueprint for the moment of opportunity upon us as 1999 shades into 2000. Its primary text, chapter 25 of the Book of Leviticus, reads:

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the day of atonement – you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants ... For it is a Jubilee; it shall be holy to you.  
(Leviticus 25: 8–10a, 12a)

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### *A tightly woven fabric*

The scholarship and commentary that surround jubilee teaching cite two further scriptures of primary importance: Isaiah 61:1–4 and Luke 4:16–30. The latter describes the return of Jesus to Nazareth where he had been brought up and tells of his selection of the Isaiah text when invited to speak in Nazareth's synagogue. In both texts, the Spirit of the Lord is invoked as being 'upon' the speaker who has been 'anointed' to preach good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, sight to the blind, and 'a year of the Lord's favour'. Scholars point to the likelihood that both Isaiah and Jesus, in alluding to the year of favour, were pointing back in history to the teachings of jubilee, and pointing forward to their application in the present and the future.

That scholarship – notably in the work of John Howard Yoder and André Trocmé<sup>5</sup> – weaves several teachings into a thick and unified fabric. Keep a Sabbath of fallow land at the same time as you practise forgiveness and freedom. Grant remission of debts. Do justice and sound the trumpet. Touch any one of these threads and the entire jubilee fabric quivers. Observe a centennial or millennial year Sabbath when the land lies fallow, for example, and the land itself is freed; forgive debts, and reconciliation ensues; engage in the festivity signalled by the trumpet's summons and the justice of jubilee sings.<sup>6</sup> In what follows I respond to *The Way's* invitation to concentrate on one of these threads, jubilee justice, arguably the summation and spiritual centre of jubilee. In the rest of this essay, I comment on the meaning of jubilee justice, on the faces of economic justice, and on five pastoral responses that can empower churches to hold a just jubilee in 2000 and beyond.

### *Meanings of justice*

Justice is so multifaceted a reality that we have developed many ways to speak of it. It is, to start, a spirituality. I use the word 'spirituality' to refer to our way of being in the world in the light of the Mystery at the core of the universe. The term 'spirituality' also includes what this Mystery asks of us, including the demands recorded by the prophet Amos:

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an ever flowing stream. (5:23–24)

Study of these demands leads to the recognition that justice must be imagined not only as a blindfolded figure balancing a set of scales, but as a present action urged on us by a God of justice who demands that we preach it and that we do it. As such, justice is a constituent dimension of the Gospel – and of the jubilee.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible unfolds another set of meanings, those related to prophecy. The prophets never preach a watered-down justice nor even a gentle justice. Instead, for them, justice is passionate, tempestuous, hot-headed, and most of all, immediately necessary. Such prophetic justice is born, according to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, from the *pathos* of God. Heschel says that the divine pathos or grief contributes to making prophetic teaching bothersome and irritating: prophecy creates discomfort in both temple authorities and ordinary people. They read the Bible for a sense of order, but instead of getting it are thrown into 'orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place'.<sup>8</sup> Then Heschel makes his point. 'The things that horrify the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world.'<sup>9</sup>

The Hebrew word for justice is *mispat*, which has a variety of meanings – not only 'justice', but 'judgement', 'rights', 'vindication', 'deliverance' and 'custom'. Strong evidence exists, moreover, that originally *mispat* referred to the restoration of an environment that promoted equity and harmony – *shalom* – in a community. It is a word regularly found in the psalms and in the works of the prophets, especially when God is portrayed as having a particular concern for the poor, the widow, the fatherless and the oppressed. It refers to basic human rights and to the restorative act of repairing the world.<sup>10</sup>

In my view, the biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann provides the clearest rendering of the justice envisioned for jubilee time: justice means you find out what belongs to whom and give it back. Brueggemann says that sometimes we possess things so long we begin to think of them as ours even though they do not really belong to us. We neglect Leviticus 25:23 with its sobering reminder that no thing and no one belongs to us 'in perpetuity'. Instead, says the God of Israel, 'With me you are but aliens and tenants'. But at other times, Brueggemann continues, 'by the mercy of God, we have occasion to see to whom [everything] in fact belongs. And when we see that, we have some little chance of being rescued from our misreading of reality.'<sup>11</sup>

For those of us so privileged we have forgotten who owns what, jubilee justice comes as gift. Like a mantra, it keeps exhorting, 'return', not only in the sense of the jubilee journey back to our place and our

ancestors, but return as relinquishing, giving back, handing over what belongs to God and to those without justice throughout the world.

