



Seeking Shalom

BY MARIJKE HOEK

When Jeremiah instructs God's people in exile to seek the peace and prosperity of the place to which He has brought them and pray for it, he reminds them that their destiny is interwoven with that of the wider community: if the city prospers, they too will prosper (Jeremiah 29: 4-14).

Instead of lamenting their plight (Psalm 137), He focuses them on His purposes in exile. This small community was to hold out a vision of wellbeing for the wider society and bring *shalom* in the place of brokenness and hopelessness.

'*Shalom* is human flourishing with God the Creator and Redeemer at the centre of our embodied existence, living heartily as complete persons of soul and body in right relationship to God's good creation and its blessing', writes Naugle.[1] While they feel dislocated in Babylon, the command to



seek the wellbeing is followed by the instructions to invest for the long haul. Besides prayer, they are to build, settle, grow and produce families. It echoes the creational mandate of Genesis 1:28 and 2:15.

Faithful stewardship

We are called to seek peace, soundness, wholeness, security, and fullness of life, in which our relationships with God, with each other and the nonhuman creation are to thrive. Our witness and work will always take shape in a specific context scarred by injustices and the absence of *shalom* in multiple facets: social, spiritual, emotional, physical, cognitive and material.

How do we live well in the light of such grand commissions? Delving into the riches of biblical themes enables us to understand our responsibilities. The Lord requires us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him (Micah 6:8). As He is just and merciful, we should, likewise, emulate Him in our relationships. 'Mishpat' (justice) needs to be pursued (Deuteronomy 16:20), and lived out in relational values such as treating people equitably (e.g. Leviticus 24:22; Zechariah 7:10f). Israelite society was founded on the expectation of righteousness ('*tzadeqah*', e.g. Proverbs 12:28). This concept involved 'acting rightly' and being in 'right relationship' with God and with each other. Hence '*tzadeqah*' and '*mishpat*' are frequently placed alongside one another (e.g. Job 29:12-17). It concerns our daily life, how we relate, who we relate to, the character of our vocation and the kind of society we build. 'Learn to do right; seek justice; defend the oppressed; take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow'. It's worship (Isaiah 1:17).

Our stewardship is meant to reflect God's gracious and just reign. *In To Change the World*, Hunter (2010) speaks of a faithful presence, 'For Christian believers, the call to faithfulness is a call to live in fellowship and integrity with the person and witness of Jesus Christ. There is a timeless character to this call that evokes qualities of life and spirit that are recognisable throughout history and across cultural boundaries.'^[2] The Spirit is a powerful and inspirational companion enabling us to live well, 'to each manifestations of the Spirit are given for the common good' (1 Cor. 12:7).

Seeking shalom, learning to live righteously, doing justice; these are action verbs.[3] Our worship takes place on the altar of daily life in which we discern God's will (Romans 12:1-2). It shapes the character of our households, professions and communities. It may mean hosting a refugee in your home; creating apprenticeships for those who need a second chance; offering your judicial expertise *pro-bono* to those lacking access to legal aid; helping the homeless access housing; paying your cleaner a living wage; inspiring your class to advocate on behalf of their asylum-seeking fellow pupil; teaching NEETs to code; dedicating a significant portion of your company's profit to the vulnerable; starting a local campaign that awakens consciousness of racial prejudice, and more.

Reweaving communities

In *Generous Justice*, Keller (2012) describes 'doing justice' as living in a way that generates a strong community where people can flourish and, in particular, to go to places where shalom has broken down, where weaker members are falling through the fabric, to repair it. We reweave by weaving ourselves into it. Reweaving shalom means to sacrificially thread, lace and press your time, goods, power, and resources into the lives and needs of others.[4]

Numerous injustices are found in contemporary Britain. Like the biblical concept, being 'poor and needy' denotes economic, judicial and/or social vulnerability. It is experienced through a range of conditions due to forced migration,



unjustly low wages, extortionate loan schemes, erosion of legal protection for the weak, discrimination, violence by people with evil intent and courts favouring the powerful, just to name a few. Consider the institutional racism in the Windrush scandal emanating from the hostile environment policy, unlawful benefit sanctions, withholding protection from victims of human trafficking or modern slavery, employers paying below the minimum wage, extortionate payday loans, the rise of the working poor, and more.

