

The year of Jubilee: a generous gospel for human flourishing

Annika Greco Thompson links the Jubilee principle with Jesus' proclamation of good news to the poor based on Isaiah 61. She points out that Jesus follows Elijah in the supernatural multiplication of food rather than miraculously producing bread from nothing. She suggests therefore that our own generosity should fuel an individual's agency, not their dependency.

The Old Testament concept of Jubilee has been on my mind over the last several months. In the Catholic church calendar, 2025 is a year of Jubilee (celebrated every 25 years). Also, my husband recently turned 49 (the year of Jubilee in the Old Testament), and we've just bought a house on a street called Jubilee Avenue.

So I've been wondering, is God trying to speak to me about this?

What is Jubilee?

Leviticus 25 outlines the Year of Jubilee: a full year dedicated to the releasing of slaves, the cancellation of debts, and the return of individuals and families to their ancestral lands.

The concept of Jubilee is multifaceted but revolves around these key elements:

- Debts were to be cancelled and indentured servants (or slaves) were to be released from their contracts.
- Each person was to return to his family property and clan; no loss of land was permanent.
- The land was to rest – no sowing or reaping for one year.

- Charging interest on loans was not permitted, and any buying or selling of land was to be done at a fair price in relation to the Year of Jubilee.

- The land ultimately belonged to the Lord and his people were tenants (stewards).

In a similar vein, Leviticus 19 names a number of laws that call for generosity to be exercised by landowners. We see the practice of letting the poor glean from fields and vineyards during harvest time. We see landowners told not to withhold the wages of a hired man overnight. We see God admonishing his people to be neither partial to the poor nor show preference for the great, but to judge fairly and accurately.¹

If we were to summarise what this and the larger concept of Jubilee is all about, it's God's idea for human flourishing. It's a manifestation of his generosity towards his people. It's a blueprint for reconciliation. It's also a guardrail against our human propensity towards slavery.

Leviticus 25 is pregnant with God's concern for social justice, economic fairness and the wellbeing of his people. He knew how easily debt could fracture relationships. He also knew that our own lack of self-control would lead us into poverty and slavery, and he made provisions for that to never become our permanent state. But the onus was, and continues to be, on his people to follow the principles he laid out. It's telling that the chapter on the Year of Jubilee is immediately followed by a chapter on rewards for obedience and the punishment for disobedience. God does not obfuscate or mess around.

What does Jubilee have to do with the Gospel?

Fast forward to the New Testament, and we see the Jubilee principle being embodied in the person of Jesus. When he reads Isaiah 61 out loud in the synagogue (Luke 4), we see a parallel emerge between the Jubilee principle and Jesus' message of the Kingdom: It's time to release captives from prison, to bring good news to the afflicted, to



'The land was to rest'
Photo: Castle Farm Slingsby



Marc Chagall,
Elijah and
the Widow
of Zarephath
(c.1939)
photo:
cutter & cutter

restore what has been broken, stolen or lost. Essentially, Jesus is saying, 'I am here to cancel your debt.'

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)

If we examine verse 18, we see something interesting: Jesus' solution for prisoners was to proclaim freedom. His solution for the blind was to give them sight. His solution for those who were oppressed was to see them released. Following that logic, why isn't his solution for the poor to give them food and shelter, or even money? Instead, his solution was to 'preach good news' to them. This is also repeated in Luke 7:22 when Jesus reports back to John the Baptist, saying,

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Does this mean that Jesus dismissed poverty as being anything other than

a spiritual condition? Was he failing to sensitively 'read the room'? Or have we perhaps overemphasised preaching the gospel with words and neglected to sufficiently preach it with actions?

What is poverty in the hands of a generous God?

With the caveat that modern poverty is a multi-layered problem involving complex factors, please indulge this more abstract exploration of the nature of poverty that reveals what I believe Jesus was getting at here.

