

Jesus disturbing teaching on God and Debt

This paper will explore the political, social and economic context in which Jesus lived and worked. It will do this partly on the basis of the results of archaeology over the last 100 years which has given us access for the first time in nearly 1900 years to actual world of Jesus rather than that imagined by the later Christian community. These results enable us to read the teaching of Jesus afresh with some sense of the original context in which he taught. As such they enable us to arrive at a radical and challenging Gospel that is often obscured, however unintentionally, by later Church concerns. This Gospel challenges us both as Christians and as active members of our society seeking justice and peace for all. My paper is in three parts, the political social and economic situation of first century Palestine, some of Jesus most famous teachings re-read in the light of this, and finally and briefly the challenges that this poses to us today.

The Land under the Empire

So let's map out the political and economic situation of the time. Jesus lived his adult life in Galilee, a puppet kingdom of the Roman Empire ruled locally by Herod Antipas the son of Herod the Great who had been educated in Rome and was completely under the control of the Imperial authorities. The result of this was the increasing imposition on Galilee, and indeed Palestine, of Imperial tax legislation and tribute requirements during the whole of Jesus lifetime. The result of this economic control and exploitation would lead to widespread impoverishment of the peasant class from which Jesus came and eventually to a bloody uprising from 66 to AD 70 when the Jerusalem Temple was systematically destroyed by Roman Legions and with it Temple Judaism, leaving remnants of leadership who would form the beginnings of Rabbinic, synagogue based, Judaism and Christianity. So as church our existence is partly the result of the greed and oppression of the Roman Empire now long dead.

If we look at the first map we get a macro picture of the Roman Empire and can see the place of Palestine within it. Although Palestine was small and it has at this stage no significant army nor military elite it remained crucial because of its coast and trade routes that crossed it which gave access to major powers whose resources Rome needed and whose potential threat she is wary of. It is part of the Province of Syria and during the lifetime of Jesus Syria was the only part of the Roman Empire where four whole Legions were stationed with 2 more in Egypt to the south. Along with Phoenicia and Syria, Palestine formed a bridge between Asia Minor and Egypt and its coast provided access to the Mediterranean. Since most of Rome's grain came from Egypt and North Africa, control of this region was crucial

The New Economics

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

Effectively they controlled by manipulating mass debt and patronage through an oppressive system of taxation using local officers to bear the brunt of the local populace's hate. They were involved in deliberate and consistent social engineering such that the people of the Land were being divorced from the land. The new taxes still a vestigial memory in Luke's gospel chapter 2 "When Quirinius was governor of Syria..." and which Josephus speaks of as heavy and burdensome were all part of the imposition of a new economics which

involved money rather than barter. The people of the Land had not only to pay extra taxes in kind, and new import and export taxes on all produce entering the land and for the privilege of using the new roads, to do so they had to borrow to meet the new taxes, eventually mortgaging the land, and then being forced to sell it when they fell behind with their payments. Many became day labourers, and land once collectively owned became organised into large estates *latifundia* under the control of absentee landowners who lived in the new Greco-roman cities of Caesarea, and Sephoris.

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

The Land, the Rich and the Poor

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

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

The parables of Jesus are full of details about the lot of such people and their dependence on the large estates who hired them. These were usually owned by absentee landlords who lived in the cities but left senior slaves, *economoi*/stewards, to see to the hiring of labour and the production and sale of the harvest. Smallholders had to produce enough for the taxes to Rome and to the Temple, to pay the landowner whose land they rented and to retain enough seed for the following years sowing. If the harvest was bad smallholders would borrow against next year's harvest to buy seed, but if that went badly and they defaulted on their loans then the consequences could be dire with family members being taken into slavery or imprisonment (Mth 5:25ff; 18:23ff.), or the whole family being ejected from their village and becoming wandering day labourers. This approach to debt does not reflect the traditional codes of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and shows the influence of Roman imperial Law. Jewish law has no imprisonment for debt but does allow for indentured service. Those who couldn't gain work or support themselves by begging or banditry soon died. Archaeological examination of the bodies of these day workers suggest that only the fittest could survive

such a life for more than 2 or 3 years. Hence the power of the parable of the workers in the vineyard which we shall look at in more detail soon.

