

IUBILAEUM MMXXV

Our Holy Father Pope Francis has proclaimed the year 2025 a year of Jubilee. It is a wonderful gift to the Church, indeed to the whole world. The Jubilee is a Biblical institution. We read of it first in Leviticus – not perhaps the book we most readily turn to for spiritual reading. So let us remind ourselves of what the Lord told Moses on Mount Sinai regarding the year of Jubilee.

The Jubilee was to take place every fiftieth year, after ‘seven weeks of years’. Its function was to give all people resident in the Land a regular, predictable chance to redress balances, release captives, cancel debts, and have a corporate rest. It was to be a year of homecoming: ‘In this year of Jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property’ (Leviticus 25.12). This point regards more than just a sentimental attachment to the old camp fire. It regards the nature of property and our claim to it. Leviticus recognises the complex dynamics of human communities. It may happen through various transactions that territories pass from hand to hand. Someone lives on the land for a while, then sells it, or is driven off; somebody else redeems or occupies it. Conflicts arise. Someone cries from the left: ‘This land is mine!’ Somebody else cries from the right, ‘No way! It is mine!’ This is the sort of situation the Biblical text addresses. It does so by short-circuiting the discourse of rights and entitlement. ‘The land’, says the Lord, ‘shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants’ (Leviticus 25.23).

Given the parlous state of our world right now, this perspective is important. A durable society worthy of free women and men, corresponding to God’s will for humanity, cannot be built simply on claims to possession. For a society to thrive, individuals within it must first become a *people*, bound together by a covenant of justice consonant with natural and divinely inspired law. Ultimately we are all, like Abraham, our father in faith, strangers and aliens in the land (cf. Genesis 23.4). We must learn, then, to be worthy sojourners, committed at once to righteousness and to hospitality, mindful that the land, wherever on the globe we may happen to live, remains *the Lord’s*, and that we shall be called to account for our political, religious, and ecological stewardship of it.

Having established the principle about ownership of land, Leviticus applies the logic of Jubilee more intimately to human relationships. The Bible has no illusions about these. It sings of ‘how good and pleasant it is when brothers live in unity’ (Psalm 133.1) while recognising that such unity does not come cheap. It must be striven for, sometimes at the cost of great suffering. Let us not forget that the history of our race outside Eden

begins with a fratricide (Genesis 4.1-8). It is not natural for us human beings, as long as our nature is wounded and blinded by sin, to live peacefully together. That is why peace, in Scripture, is presented as dynamic, a living reality we must *pursue* by departing from evil and by doing good (cf. Psalm 34.14). On account of life's vicissitudes it may occur that one human being falls subject to another – say, on account of debt or imprisonment. The one who holds in his hand the bill of debt or the gaoler's key may feel, then, an intoxicating rush of power, as if his dependents belonged to him and were his to deal with as he pleases. Leviticus reminds us that this is a perverse illusion. Even 'if your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you', we are told, 'you shall not make him serve as a slave' (Leviticus 25.39). No human being can, on *any* terms, pretend to own another. Men and women sometimes do stupid, even wicked things. They may need to be constrained by just means to pay what they owe; they may need to be chastised or restrained. But they remain sovereign. What is more, they are by virtue of their simple humanity, made in God's image, bearers of an immense potential dignity we owe it to them to recognise and to call forth. Leviticus undermines the idea that some people are naturally others' subjects by decreeing that all bondsmen are to be set free in the year of Jubilee. 'For they are my servants', says the Lord, 'whom I brought out of the land of Egypt' and redeemed (Leviticus 25.42). Only God can rightly say to us, 'You are mine' (cf. Isaiah 43.1). Only he, who is almighty *and* merciful, can let us experience total dependence as perfect freedom.

The ideal put before us by the Bible is not upheld in the world we inhabit. This is a state of affairs we must, as Christians, confront and strive by every means to change. Just think: human trafficking is soaring, a terrible and demeaning trade; whole nations are crippled by debt and ruthlessly exploited; commercial agencies (above and below board) promote and foster addiction to drugs and games, pornography and booze for the sole purpose of gain, *devising* ways of keeping people shackled. And what are we to say of the erosion of the rights of the unborn, increasingly denied any form of humane, legal protection under law? When our countries were evangelised a millennium or so ago, a major civilisational step forward was the recognition of each person's sovereign dignity, which was seen to begin in the womb. Belief in an incarnate God, made 'a man like us in all things but sin' (Fourth Eucharistic Prayer), had a profound impact on our collective understanding of what it is to be human. The further this belief recedes from public life, the more humanity is under threat. An individual can then once again consider another individual his or her chattel. This is a tendency we are morally obliged to counter constructively as we uphold an anthropology worthy of our nature.

It is a wonderful providence that next year's Jubilee, summoning us to construct a more just world, coincides with the seventeenth centenary of the Council of Nicaea, held in 325. At Nicaea the creed was defined that we still profess each Sunday, when we affirm our belief in the Blessed Trinity, one God in three Persons; in the incarnation of God's Son, 'Light from Light, true God from true God'; in Jesus Christ's redeeming and sanctifying work through his birth, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven; and in the transforming presence among and within us of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who spoke through the prophets and speaks to us still through Holy Church.

As your bishops we pray that the Jubilee year may see an effective, cordial, and intelligent deepening of faith in our countries. We invite you to return to the sources of our creed by studying the Scriptures and our wonderful Catholic *Catechism* in order thereby to be rooted more deeply in the mystery of faith, to experience what it means to live 'in Christ' (cf. Galatians 2.20), better placed to 'give an account of the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3.15). Thus prepared we shall find the strength and means to be agents of Jubilee, so that the Lord may, through us, as we pray each Good Friday, 'cleanse the world of all errors, banish disease, drive out hunger, unlock prisons, loosen fetters, granting to travellers safety, to pilgrims return, health to the sick, and salvation to the dying'. We will support you in this holy endeavour with all our strength, grateful for the witness of fidelity, charity, and generosity we find in the dioceses it is our privilege to serve. In his letter announcing the Jubilee, published on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes 2022, the Holy Father expressed hope that this forthcoming year may build up the Church 'so that it can press forward in its mission of bringing the joyful proclamation of the Gospel to all'. To this intention we say wholeheartedly: 'Amen!' The Jubilee motto is 'Peregrinantes in spem'. We are, that is, to be pilgrims moving out of hopelessness *into* hope. As we embark on another Advent, we marvel at the grace given us in the Word's incarnation, which renews the world. May we credibly witness to this newness as Christ's disciples through generous charity, firm communion and brave justice, illumined by the splendour of Truth.

Given on the First Sunday of Advent 2024,

+ Anders Cardinal Arborelius OCD (bishop of Stockholm), +Peter Bürcher (*emeritus* bishop of Reykjavik), +Bernt Eidsvig, Can.Reg. (bishop of Oslo), +Raimo Goyarrola, (bishop of Helsinki, Vice President), + Berislav Grgić (*emeritus* bishop of Tromsø), +Czeslaw Kozon (bishop of Copenhagen), +Teemu Sippo SCJ (*emeritus* bishop of Helsinki), +David Tencer OFM (bishop of Reykjavik), +Erik Varden OCSO (bishop prelate of Trondheim and apostolic administrator of Tromsø, President)