The Bible is rife with examples of people living in poverty. In 1 Kings 17, God tells the prophet Elijah that he has commanded a widow in the village of Zarephath to supply him with food. Elijah might have thought that this woman was resourced, but instead he encounters a destitute woman on the verge of starvation. He still asks her to provide for him. What an audacious, dare we say insensitive and tone-deaf, request! But was it? This woman had nothing other than a handful of flour and a little bit of oil. But this was not *nothing*. It was still a *handful of flour* and a *little bit of oil*. And she responded

to Elijah in faith, using what she had to exercise generosity and provide for someone else. And the result was *supernatural multiplication*.

There is a similar story but one with an additional community dimension in 2 Kings 4. The prophet Elisha encountered a widow who was about to lose her two sons to a creditor, but he advised her to gather as many jars from her neighbours as possible, to fill them with olive oil, and sell the oil to pay off her late husband's debts. Here we see God's supernatural provision (the oil) joining forces with a generous community's provision (the jars), resulting in a desperate family being freed from debt and provided for into the future.

One of the most famous stories of the New Testament is the feeding of the five thousand. Again, we see a problem of provision surface when Jesus asks his disciples to feed an enormous crowd of people. Their response? We don't have anything to give them so let's point them elsewhere. Jesus' response? *You give them something to eat*. After some scrambling, the disciples found they had five loaves and two fish. Not

enough, certainly, but not *nothing*. Responding to Jesus in faith, they used what they had to exercise generosity and provide for others, and the result was *supernatural multiplication*.

None of these stories is one of wealth. All three saw people facing profound scarcity, but the act of generosity rooted in faith released supernatural provision. The 'good news' – the life-changing, paradigm-shifting good news – is that when we commit our lives to the Lord and choose to become part of his kingdom, we live under his reign and way of doing things. There are abundant heavenly resources at our disposal, both material and immaterial. It doesn't matter what tangible provision we have in our hands; He can produce supernatural multiplication. This, I believe, is what Jesus was saying in Luke 4 and 7 when he inferred that what the poor really need is good news, not just physical provision.

The lie of scarcity

The modern Church faces issues on multiple fronts, but I posit that perhaps the biggest challenge is combatting the mindset of *scarcity*.

Scarcity is the foundation upon which our entire capitalist system, civilisation and societal worldview are built and by which they are informed. The market only has so much supply, and those who have the resources to create and fulfil the demand, win, and those who don't, lose. This creates a scramble for resources, fuelled by greed and fear, enabled by a lack of self-control – all of which leads directly, or indirectly, to impoverishment and dependency (in other words, *slavery*).

The Jubilee paradigm has not lost its relevance; it is still the blueprint God provides to help us combat the lie of scarcity and resist slavery. We don't have to look far to see people being oppressed by systems and institutions that have strayed far from their original purpose of helping people flourish. So many of us live in relational poverty, far removed from our proverbial 'ancestral land'. So many of us are slaves to an unrelenting churn of earning and spending, burdened by debt. The earth is groaning at the frantic pace of human consumption, and society is still in desperate need of healing, restoration, freedom and renewal, as expressed in Romans 8:18–25.

If Scripture says that in the kingdom of God there is abundance and freedom from the things that so easily enslave us, then our Christian lives and our behaviour should look radically different to the rest of the world. But do they?

For all our counter-cultural rhetoric, I fear the Church has bought into a scarcity mindset just as much as the secular world has. How else do we explain why talking about money and giving is so awkward and difficult for so many of us? Where is the freedom?

How do we explain why so many ministries, charities and missionaries struggle to maintain a solid support base when there is so much money in the world? Where is the abundance?

Why do some church leaders feel pressure to 'grow the brand' (whether that be their own brand or the Gospel brand) to the extent that discipleship and maturation of the flock take less of a priority than all of the projects, activities and initiatives the church is busy doing in order to attract more attendees? Where is the focus?



The Multiplication of the loaves and fishes

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

What does this mean for business?