Societal injustices are many and varied and may have typical regional or local expressions. These fractures and flaws in society call for a compassionate reweaving of community life that restore the capacity for people to thrive. All expressions of apparent need provide an opportunity to forge links with those who often feel deeply alienated, even deserted. We can all be good neighbours who accompany the vulnerable in their quest to access justice or who provide new

opportunities where horizons have closed. Such friendships transform a community by initiating something new amidst the social processes that lead to hopelessness and poverty. This is the idea of justice rooted in relationship, expanding the spaces where people can flourish, as Wariboko (2014) asserts in *The Charismatic City*. [5]

Initiating newness

The strength of our communal life is key. The variety of experiences and gifts causes us to listen more deeply and to create an emancipatory setting in which all have agency and a voice. New relational forums have emerged that address the systemic dynamics that prevent people from thriving. The Poverty Truth Commissions in various cities are made up of people who experience poverty, decision makers, and organisational, civic and faith leaders, enabling a deeper and empathic listening.[6] These relational networks of converging civic relationships and friendships across social, spiritual, and political groups



enhance the insight and wisdom to effect structural change.

Furthermore, campaigns are an effective way to address injustice. In response to the rise of in-work poverty,[7] Christians started local Living Wage campaigns, leading to a significant rise in Living Wage employers. In Manchester it led to policy change when the City council became a Living Wage employer and partnered with businesses and organisations aspiring to become an accredited Living Wage City, a move that has lifted tens of thousands of households out of poverty. The emergence of the Churches Mutual Credit Union that adopts fair borrowing practices exemplifies an effective joint voice with those with lived experience, which raises public awareness, educates the public conscience, critiques unjust policies and practices, and models a new moral economy.[8] The current cost of living crisis following the Covid pandemic caused a rapid emergence of new moral local economies. The paradoxical phenomena of food waste and food poverty are being countered in new community groceries where redistributed surplus food is made available, while people can also become part of a learning community offering a curriculum of life skills, such as debt advice, counselling, on the job training as well as opportunity to explore faith.[9] Such creative grace furthers *shalom*.

Honing our lens

The above requires us to observe our worlds closely, intentionally forming new relationships and starting new conversations. We need to listen better to those who suffer injustice, and so adjust our optics. Honing his lens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well, 'We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.' [10]

This line of sight forges a new critical consciousness as it brings lament to

the core of our mission. Life ought not to be like this. How we are to live as a community is shaped by cries that offer a profound critique of the status quo. Lament is undoubtedly connected to the new heart and Spirit we have received (Ezekiel 36:26). The capacity to grieve is the beginning of real criticism, according to Brueggemann (2001), 'Bringing hurt to the public expression is an important first step in the dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge.' [11]

Conclusion

Jeremiah focuses God's people on God's purposes in exile. This is a time for seeking the shalom of the city. A time of profound spiritual renewal. God's purposes concern a comprehensive restoration. Within a fractured society His Spirit creates a new household, a hospitable community that listens intently, moves emphatically, and works with people who are disjoined from a constructive base and sustainable way of life. Salvation is comprehensive; all of human life and wider creation are the focus of God's redemptive plans. Our prayers, lament, and supplications express yearnings for His divine intervention in interrupting the present and reconfiguring new possibilities. As we read the texts through the lens of new creation, and shape our vocations, we are sustained by hope as we dedicate ourselves to this divine command to seek *shalom* and to do justice.

End Notes

[1] Naugle, D.K. (2008) *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives: Learning the Deep Meaning of Happiness*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p.18.

[2] Hunter, J.D. (2010) *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Oxford: OUP, p.197.

[3] Wright, C.J.H. (2006) *The Mission of God*. Nottingham: IVP, p.367. The Old Testament combination 'righteousness/justice' is at the heart of ethical teaching and Wright suggests the nearest English

expression would be 'social justice', with the warning that this cannot be seen as a static phrase as the Hebrew twin theme is dynamic, i.e., things you do.

[4] Keller, T. (2012) *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*. London: John Murray Press, p.177.

[5] Wariboko, N. (2014) *The Charismatic City and the Public Resurgence of Religion: A Pentecostal Social Ethics of Cosmopolitan Urban Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.28-40, 108.

[6] <https://mhp.org.uk>; Grinnel, A. (2021) *Wisdom Cries Out: Public Theology from the Margins*. Temple Tracks 2. William Temple Foundation; <https://povertytruthnetwork.org>.

[7] See the report on the current steep rise of in-work poverty by Williams, M. (2022) *A Biblical Response to Working Poverty*, The Jubilee Centre.

[8] <https://churchesmutual.co.uk>.

[9] <https://communitygrocery.org.uk>; <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/what-we-do/pantry>.

[10] Kelly, G.B. (1991) 'The Life and Death of a Modern Martyr' in *Christian History Magazine* edition 32. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/life-and-death-of-a-modern-martyr>, accessed 8/5/2023.

[11] Brueggemann, W. (2001) *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress, p.12.

