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JUSTICE

FOR THE POOR

AND OPPRESSED

A. M. Leske

When the Church looks to its task in today's world, it is confronted by a growing number who are poor and oppressed, weak and unfortunate, hungry and unclothed. They are those caught in the squeeze of growing population and diminishing resources. They are those who feel deprived of hope and livelihood by the structures and pressures of a society geared to the wealth of the few. They are also the failures of this age, the misfits of society, the people displaced by the machine, the aged and the handicapped who cannot work. What is the Church's task in regard to these people? To deal with this problem satisfactorily, we need to understand what Jesus meant when He told John's disciples that one sign of his messiahship was that "the poor have good news preached to them". (Matthew 11:5). To preach that "good news" today, we must understand what the Bible means when it talks of the poor and oppressed - a motif which flows through the Old Testament into the New where it finds its fulfilment in the teaching of Jesus.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Poor Man and the King

At the beginning of their history the Israelites were semi-nomadic shepherds and cattle-breeders. Admitted to Egypt at a time of famine, they had settled in the fertile Nile delta. There they increased in strength and numbers, with the result

that the pharaohs of the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1310-1200 B.C.) felt threatened by them and pressed them into service to carry out Egypt's huge building program. Thus, right at the beginning of their history, the Israelites became a people poor and oppressed.

In that context came the promise of Yahweh, "I will bring you out of affliction ('oni) of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites . . ." (Exodus 3:17). And forty years later the Israelites finally settled in the promised land, conscious that Yahweh had fulfilled His promise to them and graciously given each of them a share in this land.

Yahweh had not only delivered them from affliction and oppression but made them His own in a covenant relationship and gave them His law in which they could find justice and security. This law was rooted in the grace of God and established their rights and responsibilities as individuals and in community. An afflicted and oppressed people had been given identity as the people of Yahweh who ruled over them with justice and mercy and His everlasting love.

As long as the old system of family and tribal solidarity remained untouched in the new land, the Israelites retained the absolute social equality and democracy of their nomadic period, which had been safeguarded by the covenant law. In this system the elders of the clan directed the life of the community. They rendered justice at the gate, presided over sacrifices, and lead the people in war time combat. But they did this only on the basis of the acceptance of the other men of the clan who had the same rights. For they were all equal and members of the same race with Yahweh as their covenant God. In such a tightly knit group each man had concern for his brother, and the group was obliged to protect its weaker and less fortunate members.

With the growth in numbers and the coming of the monarchy, there was a breakdown in this family and tribal solidarity. Ties gradually shifted from the clan to the king. Centralization tended to destroy the power of local authorities. The officials, whom the king set up around him to judge the causes of men at the gate in the place of the clan elders, were open to bribery because they felt no real loyalty to the clan. The weak and unfortunate began to find themselves without protection from the greedy.

It was under these circumstances that the whole biblical motif of the poor man developed. Words like 'ani and 'anaw, 'ebyon and dal came into popular use. These words were all covenant terms to describe those who suffered at the hands of the *rasha'*, the evildoer who broke the covenant law. They came to mean those who were persecuted, afflicted and oppressed, the dispossessed, and consequently those who had become economically poor and wretched. Since Yahweh was the upholder of the covenant, victims of covenant transgressions appeared to Yahweh when His representatives - the clan elders and eventually the king - proved incapable of giving justice.

Although the advent of the monarchy coincided with the emergence of the poor man motif, kingship itself had just the opposite purpose. The king was anointed by Yahweh to be His representative and in his judgements to exercise the justice

1. Cf. A. Causse, *Les Pauvres d'Israel* [Prophetes, Psalmistes, Messianistes] (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, J. Gabalda et Cie, 1922), pp. 14-17. Also Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, c. 1961), 4-23.

of Yahweh for all the covenant people.² By anointing, the king was set apart as being inviolable and imbued with the spirit of Yahweh. Thus the king was known as *machiach Yahweh*, “Yahweh’s Anointed One”. The king was further designated as Yahweh’s son (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7; 89:26,27). As such he was to represent Yahweh to the people of Israel and the people to Yahweh. A strengthening of this imagery occurs when we remember that Israel is also described as Yahweh’s son (Exodus 4:22,23; Hos. 11:1; Jer. 31:9; Deut. 32:6).³ Thus it was that the king had a special responsibility towards the weak, the oppressed and the poor. And the poor and oppressed looked to the Lord’s Anointed to take up their cause before Yahweh and to give them Yahweh’s justice and protection from the wicked.