The collusion of the Temple and the Priesthood

It's worth noting that although the people of Galilee had tax to pay to Herod and various duties on produce to Rome they were still required by the Priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem to pay tithes and offerings to the Temple and the priesthood. The Gospels start with a picture of Jesus as the devout son of devout observant parents who make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and that it is the most natural thing in the world for him to consult the priests and elders when he is 12 years of age, but as his public ministry develops his critique of the temple and its manipulation becomes ever more severe. In this he is ahead of his time. The Talmud the later collection of post Temple Jewish wisdom has a famous lament:

"Woe is me because of the house of Boethus

Woe is me because of the staves.

Woe is me because of the house of Annas

Woe is me because of their whisperings.

Woe is me because of the house of Kathros

Woe is me because of their pens.

Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael ben Piabi

Woe is me because of their fists.

For they are High Priests, and their sons are treasurers, and their sons-in-law are temple overseers, and their servants beat the people with clubs."

(b. Pesahim 57a; t. Menahot 13:21)

The Great Tradition Deconstructed

What the quote points to is the use of violence, the keeping of records of debt, manipulation of Temple positions, and the use of rumour to control. It is in his parables that Jesus begins to open this up. In doing so he challenges

the "Great Tradition" that among the leaders of his people is the accepted account of how things are, history as it were from above, an imposed ideology that legitimises the domination of the masses by a wealthy and powerful elite. "Great Traditions" are nearly always urban based and written, since the written text is always seen as more powerful and of course needs its interpreters, scribes. At the heart of the Great Tradition in Jesus time is the emphasis on ritual purity and the following of all the Sabbath laws, this is the sign of a true paid up child of Abraham. John the Baptist had already railed against this legitimised corruption of the national myth cf. Luke 3:7:

*"Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming retribution?
"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not start telling yourselves "We have Abraham as our Father", because, I tell you, God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. Yes even now the axe is being laid to the root of the trees, so that any tree failing to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire."*

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

Jesus and the Torah

Jesus is involved in an on-going debate over the true nature of the Torah and he stands with the prophets in their interpretation of it (Math 5:17). As he puts it "The weightier matters of the Torah are judgement, mercy and faithfulness." (Mth 23:23).

Something of this tension can be seen in the encounter between Jesus and a scribe who asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks two revealing questions: What is written in the Torah? How do you read? In other words they make sure they are dealing with the same text but then the text has to be interpreted. In Galilee the Torah was in dispute. Jesus teaching and action reveal how he read/interpreted the Torah. So let's look at some of his readings.

Purity and Debt

In the Torah there are purity as well as debt codes. The debt codes belong primarily to the Yahwist and Elohist strands of the tradition and the purity codes to the Priestly strands. Deuteronomy reinstates both. The codes apply to the table, the household and the sanctuary.

The origin of the purity code is in the creation story and the command "You shall be holy as I am holy". Just as God separates light from darkness the purity code separates incompatibles cf. Dt. 22:9-11 on planting different seeds, using different cloth for clothes, ploughing with different animals. But the process continues - clean and unclean animals, women at different times of their cycles, Israelites and Gentiles, those who follow the Torah and the *amme ha-aretz* (the dirt poor who have no time for the finer points of religion as they strive to survive on a daily basis). The list can extend *ad infinitum* at its heart is the idea that every individual should be complete and there should be no mixing of kinds. Mixing involves pollution, confusion, a curse, and

death. Impurity is the beginning of the dissolution of creation back into chaos. The purity codes avoid this.

