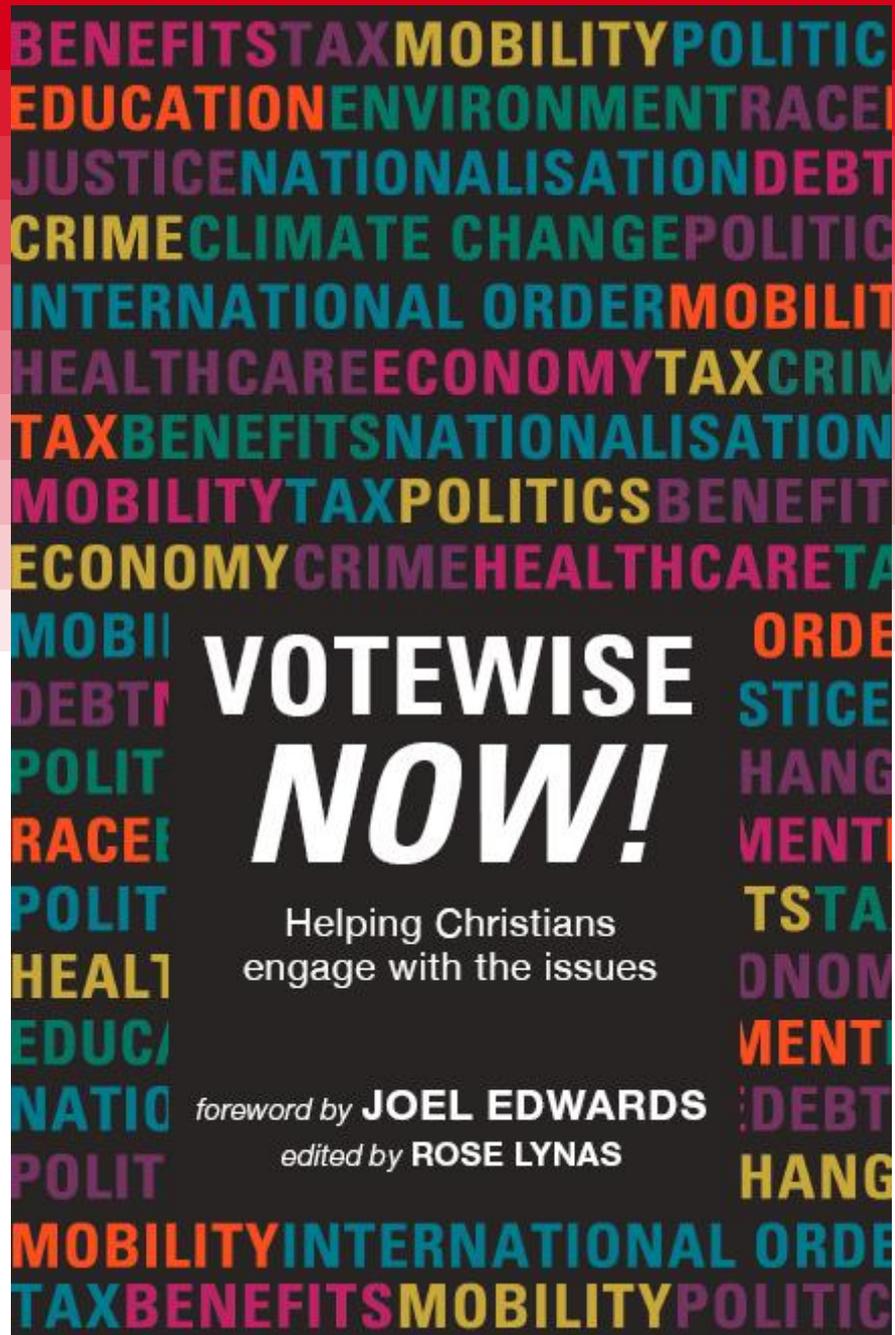


The Big Issues

A Group Discussion Guide for Voters



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A BIBLICAL VISION FOR SOCIETY

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Foreword

These Bible studies are intended to go alongside the second edition of *Votewise*, but although it will probably help if at least one person in the group has read the relevant chapters in the book for the background arguments, this is not necessary for everyone. With the exception of the introduction, the studies are designed to be used as standalone guides, rather than working through all of them in sequence. Depending on the time available, groups will probably want to adopt a “pick and mix” approach, choosing the studies that address their greatest concerns.