### *Economic justice*

Questions of return, relinquishment and what belongs to whom inevitably bring us to economic questions. Today, the word 'economics' is so closely associated with the realms of production, development and management of material wealth that it is difficult to understand it in any other way. Nevertheless, when viewed economically, the face of justice turns not only in this direction but in two others. It turns toward ecology and it turns toward householding or 'home' economics. Including each of these as aspects of economic justice makes *the* economy even more essential to jubilee.

### *Ecology*

The Greek word *oikoumene* comes from the noun *oikos* – a house or dwelling – and the verb *oikeo* – 'to live' or 'to dwell'. Usually the word is translated as 'the whole inhabited world', although human arrogance has often led to our forgetting that this inhabitation includes others besides ourselves. Deer and duck, stone and sand also inhabit the whole round earth. So a first element of economic justice is responsibility to the *oikoumene*, where 'find out what belongs to whom and give it back' means stop polluting the environment. As the jubilee arrives, return to the water, the soil, the air, and the non-human animals what belongs to them.

### *Economy and householding*

Following Wendell Berry,<sup>12</sup> I use the term economy to include and highlight the practices and customs of human housekeeping and human householding and the ways the human household maintains itself within the household of creation. Here, a jubilee people must find out their response to a market economy that threatens to destroy the world. Berry suggests that one response lies in the recognition that issues of human householding are intimately tied to the artistic imagination, especially if we think of art as all the ways in which human beings make the things we need. 'How we work, what work we do, how well we use the materials we use, and what we do with them after we have used them – all these questions are of the gravest religious significance.'<sup>13</sup> Here, the relation of economy to justice lies in the recognition

that all of us are worker-artists and the art-work we do contributes to either the shattering or to the restoring of *shalom*. Whether we work with words and music to write a song, with a plough to turn the earth, or with food to prepare meals for our families, our work contributes to creating or to nullifying a just world.

### ***Economics***

Economics or the economy is the third direction toward which the face of jubilee justice turns, usually under the aspect of capital. The Bible takes this face of economy with utter seriousness, regularly referring to debt, the ownership of land, bonds and mortgages. The parables of Jesus habitually raise issues of economic capital. And the jubilee itself centres on these issues through the primary commands to return land and property to their original owners every fifty years and to release debtors from bondage. The principle here is that nobody should be condemned to poverty for ever. Therefore, when the fiftieth year arrives (and certainly when the two thousandth appears), hold a jubilee and wipe the slate clean.

In recent years, no aspect of jubilee teaching has captured the human imagination throughout the world more completely than this one, as forces like Jubilee 2000 USA and Jubilee 2000 UK (and fifty-plus other countries from Angola to Zimbabwe) have engaged in a worldwide, international campaign to petition the G-8, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to remove the crushing debt of the world's poorest nations (the HIPC's or heavily indebted poor countries). This is appropriate to the jubilee; it is also action with precedent in other contexts, although not on so broad a scale as the debt cancellation urged today.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Redistributing capital***

This international movement to remove debt is directed toward the endgame that jubilee justice envisions into the next century and beyond – the redistribution of capital. This is a widening, broadening task, since capital is no longer limited to the three elements of production (capital, natural resources and labour) where wealth is translated into machinery, buildings or other equipment that increase the efficiency with which labour can transform raw materials into products. Instead, 'redistributing capital' involves all of us working toward jubilee justice from many different perspectives.

The work of Jon Gunnemann is valuable here. Gunnemann is a social ethicist at Atlanta's Emory University who reminds us that the narrow meaning of capital has expanded recently; that environmental economists, for example, talk about 'natural capital', referring to fossil fuels, soil, plants, animals and the ecological realities I noted above. That demands attention not only to fiscal deficits, but to the growing 'earth deficit' of drinkable water and arable land essential to jubilee justice.<sup>15</sup> We also speak today of 'human capital' – the wealth present in job skills and literacy, for example, that those of us who can read and write must redistribute, and the privilege that often comes with white skin or male gender or heterosexual orientation.

We are also extending our awareness of religious capital, about which Gunnemann observes that '... much of the modern economy depends on religious capital – everything from the psychological renewal that churchgoers get from their weekly worship to the legitimization of the teachings that provide for private property or capitalism'. One source of religious capital with direct connection to the jubilee is forgiveness, which, as we have seen, includes the free cancelling of debt. 'Without forgiveness and the rituals connected to it, religious capital and human cooperation could not be sustained,' he says. Such abundance of grace 'provides the symbolic and actual practices that build, repair and maintain human communities'.<sup>16</sup>

Another call to redistribute capital has been made to the world's richest countries in connection with the military, economic and cultural power that has grown in those countries since 1492. That was the start 'of centuries of violence, theft, seizure of land, murder, slavery, genocide and untruth that built up the wealth of the West'.<sup>17</sup> Convening a group of Asian theologians and church historians in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in April 1998, Oblate Father Tissa Balasuriya led them toward a Statement where the group insisted that, given the reality of the enormous and growing gap between the wealthy minority and the impoverished majority of human beings, triumphal celebrations are inappropriate when Jubilee 2000 arrives. Instead, all of the world's nations must emphasize a world order based on justice, equity and sustainability.