The debt codes are linked to the exodus and the gift of the Land. The land is Yahweh's the people are tenants. So the land can never be sold permanently (Lev. 25:23). The Debt codes extend the graciousness of the first gift to the sharing of the fruits of the land e.g. Deut. 26:12 has tithing every three years to "the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they eat their fill within your towns." Similarly with the Sabbatical Year (Dt. 15:12-18) and the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:23-55) with its cancelling of debts, freeing of slaves, and return of land to the original families.

The debt codes aimed to avoid the violence of the exploitation of the poor by the rich. They were unique in the ancient world. But it is clear from Jesus teaching that they have been side-lined and as the land produced abundantly it was not simply seen as a gift but as a source of wealth and so instead of distributing the surplus it was hoarded for status and private excessive consumption.

Notice what happens when one code is read over another;

When the debt codes are read as subsidiary to the purity codes, poverty, from the point of view of the purity codes, is the result of uncleanness. If one were pure one would be blessed i.e. not poor. Hence the way in which the Temple authorities (High Priestly families, the Sadducees, some Pharisees), who based themselves on the purity codes, blamed those they exploited by portraying them as unclean *amme ha-aretz*. Their poverty was their own fault.

But read from the point of view of the debt codes poverty is the result of covetous greed what Jesus calls *Mammon* the unrestricted accumulation of wealth. And how do the rich in this society accumulate wealth? At the expense of peasant producers, through fraudulent collection of taxes and

tithes, through lending to those who would have difficulty paying back and then foreclosing on their loans. All this is a violation of the will of Yahweh expressed in the non-exploitative social relations of the covenant. In Jesus view it compromises the justice of the divine rule (the Kingdom). So in the story of the rich fool (Lk. 12:16-20) Jesus explodes the way in which the debt codes have been sabotaged. The fool in hoarding the excess out of greed undermines the Torah's teaching that the land is Yahweh's alone. Life is giving, whereas here having is holding and implicitly is the cause of the poverty and death of others.

In the time of Jesus from a peasant farmer becoming a day-labourer as a result of debt, and so being totally dependent on one's own strength and health and no longer being supported within the mutuality of village structures, till dying of malnutrition, was a matter of a few years. Hence the power of the parable of the workers in the vineyard that attacks head on the isolation and marginalisation of the day workers in a society founded of the shared graciousness of Yahweh's gift.

Again something of this can be seen in the encounter with the wealthy man in Mark 10:17-22. He flatters Jesus expecting suitable polite flattery back but gets none. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks. He is wealthy with inherited wealth. It is his expectation as an observant Israelite to inherit eternal life. He comes in confidence. He has followed the Torah since youth according to the perspective of the purity codes he is pure. As wealthy he is already blessed by Yahweh.

Jesus challenge is a challenge to his religious assumptions. The rich man who can only remain wealthy by keeping others poor has worshipped a God who condones oppression and debt. This is the not the liberating God of Exodus. The God of the covenant has become a God of convenience. Note how Jesus slips in the phrase "***you shall not defraud***" among the commandments. There is no such commandment in the Decalogue but, for Jesus, to defraud

implies the infringement of the whole covenant and the taking of God's name in vain.

The confidence of the wealthy man is total so Jesus has to restate the radical message of the Decalogue in a powerful way. **Instead of reading the Decalogue through the purity code he reads it through the debt code.** "*Just one thing you lack: go, sell, give - distribute to the destitute, follow me*". This is a reading of the Torah as an appeal to the justice of the rule of Yahweh. Jesus interprets the Torah in terms of the distributive justice of God, who gave the land to be received and shared not hoarded at the expense of others. He is appealing to the Jubilee code. The man leaves because he has great wealth, many possessions, and great estates. He can meet the requirement of the purity codes but not of the radical call to distributive justice.

The Parables of the Alternative Kingdom

Let's take a few of Jesus parables and read them against this backcloth. It's worth remembering he taught these parables to groups, crowds, communities. They were intended to provoke discussion, conversation, raise awareness. They were **the starting point** of a process not the end. They got people to a possible shared "light-on" moment which could then have further consequences. If a group saw the implication of a parable then they saw their world differently and had a choice to make:- whether to stay with the way things were or to step out into this new "kingdom" way of looking at things.