The introductory study is twice as long as the others, and expected to take around an hour as it establishes some of the overall principles relied on by the rest. The other studies are expected to take about 30 minutes each, and so two can be discussed in the course of a normal home group or Bible study meeting. The whole course could therefore be followed in the space of six weeks – one in the first week, and two the remaining five. Those with more limited time might find it easier to pick the studies most relevant for their group.

Introductory Study

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Hebrews 11:13-16

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

When it comes to putting a cross on our ballot, the obvious but often unasked question is: What are we ultimately hoping to achieve by voting? We are clearly trying to change the country in some way, but when we step back from the individual policies, parties and candidates, what do we want the overall picture to look like in practice? It is only when we know this purpose that we can then grasp some of the ideals and values against which we can judge a party’s policies.

Faced with the question from a Pharisee about the greatest commandment, Jesus summarised the Law and the Prophets not in terms of a single rule (such as murder or theft), but in terms of the principles that underpin the entire Law: love for God, and love for neighbour. In voting language, his overarching concern was not the economy, unemployment, immigration or healthcare, but something more fundamental: right relationships in every area of life. ‘All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’ Every law in the Old Testament regulates some aspect of a relationship, whether business, family, international, between an individual and God or between two people.

Whilst this gives us a guiding biblical principle for voting – and integrating our faith into our lives as a

whole – there are at least two problems. One is that party politics today is often fought on single issues, rather than the ‘big picture’. This means that even if a party adopts a ‘relational’ policy we approve of in one area, it doesn’t mean the same will apply in other areas. Without consistency in this regard anywhere across the political spectrum, we have to weigh up the different parties and select the best, or least-worst, to support.

The other problem is potentially more serious. Voting often doesn’t even get as far as the substance of the parties’ manifestos, but instead runs aground on spin and personality. Alternatively, people can make up their minds before they even know the parties’ differences, voting one way or another because they, or their families or wider communities, always have. In the London mayoral election of 2008, for example, voting for Boris Johnson (Conservative) or Ken Livingstone (Labour) correlated strongly with white and ethnic minority populations respectively; ethnicity was a stronger predictor of voting choice than class.¹

¹ <http://www.ipsos-mori.com:80/content/londoners-voted-on-racial-lines.ashx>

The challenge is to see beyond the window-dressing to what is truly of significance. No matter how charismatic (or otherwise) a party leader, or how strong our existing loyalties and affiliations, substance is what really counts. When we vote, how much are we reflecting earthly

values, and how much are we, like the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:13-16, ambassadors of heaven who recognise that we are strangers on earth? In the words of the Lord's prayer, whose Will is done: ours or God's?

Discussion Questions

1. In terms of our faith, why vote at all?
2. Discuss what your ideal society might look like, both on the surface and in terms of the values that underlie it.
3. In the past, what are the reasons we have voted one way or another?
4. How much do these reflect the biblical concerns discussed above?
5. Which party/candidate do you currently see as the most 'biblical' overall, and why?
6. The likelihood is that this election will be decided on the economy. How do we balance a concern for the major (single) issues facing the country with the 'big picture'?
7. How much do we see our identities in terms of citizens of earth, or ambassadors of heaven?
8. Does our engagement with politics begin and end at the ballot box, and if not, how does it touch the rest of life?