As Christians who work in business, let's consider what we might do to shift our business practices towards a kind of 'Jubilee model' – whatever that might look like in our contexts. Adopting an abundance mindset (as opposed to a scarcity mindset) might change the way we compete with other businesses, or the way we relate to our suppliers, or the way we treat our employees, clients and customers. We might be quicker to practice Sabbath, or share our profits with the poor, or encourage our staff to engage in charitable giving. We can preach the gospel through action and show our peers that there is a better way to do business and a better way to do relationships.

For example, The Entertainer² and Mitchell Group³ are two UK businesses that are run by Christians and known for not trading on Sundays. That's a form of 'letting the land rest'. They also share their profits with those in need through their charitable foundations. That's a form of 'letting the poor glean'. Grace Enterprises⁴ is a Nottingham-based social enterprise, run by Christians, that creates businesses in order to employ people who would normally encounter major barriers to work due to homelessness, substance abuse, prison time, mental ill health, etc.⁵ Providing them with dignified work and a living wage whilst helping them get back on their feet sounds very much like 'releasing slaves from captivity', doesn't it?


Showing generosity is a big part of all this. For example, business owners can choose to donate a percentage of their profits to charitable causes, or they can put giving schemes in place to incentivise their staff to give to the charities and causes they feel passionate about.

Generosity naturally seeks the empowerment of others, and Jubilee-minded business owners will look for ways to increase the agency of the people who work for them. Recent examples of Christian business leaders who have handed over the ownership of their companies to their employees include The Wonderful Creative Agency⁶ and The Entertainer.⁷ This is just one of many ways to model generosity as a core leadership practice, and it's a great case study in how to exercise good stewardship of one's power: by handing it over to others for their continued flourishing.

Shifting the paradigm

Jubilee is about relating to one another in a spirit of generosity, recognising that the land belongs to the Lord. God is our King, and the land we live in is his Kingdom. We are his stewards. Nothing we have is owned by us but by God. Regardless of how much or how little we've been given, the proof in Scripture is that when we are faithful to steward it well – with a posture of generosity rooted in faith – we can count on the multiplication of resources. Poverty and scarcity are not biblically qualified excuses to neglect exercising generosity and good stewardship.

Perhaps this is hitting a cultural sore spot, but we must be willing to examine our existing paradigm and question if it's the right one. If we don't, we will lose our credible voice in the public space, society will continue to pursue godlessness for lack of a better idea, and the Kingdom of God will not advance. Not because God isn't powerful enough to override our efforts, but because he is nothing if not faithful at keeping his promises and commitments. In the beginning, God gave humankind dominion over the earth, and he is still asking us to have dominion. He is not going to take back something he gave freely and generously to us. He can, but he won't.

As citizens and ambassadors of God's kingdom, we are called to live generously and steward all that we have for God's purpose and his glory, not our own. All through the biblical narrative, God's generosity empowers people and restores agency to them; it does not make them dependent on any institution or individual. This suggests that our own generosity should fuel an individual's agency, not dependency. What better way to do this than to preach the good news that being a citizen of Heaven means we have access to supernatural multiplication of resources! We no longer have to live in a state of indebtedness and slavery. Jesus came to proclaim the Year of Jubilee once and for all. Let us live as if we believe it. 

1. See the article by David Parish, 'What did you glean today?', FIBQ 23.1, pp5-7.

2. <https://www.thetoyshop.com/>

3. <https://www.mitchellgroup.co.uk/about/>

4. <https://www.graceenterprises.co.uk/>

5. Richard Higginson interviewed Matt Parfitt, Head of Grace Enterprises, in FIBQ 21.4, pp. 17-20.

6. <https://www.bewonderful.co.uk/insight/eot/>

7. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/inspired-by-christian-faith-owner-of-the-entertainer-top-shop-hands-business-to-staff>



Annika is a Swedish-American, married to a Brit and living in Liverpool. Before coming to the UK, she lived in Lebanon, Sweden, Spain and the U.S. and has had a varied vocational trajectory. Her current role as Growth and Relationships Manager at Stewardship sees her travelling the country and encouraging Christians to live a life of biblical generosity. She enjoys writing on the topic of generosity for Stewardship's blog and other publications.