In this context, the Colombo Statement supports the principle of the Tobin tax, named for Yale economist and Nobel laureate James Tobin. This proposes an international tax (of 0.5 per cent, for example) on international currency transactions. The \$3 trillion revenue such a tax would produce is the equivalent of some 60 per cent of the gross national product of all the countries of the third (or 'two-thirds') world.

It would be sufficient not only to write off the debt of the world's poorest countries, but would compensate the former colonies of western nations for the losses they have suffered. It would also create a fund for social investment in the world's poor countries.

### *Pastoral suggestions*

How might churches and other religious bodies respond to the issues raised in these pages? What are some concrete applications we can make? What symbolic and actual practices can engage us as we seek to redistribute capital in this jubilee era? Here are five suggestions, each already in existence in a diversity of forms.

#### *Raise questions*

The Colombo Statement provides a model for this first pastoral application. Beginning with an expression of gratitude for work on HIPC debt, it turns attention to the debt of colonizers as well. To promote awareness of this other debt, the Colombo Centre is sending questionnaires to 4,000 universities around the world, to 500 seminaries, to all religious orders and congregations, to all Justice and Peace Commissions and to major publishers. It asks each of these the following questions, which might also be asked in our own educational contexts, providing a natural syllabus that focuses on the debts that colonizers owe.

Some of the questions are: How do you deal with the history of colonization? How do you explain what happened? Does the history you teach include a critical examination of the activity of Christian powers in your country or by your country elsewhere? Do you compare colonial economic relations and those imposed today by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the G-8 nations? Do your textbooks examine the values and pre-suppositions of the colonizers (racism, sexism, patriarchy, the religious superiority of Christianity) internalized by the colonized? What resources do you use to help others understand and reflect on these issues? In the light of your responses, how will your community celebrate the Great Jubilee of the year 2000?<sup>18</sup>

#### *Create a truth and reconciliation committee*

As a way of responding to issues raised by questions such as the foregoing ones, create a committee at the diocesan or judicatory level where the debts owed by the colonizers are named and the offences they represent repented. This offers practical and liturgical forms that

allow people to consider their national responsibilities, and to use memory as an ally in coming to grips with their national history, especially if it includes a legacy of domination, warfare and subjugation. South Africa has led the way in teaching the power of such a commission, but the model in that country needs to be translated into the experiences of other nations. In the United States, for example, with our history of destruction of Native American peoples and cultures, the enslavement of African peoples, and the continuing legacy of structural racism toward non-white peoples, such a commission might help redistribute the capital of reconciliation and healing along with financial and economic capital.

*Set up a 'Leviticus 25:23' fund*

Under the auspices of whatever institution you belong to (school, parish, hospital, extended family, religious order) create a socially responsible fund in your immediate area. In New York where I live and work, for example, and spearheaded by religious orders who minister in local neighbourhoods, 'Leviticus 25:23' is a mutual fund created from grants where the initial lenders are socially responsible religious communities. Their loans are matched by other local lenders who are corporate agents: banks, foundations, government and community development agencies. Over the last sixteen years the fund has established a niche in the child day-care industry by using its pool of no-cost loan capital to support those running the day-care programmes as well as the needy young children these programmes reach.<sup>19</sup> In addition, 'Leviticus 25:23' provides a model for those seeking similar pastoral engagement.

*Think small*

In concert with national and international actions, be sure to make smaller local connections. The basic principle here is that three people are not only two more than one; three are a reality different from one. A national Jubilee 2000 USA Conference in October of 1998 concentrated on bringing the issues of jubilee back home, thinking globally even as it was acting locally, but also thinking locally as it was acting globally. At a workshop called 'Getting Your Church or Religious Community on Board', presenters made suggestions on ways to involve local parishioners in redistributing economic, social, environmental and religious capital worldwide. These included making sure people know jubilee's biblical roots, providing sign-up sheets through which people could lobby their local law-makers, urging them to provide debt relief; keeping alive the message of jubilee through newsletters, posters



and announcements in bulletins; volunteering to write about jubilee in the parish newsletter, involving the entire parish – not only the social justice team (although such teams are critical) – and putting a face on the human realities of need, suffering and debt. At the conference where the workshop was held, one pastor of a predominantly African-American congregation described how his parishioners had been very receptive to the jubilee, sensing a solidarity with their brothers and sisters in Africa.<sup>20</sup>