1. The Economy

Luke 16:1-9

¹Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’ ³The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg. ⁴I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

⁵“So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’ ⁷Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ ⁸‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

⁸“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

In Luke 16, Jesus presents the parable about a manager who is fired after wasting his master’s possessions. The word used means to ‘scatter about’ or ‘squander’ (the same term is used of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:13), so this is dishonesty for personal gain rather than just mismanagement. When the crunch comes and the manager realises he will lose his job and all prospect of future income, he makes another realisation: although worldly wealth may be transitory, it can be used to pursue true wealth that is not.

There may be more to his actions than generosity – even self-interested generosity. As he has defrauded his master, it is quite possible that the steward has also been defrauding his master’s debtors too – perhaps the

tenants who farmed his land and who paid him in a proportion of their harvest. If that is the case, this is not just generosity but repentance and justice, putting right his earlier sin. In the process, he ‘buys’ their grateful friendship. Right relationships between landowner, debtors and steward are restored. (Depending on the honesty of the rich man, he may or may not have been pleased that this injustice had been addressed; either way, he commends the steward for his wisdom.)

Jesus suggests that using earthly wealth (literally ‘unrighteous wealth’) the right way is a pre-condition for entering the Kingdom of Heaven, releasing our ties to the earth ‘so that when it is gone, you may be welcomed into eternal dwellings.’

Discussion Questions

1. Economic growth is often seen as ‘a proxy or measure of happiness, and therefore to be pursued.’² What does this parable suggest that the purpose of wealth and the economy should be?
2. What do ‘true’ wealth and [economic] growth then look like in practice?
3. What needs to change about our economy, and what questions would you want MPs to answer about their plans for and attitudes to our economy?
4. On economic measures, which party do you think is closest to the biblical ideal, and why?
5. How can we use money to build relationships in our personal, family, church and wider lives?

² Paul Williams, *Votewise*, chapter 1.

2. Criminal Justice

Romans 3:21-26

²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Justice is not just something that God carries out or desires, but what he is. 'He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he' (Deut 32:4). Like love, kindness and righteousness, justice is part of God's very nature, and therefore cannot be considered apart from his other characteristics.

In the Old Testament, the Exodus was the greatest example of God's justice, delivering the Hebrew slaves from Pharaoh's oppression. In the New Testament, the crucifixion is God's ultimate act of justice – described in Luke 9:31 as the new 'Exodus'. In the crucifixion, God

overthrew the ultimate enemy and, in the process, restored relationships between himself and humanity. Romans 3:21-26 links the punishment of the crucifixion to the justice, righteousness and grace of God, reconciling us to him through Jesus' death. The Last Judgement will restore the whole of Creation to him through the Cross.

Justice addresses sin, which is more than breaking the rules; it is a rift in the relationship between us and God, and between each other. As such, punishment is never arbitrary. It is always relational, and restorative.

Discussion Questions

1. 'All have sinned... and are justified freely by his grace...' How should Jesus' sacrifice shape the way we view criminal justice?
2. How does understanding justice as just one of God's inherent characteristics influence our approach to criminal justice?
3. How does criminal justice in the UK today reflect the biblical ideals?
4. What needs to change, and how might this be achieved?
5. What questions would you want to ask MPs about criminal justice?

3. Healthcare

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” ²⁷He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”

²⁸“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” ²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” ³⁰In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

³⁶“Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” ³⁷The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

It is interesting that Luke, the physician, is the only gospel writer to include the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Although Jesus spoke this parable to answer the broader question of ‘Who is my neighbour?’, there are a number of secondary points we can draw from it in terms of healthcare and other caring relationships. We have to be careful not to read too much into it, but there are several ideas that are thought-provoking.

For example, the hero of the story is a Samaritan – not the Jewish priest or Levite, or even an ordinary Jewish layperson. Whilst the priest and Levite’s avoidance of the injured man might show a concern to remain ritually ‘clean’ (contact with a dead body would have meant they temporarily could not have served in the Temple), or perhaps fear of an ambush themselves, Jesus

implies that there was another reason. These two both lacked compassion, whereas the Samaritan ‘took pity on him’, despite the fact that he was from a culture traditionally despised by the Jewish people – and vice versa – and regarded as unclean. Compassion transcends religious and cultural boundaries and is not selective in who it helps.