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

Here we have a representative of the powerful in the land in purple clothes, which cost a fortune and imply a royal or imperial official, whose fine cotton is imported, then as now, at great cost from Egypt. Lazarus meanwhile is described as *ptokōs* - destitute, corpselike, almost carrion for the wild dogs.

Although in fact they alone are kind to him, licking his sores which are the result of malnutrition. The difference between the two protagonists could not be greater and to underline this Jesus emphasises the great gate that keeps Lazarus (whose name ironically means "God helps") excluded. If only the gate had been open everything would have been different. The rich man dies and is buried with honour.

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

Throughout Abraham seeks Dives recognition of Lazarus as equally a child of God. The language he uses of Dives is **teknon**/child and Dives indeed calls Abraham **pater**/father but he remains within his own class and family consciousness he only cares about his brothers. He cannot see Lazarus as a child of Abraham and therefore as his brother, which is the teaching of the Torah. In which the land is for all, its produce must not be hoarded but shared, so that even the widow, the stranger and the orphan have enough (Lev. 25; Deut. 15:1-18). In telling this story Jesus places himself squarely in

the prophetic tradition of Isaiah 1:16-17,5:7;, Jeremiah 5:23-29; 21:11-14; Amos 2:6-11; 5:10-24 and Micah 3:1-3, 9-12 condemning the exploitation of earlier generations of Kings and oppressive royal officials. It also reveals how class and family interests within the new economy have undermined the sense of solidarity of the people.

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

As Jesus tells the story the situation unravels - the destitute on the street becomes the honoured guest at the heavenly banquet. How is this possible? Either something is wrong here or something is wrong in the afterlife. The story is strange since it includes the ordinary everyday world, a beggar at the door, with the world of the elite super-rich who are not part of the everyday - but in telling this story Jesus' listeners begin to see the relationship between the stellar wealth of the minority super-rich and the growing poverty of the masses. And they have an insight into what might change things - a rediscovery and re-embracing of the vision of kinship and hospitality of Moses and the prophets. It is particularly fitting that Jesus should have used

Abraham, who the elite had used as the symbol of their class and its ethnic purity and, who in a certain sense legitimated their rule (Lk 3:7-9). But in Jesus story Abraham is now the one who restores true kinship and hospitality to the destitute. (Lk13:28-29)

Let's take another example:

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

Here we have day labourers , some of whom would have been smallholders trying to implement their subsistence living, some landless and destitute no longer with the support of extended family or local community, some would be wandering and so strangers to the locals; so here we have differing working groups vying with each other for limited work. Any sense of **solidarity and identity** has long gone. Normally it would be a steward hiring them, as the land-owners tended to live in the new cities and had little to do with the day to day running of the estate but Jesus deliberately includes the owner here, to again make the link between those at the top of society and those at the base. **The normally invisible elite are here made present and, as such, accountable.** He heightens the conflict (Horsley 2011).

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

The owner tells his steward to pay them **in reverse** but orders him to give them all a denarius rather than a proportion of the daily wage equivalent to their hours. The owner is playing with them; it is a gesture of contempt, an insult implying those who have worked all day are no more valuable than those who have worked for an hour. So shaming is the insult that the workers protest, if they don't then the value of their work in the marketplace is undermined and implicitly they are accepting his right to pay less the next time.

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

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

Note again what Jesus is doing in these parables. He is drawing on the **experience of the people**, provoking them to see their world clearly but

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

Is the teaching of the kingdom of God new? Or is it merely a fresh statement of the essential dynamic of the covenant?