The Poor Man and the Prophets

However, the kings were very human and needed to be reminded of their sacred duty. To do this a new and creative phenomenon arose in the persons of the prophets, for whom the covenant faith was basic to Israel’s life and well-being. It was only under such a unique democratic kingship as was known in Israel that prophets could arise and wield the influence they did. When David took Uriah’s wife it is significant that the prophet Nathan described his wrongdoings in terms of a rich man oppressing a poor man. (2 Sam. 12:1-6). Such injustice was repulsive to a just king, because the king was to be the special protector of the poor and oppressed. Thus King Ahab’s sin of coveting Naboth’s vineyard was in complete contradiction to his duty and brought upon him the wrath of Yahweh. Only by humbling himself before Yahweh was Ahab saved from dying the ignominious death of one rejected from the covenant community of Israel. (1 Kings 21).

The prophets spoke not only to the king but to the privileged class in Israel. The prophet Amos protested the luxury and revelry of the wealthy who used their riches and power to oppress and exploit those less fortunate. He addressed the merchant class as oppressors and swindlers who trampled upon the poor person and sold him for a pair of sandals. (Amos 8:4; 4:1-3). He warned them that such rapacity and exploitation would mean their destruction; they would be carried away captive to a strange land and would have no opportunity to enjoy their ill-gotten gains. (3:11, 13-15; 5:11; 6:14). He described the king’s officers, who had the duty of rendering justice at the gate, as selling their judgements for bribes and thus intensifying the injustice against the righteous poor man. (5:12).

In the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Hosea portrayed Yahweh’s covenant love for His people and the people’s repudiation of that covenant relation with Yahweh with his graphic picture of an unfaithful wife. He condemned priest and prophet as corrupt (4:4-10), the cultic worship as degenerate (4:11-14), and the kings and leaders as wicked. (5:1; 7:3-7; 8:1-14; 9:15-17). The whole institution of the

2. Cf. 1 Kings 3:16-23; 2 Kings 8:1-6, Causse, *Les Pauvres d’Israël*, p. 32.

3. Cf. C. R. North, “The Religious Aspects of Hebrew Kingship”, *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, L (1932), 13-16.

kingdom would be destroyed in order that they might get back to the old covenant relationship as they had known it in the desert. The ideal of the covenant relationship would begin again in messianic renewal, and once more the people would say: "Thou art my God". (2:24; 14:5-7).

Somewhat later in Judah, the prophet Isaiah spoke out fearlessly to denounce the princes as rebels and thieves who sought bribes rather than defending the orphans and widows, the poor and oppressed. (Is. 1:23; 3:14-15). There was no end to the greed and graft and corruption of the leaders and officials of the country. (5:8-23). They had even changed the laws to rob the poor of their right and to take over the property of the weak and unfortunate. (10:1-2). Even the oppressed were being led astray by their oppressors. (9:15,16). The only hope which Isaiah saw was that the next king would truly be God's Anointed and would establish and uphold justice and righteousness. He would represent Yahweh so well he could be called "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!" (Cf. 9:1-6; 11:1-4). When the actual rule of the new king did not measure up to this "good news", the hope became the future ideal. Thus the messianic hope gradually developed.

One after the other, the prophets raised their voices in outrage against the injustices and godlessness of the political and spiritual leaders. Micah denounced the greedy oppressors who took over the hereditary family properties to make themselves great land-owners (2:1-2), and gave expression to the messianic hope for a righteous and merciful shepherd. (5:2-4). Zephaniah, the great grandson of King Hezekiah, saw in the poor of the land those who do the will of Yahweh. He urged those oppressed to continue to seek the Lord, to seek righteousness and humility so that they might escape the day of wrath. (2:3). They would be the holy remnant left after Yahweh had destroyed the proud and haughty. (3:11). Jeremiah, also, did not hesitate to hurl invectives against the kings of his time for not carrying out their primary duty of governing the people with justice and righteousness and delivering them from the hands of the oppressor "him who has been robbed". Their job was to protect the alien, the fatherless and the widow, not to harm them and shed innocent blood. (21:12; 22:3). He told King Jehoiakim that because he had been the oppressor of the weak instead of their defender, he himself would be given the burial of one disowned and dispossessed. (22:18,19). But the time would come when Yahweh would make a new covenant with his people and forget their sins, and they would keep his commandments. (31:31-34).