In addition, the Samaritan shows both short-term (‘pouring on oil and wine’) and ongoing care (‘look after him, and when I return I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have’). Money is always limited, but both acute and continuing attention are given. Compassion is interested in the long-term welfare of the sick, not just in patching them up and getting them out of the hospital.

Discussion Questions

1. The parable of the Good Samaritan suggests that compassion was the overriding reason for the Samaritan's care of the victim. Do you agree that this should be a starting point for modern-day healthcare, and why/why not?
2. Who is my neighbour? How inclusive can and should healthcare be?
3. Around £100 billion of taxpayer's money is spent on the NHS a year. Are we prepared to pay this much, or more, for healthcare for all?
4. What should healthcare priorities be – how do we decide what is most important?
5. What questions would you want to ask MPs about this area?

4. Education

Deuteronomy 6:1-7

¹These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ²so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. ³Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Proverbs 1:1-7

¹The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: ²for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; ³for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; ⁴for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young – ⁵let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance – ⁶for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. ⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

The biblical view of education seems remarkably different from the way our culture currently approaches the subject. Central to the uncertainties and opinions we have about education policy is the underlying question, 'What is education for?'

So often today, education is geared towards gaining the right results: passing exams and achieving learning objectives. In that sense, students can be thought of as 'products of an educational machine'. The Bible, however, has a different understanding of education. It is for gaining wisdom – not simply collecting information or knowledge, although this will be a part of the process, but applying it across the whole of life.

The purpose of education is far less narrow than we can assume. Its purpose is not only to make us eligible for one or other employment opportunity; it is holistic and, as Deuteronomy 6 states, for the good of the whole community, not just for individual financial gain.

As Christians, we are to an extent strangers to our wider culture, bringing beliefs and ideas with which others might not agree. However, as God told the exiles, we are to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7) and ideally exercise influence by engaging with society rather than withdrawing from it, so that others will glorify God when they see our good works (1 Peter 2:12).

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think education should ultimately be for?
2. What does secular education get right/wrong?
3. How, as Christians, can we 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile' (Jeremiah 29:7) in terms of education?
4. What do you think should be the role in education of faith, and of faith schools?
5. What education policies have or might attract your vote?

5. The Environment

Genesis 1:26-31

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” ²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

²⁹Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.

Hosea 4:1-3

¹Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. ²There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. ³Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.”

In Genesis 1 and 2, God creates the earth and everything in it. Then he makes humans in his own image, giving them rulership and stewardship over his Creation. He provides them with food and tells them to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’, but also to work and take care of the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2:15) where he has placed them. Everything that God creates is ‘very good’, and humans are charged with ensuring it stays that way. Later on in chapter 3, broken relationship with God changes humans’ relationship with his Creation too (3:17-19).

In Hosea, God again draws a line between the Israelites’ rebellion against him and unjust treatment of each other, and the state of the environment – and therefore

also the fortunes of the people who rely on it for their lives. It is not clear whether the damage to the land is a consequence of this injustice or a more direct punishment for it, but either way the two go closely hand-in-hand.

Today, however, we can see a clear link between the ways we treat each other and the way we treat the environment. Our lifestyle choices have consequences for the world around us, and therefore for everyone else who shares it. However, it is a reality that the richest nations in the world use disproportionately more natural resources, whereas the consequences disproportionately affect those in low-income countries.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that the way we treat the environment is a matter of social justice, and why/why not?
2. Can you think of some specific examples of the way that our 'personal' energy/shopping/transport habits in the West affect other people?
3. What might sustainable rulership/stewardship of Creation look like for Christians?
4. What different personal choices might we make in pursuit of justice?
5. What issues need to be addressed on a national level?