Into this reality Jesus comes bringing a message about a God who is not primarily interested in rituals of home or temple, nor of purity laws, nor of racial identity. Rather this God is reminding the people of where they come from. When Jesus says in Mark 12:28 *Love God with your whole self and your neighbour as yourself* “he is evoking ancient memories. They would have heard the echo of the prayer written on the heart of every Jew and taught to all children Deut 6: 5 Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God the Lord alone! Therefore you shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” And the second half echoes Lev 19:18 “Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countryman. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The people of Israel were a liberated people made up of migrant workers under the Egyptians, 12 tribes is a glamorous title for 12 separate gangs with little in common except their slavery. God calls them out of nothingness, to be something, his people Israel. A people characterised by a unique freedom and as such they were to be a sign for others that such freedom was possible. They must create a land

where there would always be a place for the widow the orphan and the stranger – the migrant worker! The people whose power was a gift of God should not threaten the powerless.

Jesus breaks open again the covenant message He does it by re-naming God. The Jewish title for God – its holiest word that still today no orthodox Jew will use is Yahweh. It is given to Moses at the burning bush. *I will be who I will be, I am who I am, and I will be where I will be.* In other words God beyond our concepts and feeble imaginings, Lord of history master of creation. You can see the danger of this name. Too holy to be named God must be too holy to be near. This is the classic danger and option of monotheistic religion, utter transcendence! But when the disciples say how should we pray. Jesus says “Our Father – *Abba* a close familial, everyday name The God of domestic mess, the God who is where we all are. In using this name Jesus had already subverted the power of temple and cult and potentially of those who controlled access to the God of Temple and cult – as in the trade in temple sacrifices for forgiveness. Now in Jesus practice forgiveness is a direct transaction between God and us but implying just as direct a transaction between us and those who trespass against us.

If the Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of Abba then all sorts of relationships change, all sorts of limits disappear. “Many will come from East and West and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, while the sons of the Reign will be thrown into outer darkness” Math 8:14 The so often forgotten and latent universalism of Jewish faith flames forth again. The way Jesus extends this transformation of people’s expectations and perspectives is by his use of parables.

In the society of the time with its rigid social hierarchy and its politics of holiness to be poor and to be a sinner was often seen as the same, and so in some way to be poor was to be guilty. Jesus proposed a different view of God and of the poor and a different view of the exercise of power. Luke. 22:25

God is Father primarily of the little ones. "I am among you as one who serves." The rule of God is the opposite of the existing order. Service as opposed to dominion.

A Kingdom of the Living Dead

This is all part of the horizon of that kingdom or rule of God that Jesus invited the people of his time to look towards. At the heart of his teaching are a series of sayings that we now call the Beatitudes. The familiar received translation of the first of these (Luke 6:20 NRSV) goes something like: "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of heaven." But the Greek word *ptochoi* translated as poor is not simply poor. Poor and rich define our status within the same world but at different ends of a sliding scale. *Ptochos* is someone outside the scale, a destitute person, without family or social ties, a wanderer. Indeed it is derived from the classical Greek word for a corpse. Jesus' kingdom is not a kingdom of the poor but of the destitute, the derelict, of the living dead. The kingdom is not centered on the worthy hardworking peasant or artisan but on the unclean, the degraded, the expendable, the powerless, and all too often, then as now, the children.

Note the **basis** of his critique of power and authority – it lacked justice and truth. "*What is truth?*" Pilate asks and under pressure saves himself. The question expresses the void undermining Pilate's own authority. His wealth and that of the Jerusalem elite is at others expense, that of their neighbor. **Not to love one's neighbour is for Jesus not to know the God who is the father of the neighbour and the source of truth.**

Jesus saw the misuse of power as arising inevitably out of the profit motive – mammon. Luke. 12:21-23; Mth. 6:19-20 The rich lost their chance of knowing God, their minds clouded by desire to enrich themselves, leading inevitably to an insensitivity towards the brother in need. But for Jesus to be deaf to the cry of the poor is to be deaf to God. Such solidarity with the poor made him a threat to the Jerusalem power elite it provoked his brutal death and it inspires

us to explore again the religious, political and economic, structures of our own time and their repercussions; repercussions for our sense of ourselves, others and the very image of God that we take for granted.

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