That time was still yet to come, for the people of Israel were soon exiled to Babylon with no king and no leaders. The nation as a whole was now one afflicted and oppressed. Prophets arose among the exiled to call them to remember Yahweh their God and to look to the future in hope. Isaiah 40ff. contains the cry of "good news" traditionally proclaimed at the accession of a king.⁴ The people

4. In the Eastern countries the accession of a new king was heralded as "good news" wherein all the hopes for an ideal reign were expressed: fugitives would return, the hungry and thirsty would be satisfied, the naked would be clothed, and prisoners set free. See James B. Pritchard, "Joy at the Accession of Raamses IV", *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd edition with supplement; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, C. 1969), pp. 378-379;. Cf. Is. 29:18,19; 35:5-7; 49:9-13; 61:1-4. Further examples may be found in Jacques Dupont, *Les Beatitudes* (Paris: Gabalda et Cie Editeurs, c. 1969), II, 60-61.

knew they were no longer permitted to have a king. But Isaiah proclaimed that Yahweh himself would now be the covenant king to his people as in the times before Saul. He would come as the righteous king to bring judgement on the oppressors of his people and would “feed his flock like a shepherd” (Is. 40:9-11). This messianic “good news” continued to be proclaimed to those who “knew righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law”. (Is. 51:7. Cf. 41:17-20; 49:10-13). In this context and in the context of Israel’s suffering, the prophet spoke to the people of a “suffering Servant of Yahweh”, one who would be Yahweh’s representative, who would “bring forth justice to the nations” and proclaim Yahweh’s will. Yet he would be subjected to insults and indignities and would be despised and rejected by men, experiencing in himself all the affliction and oppression of his people for whose sake he would die a vicarious death, giving himself up as a sin-offering. (Is. 53:10. Cf. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). Finally, he would be vindicated by Yahweh who would deliver all the oppressed of his people. Thus the Servant was seen as the messianic means for the vindication of the poor and oppressed and at the same time he would himself be the first-fruits of such deliverance.

In the latter part of Isaiah there is a further cry of “good news” in which it is proclaimed that the afflicted, the broken-hearted, the captives, the mourners will be vindicated with the beginning of the messianic rule. Then they will receive peace, liberty and consolation. (61:1-3). At this time it will be the poor and oppressed to whom Yahweh turns and with whom Yahweh dwells. (57:15). The complete dependence of the poor man upon Yahweh becomes the ideal for the people of the messianic kingdom.

Eventually, many of the exiles returned to Judah and rebuilt their temple in Jerusalem. But they were only a little flock whose leaders had let them down. The political scene was changing all around them and their unfulfilled hope for the promised Messiah had reached a high pitch, bordering on despair. In this context the prophet Zechariah pictured the messianic king entering Jerusalem as one afflicted like them, riding on an ass yet rescued and vindicated by Yahweh on whom he has depended entirely. (Zech. 9:9-10). Their messianic deliverer would understand their suffering because he himself was one afflicted and oppressed, yet one who would through affliction deliver the afflicted.

Thus in the prophetic writings a very important motif emerges. The poor man, he who is afflicted, oppressed, dispossessed, weak or alienated is under God’s special protection in the covenant relationship. This protection is to be given him through Yahweh’s appointed representative and also through the keeping of the covenant laws by all his covenant people. When this breaks down the poor and oppressed appeal to Yahweh, the Yahweh answers. He will deliver his oppressed people. So it is under this motif of oppression and injustice that messianism has its birth. The Messiah is the answer to the poor man’s search for justice and righteousness. There is no attempt to separate the spiritual from the social in this search. The Messiah will bring about the freedom to prosper and to live equally under God with other people as much as freedom of faith. The messianic community will be a society where the weak are protected and the unfortunate are cared for as was originally proposed in the covenant laws.

(Concluded in the next issue.)