6. International Order

Isaiah 58:6-12

⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ⁸Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. ⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ¹⁰and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. ¹¹The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. ¹²Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”

Globalisation is here to stay. We benefit from many aspects of it, such as international trade, but the interdependence that follows from it also facilitates and makes us more vulnerable to terrorism, environmental damage, people trafficking, and financial crises over which we may have little control. Global communications technology means that we have no excuse for remaining unaware of what is happening on the other side of the world, and sometimes even in our name and for our interests.

Political approaches to international order encompass numerous interlocking concerns. Poverty, famine and disease, war crimes and genocide, the suppression of democracy, denial of freedoms, torture of dissidents, marginalisation and discrimination of ethnic and religious minorities – these all require a response, both morally and politically. And, even if there may be short-

term tensions between national interests and morality, justice and freedom are the only realistic long-term goals. Dictators do not make reliable allies and, when change does occur, their former victims can constitute future threats if previously abandoned by the international community.

God’s message in Isaiah 58 to loose the chains of injustice, feed the hungry and do away with oppression is just as relevant today when it comes to global issues of poverty, persecution and human rights. As Christians we are called to seek justice for those who cannot seek it for themselves. ‘Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute’ (Proverbs 31:8). In Isaiah 58, God makes it clear that his blessing is dependent on us acting on behalf of the oppressed.

Discussion Questions

1. How seriously do you take the conditions of Isaiah 58: ‘if you... then...’?
2. To what extent do you see international justice as our concern?

3. What personal choices can we make to address this?
4. What short- and long-term problems and benefits can you see to such personal and corporate choices?
5. Politically, what do you think the priorities should be in terms of international order and human rights?

7. Race Relations/Immigration

Deuteronomy 26:5-9

⁵Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. ⁶But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labour. ⁷Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. ⁸So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. ⁹He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Deuteronomy 24:17-22

¹⁷Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. ¹⁸Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. ¹⁹When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. ²²Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

As a people descended from a nomad, the Patriarch Abraham, the Israelites had a strong sense of what it meant to be an alien in their national identity. The Exodus, their escape from slavery in Egypt which was celebrated in the Passover, was one of their most important collective memories. For 40 years they were wanderers in the desert, before God brought them to a new land where he would bless them.

As a result of this national history, the Israelites are repeatedly commanded to love the alien and not to deny them justice. They were strangers in a land themselves at one point, harshly treated in Egypt, and their fair treatment of those from other countries who lived among them was a sign of gratitude to God for rescuing them from their slavery.

However, full acceptance of immigrants was not unconditional. There were two main categories of alien, the *ger* and the *nokri*. The *ger* was a foreigner who had taken up permanent residence in Israel, also taking on their religion and customs. They are often mentioned alongside the poor, orphans and widows, implying their vulnerability. They were to be treated as fellow Israelites in most respects. The *nokri* was probably a temporary resident who intended to return to his home country and who retained his own national identity and customs – perhaps a visiting trader or mercenary. Their willingness to integrate with Israelite culture, and therefore their rights in the land and inclusion in national life, were more limited than those of the *ger*.

Discussion Questions

1. As Christians, how far should we see ourselves as 'aliens' in the world?
2. What are the factors that the Israelites had to balance when dealing with immigrants?
3. What was the most important principle in dealing with the *ger*?
4. How might the distinction of *ger* and *nokri* help us?
5. What questions does this leave you with in terms of party policies?

8. Tax and Benefits

Deuteronomy 14:28-29

²⁸At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, ²⁹so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Matthew 22:15-21

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, ²⁰and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" ²¹"Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Deuteronomy 14 suggests a number of things about taxation. Firstly, our wealth is not entirely our own. God demands a proportion of the Israelites' income directly; he has given generously to us and this should prompt generosity of our own in return. And specifically, one of the purposes of the tithe was to provide for marginalised and vulnerable members of society. This passage also raises the question of what wealth is actually for (see also the study on the Economy) and how we should use it in the service of God.