### *Observe a regular Sabbath*

Besides letting the soil of the earth lie fallow, jubilee teaching insists that persons let the 'land' of their bodily humanity lie fallow too, keeping a regular Sabbath. This Sabbath is commanded in Leviticus 25 with great specificity: 'That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: *you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines.* For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you' (Leviticus 25:11–12a). During this Sabbath time, we are to listen for the Spirit who is 'upon' us; the Spirit who 'anoints' us to Jubilee. We are to celebrate and rejoice in the gifts we have received. We are to sing the song of 'Jubilate'. And we are to do these things even as we recognize that the blessings of God's good earth await redistribution. The Sabbath quiets, gathers and nourishes us for a time. It prepares us for the future. Then, at sundown, it sends us forth refreshed and renewed into a world hungry for justice.

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### NOTES

1 In *A sleep of prisoners* (Oxford, 1951), pp 47–48.

2 In *Between man and man*, trans Ronald Gregor Smith (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947), pp 9, 10.

3 In his Apostolic Letter, *On the coming of the third millennium*, paragraph 10 (Rome-Vatican City, 1994).

4 My own best judgement is that it has, and that certainly each of its individual traditions has been tried. For example, the Sabbath has been practised for thousands of years; amnesty for debt was known among the neighbours of the early Israelites and exists today, especially in bi-lateral and multilateral remissions: liberation and pleas for liberation are a hallmark of our time. What may

not have been true historically, in contrast to today, is the coming together of these jubilee traditions at the same time in one closely woven fabric.

5 André Trocmé, *Jesus and the nonviolent revolution* (Scottsdale PA, 1973; French original 1961) and John Howard Yoder, *The politics of Jesus* (Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans and Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 2nd edition, 1994; reprinted 1998; first edition 1972). See also *On the coming of the third millennium* (above), especially paragraphs 11 through 16.

6 I have drawn implications for public life from each of these in *Proclaim jubilee! A spirituality for the twenty-first century* (Westminster/John Knox, 1996) and for personal life in *Jubilee time* (Bantam Books, 1995). I have assumed the theme of jubilation from the prior four that Trocmé and Yoder emphasize.

7 See *Justitia in mundo*, the declaration by the world's Roman Catholic bishops, made during their 1971 Synod. See also *Economic justice for all* (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1986).

8 In *The prophets*, 2 volumes (Harper and Row, 1962). See especially vol 2, chapters 1 and 3, especially p 11, and volume 1, p 3.

9 *Ibid.*

10 See 'Just/Justice' in the *Anchor Bible dictionary* (Doubleday, 1992), vol 3, pp 1127–1128.

11 In 'Voices of the night – against justice' in W. Brueggemann, S. Parks and T. H. Groome, *To act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly* (Paulist Press, 1986), p 6.

12 See his 'Christianity and the survival of creation' in Wendell Berry, *Sex, economy, freedom and community: eight essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

13 Berry, p 109.

14 In 1953, for example, Germany was granted generous terms on payment of its postwar international debt. That helped Germany to rebuild after World War II. In 1991, the US cancelled \$2.5 billion of Poland's debt. To reward it for supporting the US in the Gulf War, the US cancelled \$7 billion owed by Egypt. And in 1995, the US government cancelled Haiti's debt – on paper \$8.3 million; in market value \$377,000. See the web site of Jubilee 2000 at <http://www.j2000usa.org/usa/quest.htm> on 12/8/98 for further details.

15 Thomas Berry, *The dream of the earth* (San Francisco, 1978), p 72.

16 For the report on Gunnemann's work and for the quotations, I am indebted to Peter Steinfeld's 'Beliefs' column in *The New York Times* of 30 January 1999, p B7.

17 Gary MacEoin, 'Balasuriya: restitution for colonial era is due' in *National Catholic Reporter* (22 January 1999), pp 14–15.

18 MacEoin, p 15.

19 For further information, contact Leviticus 25:23 Alternative Fund, 928 McLean Avenue, Yonkers, New York 10704-4103 USA; tel (914) 237-3306; fax (914) 237-3916; email [levf@erols.com](mailto:levf@erols.com).

20 This account is from Website <http://www.jubilee2000uk.org/conference0610.html> dated 20 January 1998.