In Matthew 22 Jesus looks at the question of taxation at a time when the tribute went not primarily to God, but to Caesar – as far as the Jews were concerned, a rival

claim to their loyalty and even worship. In our political system we elect a leader, even if we later regret it. In New Testament times the Jews were subject to Caesar not by their own choice; even in this situation, however, Jesus implies that they are to pay Caesar what he is due – without neglecting their obligations to God in the process.

The theme of compassion for the needy runs through the Old Testament (see also the study on Immigration). However, in terms of how we view ourselves in relation to benefits payments, we have a responsibility to look after ourselves and not assume that anyone owes us as living: as Paul summarises in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, 'If a man will not work, he will not eat.'

Discussion Questions

1. How do we view taxation – as a potential source of blessing for others, or as a burden, and why?
2. Given that we will always have to pay taxes, what would we like the money to go towards?
3. Which party seems to offer the closest ‘fit’ for these preferences?
4. What misgivings do you still have about this choice?
5. What would you like clarified or answered by the different parties?

9. Employment

Leviticus 25:35-43

³⁵“If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. ³⁶Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. ³⁷You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit. ³⁸I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

³⁹“If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. ⁴⁰He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. ⁴¹Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers. ⁴²Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. ⁴³Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.”

The Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 was intended to ensure that everyone in Israel had the means to make a living for themselves. At regular intervals, land that had been bought and sold was redistributed to its original owners and debts were cancelled, meaning that unjust extremes of wealth and poverty were avoided. When an Israelite ‘became poor’ (for whatever reason – no judgement about circumstances is required), they were to be offered work so that ‘there should be no poor among you’ (Deuteronomy 15:4).

In the pastoral and agricultural cultures of the Bible, access to land determined families’ and individuals’

livelihoods, whereas today our income generally comes from employment. Although there were some provisions for the vulnerable in the Old Testament, there was no welfare state as we understand it. Work was the only realistic route out of poverty; as such, it was important for individuals, their families and society as a whole. However, the principle of Deuteronomy 15:4 remains the same today, as does the requirement in Leviticus 25:17, ‘do not take advantage of one another’ – something that applies to all employment (and unemployment) relationships.

Discussion Questions

1. What do we think work is for? Does employment enable us to serve our families and communities, or does our work rule us?
2. What questions does the biblical material raise about long hours, low pay, and vulnerable workers?
3. Do we view work as part of a wider picture, or as something isolated from the rest of our lives – and how does this affect the way we think of things like family time?
4. Does this make a difference to how we approach unemployment, both for ourselves and others?
5. What questions about (un)employment policy would you want to ask MPs?

10. Housing

Genesis 17:3-8

³Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

Leviticus 25:23

“The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.”

In the book of Joshua, God fulfilled his promise to Abraham to give his descendants the land of Canaan. Every tribe, clan and family was to have their own allotment of land, which would remain in the family forever. Land could be bought and sold, but only on a leasehold basis. Every 50 years, on the Jubilee year, land that had been sold was returned to its original family. Everyone was supposed to have a place to live, farm and work, meaning that family and community roots were strong and everyone had a chance of economic independence. The Jubilee legislation meant that property could not become commodified but retained its full significance.

In the Old Testament, then, property was more than a place to live or an investment. It had great social and relational implications – not merely financial, as we can often view it today. The promise of the land was central to God’s covenant with Abraham and the relationship between God and the Israelites. But the land was not an unconditional gift. Ultimately, God remained its owner, and the Israelites were his tenants.

In the New Testament, the ‘inheritance’ is spoken of in terms of the Kingdom, rather than physical land. The promise is not just to the Israelites, but extended to all Christians. The strong relationship found between families and the land in the Old Testament is now seen in fellowship with others in the Kingdom.

Discussion Questions

1. How does God as ‘divine landlord’ affect the way we view property?
2. How does the idea of property affecting relationships – with God and others – change our approach to property ownership?
3. How might we strengthen the links between property and community in modern society?

HOUSING

4. Does the New Testament emphasis on the Kingdom and fellowship rather than physical property make a difference to us?
5. What questions for housing policy does this leave you with?