A P U B L I C A T I O N  O F  T H E
N O V E M B E R ,  2 0 1 5

The Africa Faith and Justice Network, inspired by the Gospel and informed by Catholic Social Teaching, seeks to educate and advocate for just relations with Africa and to work in partnership with African peoples as they engage in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

MISSION STATEMENT

Moved to action by their personal experiences in Africa, three Catholic missionary congregations namely the Missionaries of Africa, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritains), and the Society of African Missions, founded the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) in 1983 to transform United States policy towards Africa and her people. Since that time, membership has grown and remains committed in faith to advocate in Washington, DC for U.S. relations with Africa that foster justice and peace, and to educate the public across the United States on the truth about Africa.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Continental Conference on Land Grab and Just Governance in Africa
Nairobi, 22-26 November 2015

A Keynote Address
Biblical Perspective on Land with *Laudato Si* as the Background
Teresa Okure, SHCJ

I express my greetings and heart-felt gratitude to the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) and its collaborators for inviting me to this historic “Continental Conference on Land Grab and Just Governance in Africa” and for

Preliminary Observations
asking me to present this keynote address on the “Biblical Perspective on Land with *Laudato Si* as the Background.” I also thank all of you the participants for being disposed to listen to this presentation. The purpose of a keynote address, as I understand it, is to set the tone or point a direction for discussion, not to engage in the discussion itself. The word “direction” here refers not to the contents of the presentation (which is inevitably limited by the finite subject making it), but to the topic chosen for the address, namely “the biblical perspective” on the theme of the conference.

From the Second Vatican Council till Pope Francis, our church leadership has systematically and relentlessly urged that everything we do as Christians, and particularly as Catholics, be rooted in Scripture, “the soul of theology”. Benedict XVI pleads that all disciplines of the church, whatever their nature, be rooted in God’s word, which finds its ultimate and full meaning in Jesus. With the Second Vatican Council (DV12), Pope Francis begs scripture scholars and theologians to help the church mature in its understanding of God’s word (EG 40). Theology in this context is understood not so much as an academic exercise, but primarily as God’s word about us and the entire creation. Only secondarily is it our word about God, or in the classic definition of Anselm, “faith seeking understanding through philosophical discourse.” It is therefore most appropriate that we begin our reflection on land grab and good governance in Africa by seeking foundational wisdom and insight from Scripture, God’s Owner’s Manual for us, in order to ground our discussions and their desired outcome in God’s loving, creative will for us and so discover objective, sustainable and lasting solutions to the issue.

As we do this we bear in mind that the scriptural approach to any issue seeks to promote the good of all without exception: the exploiters and the exploited, the land grabbers and those whose lands are grabbed from them. God’s project and agenda for humanity excludes no one, though individuals may choose to exclude themselves. Jesus, God’s good news for humanity, “the only one through whom we may be saved” (Acts 4:12), the new humanity and creation, commissions us to go out to the whole world and proclaim God’s good news, God’s general amnesty to all of humanity and creation, and thus to make our own His missionary inaugural statement in Luke 4:18-19.

In the past, AFJN along with other collaborators previously tackled the problem of Africa from their foundational base in America or Europe. Recently, this network realised that it had to take its activity to Africa where the problem is located, generated, sustained and acutely felt. This continental conference, a landmark outcome of this praiseworthy move, invites us in turn to name the problems in Africa as they are so we can find their adequate and life-based solutions. Faith and networking, twin aspects of AFJN’s identity, needs to become an integral part of our discussions and search for solutions. Faith and networking are integral aspects of the gospel. Faith, not so much in what God can do for us, but our believing or accepting what God has already done and continues to do for us as revealed in the Scriptures, in human history and conclusively in Jesus of Nazareth, God-Word become flesh (John 1:1-2; 14), to reveal God uniquely and tangibly to us (John 1:18; 1 John 1:1-4). Faith and networking are essential both for our discussions and for our future, sustainable implementation plans. Without both the positive actions envisaged by this conference to effect gospel-based change and transformation of all stakeholders will not materialize.

As an entry point to our discussion on land from the biblical perspective, we need to do a little exercise which will ground us naturally and consciously in the topic. I humbly crave your indulgence and cooperation to do this little exercise for me. The exercise: All, please stand; move a little from where you are, move to where your neighbour is standing, feel the ground under your feet, feel a connection to it.

The first point of the exercise is to drive home the fact that when we speak of land, we are speaking of something which is the very construct of our being as humans, our heritage and endowment from God; something which we cannot change or escape from. As creatures, we are landed people; we live on land, operate on land, build houses and businesses on land, and carry out our undertakings on land. God has created us in such a way that the land is our natural habitat. Our houses, institutions and business centres and even this venue of our conference are built on land.

Those who want to migrate to the moon or Mars will still need to land when they get there. We have feet to move with, not wings or fins; the vehicles we make to transport us from place to place operate on land. If we travel by sea, we aim at berthing, at reaching land. If we fly by air as most of us did to come to this conference, our one and sincere prayer and the prayer of our families and friends is that we will land safely. We comb the seas and land to find planes which did not land safely, as happened lately with the Malaysian Airlines MH370 God made birds to live in the air; that notwithstanding, they perch on trees planted on land. An Ibibio Proverb says “the feet of a bird that flies in the air points to the ground.” Sooner or later it will alight on a tree or on the ground itself. Birds feed on the produce of the land, at times to the pain of the owners of
the seeds and creatures on which they feed. Only fish have their natural habitat almost exclusively in the sea.

The fact then establishes itself: We are essentially and substantially creatures grounded on land; we cannot do without land. A second observation is that though we are grounded on land, God has so made it that we cannot occupy at any one moment more space than our feet and form can occupy. Just look around this room. The space we each occupy is where we stand or sit. To occupy another space, we have to relocate from where we are to that other space. Once we leave the space we occupy, that space becomes free for another to occupy. We cannot physically occupy more than one space at the same time. By giving us feet commensurate with our height and size, God made provisions for each creature, human or animal, to occupy one space of land at a time. How do we factor this into the issue of land grab and good governance in Africa from a biblical perspective? What message do we gain from this for all human beings?

A third awareness, this time from our natural human reality, is that even in death, we will only be able to occupy the size of space commensurate with our bodies. Coffins are normally made to the size of the corpse. A madman in Onitsha, Nigeria, reportedly saw grave diggers of a very wealthy man in the city. He asked whether that was all the space they were digging for this man. The diggers replied that it was the normal size for graves. The madman then asked “Will you be able to fit his fleet of cars, his multi-million businesses, his chain of stores, and his lands [probably grabbed from the poor who laboured it for him for a pittance] into that grave?” Another madman in Uyo, the capital city of Awa Ibom State, clothed in dirty tattered rags, self-styled “Ayed Ubok Otuk” (Only those who wash their hands can touch him [for fear of dirtying him]) used to sit at the biggest roundabout in Uyo City (called the Piccadilly Circus in the colonial days, but now Ibom Connection). He would repeat to himself ad nauseam, but also to the hearing of all passersby, “When a man dies, he goes down below conversing with the ants. Again. Down below conversing with the ants. Again. Down below conversing with the ants.” Has the wisdom of these two madmen anything to offer us about our connectedness to the land and the issue of land grab and good governance in Africa? The fact that we each cannot be bigger than the land we occupy? That to seek to do otherwise is to make a mockery of oneself and deprive others?

Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*, which the conference organisers have chosen as the background for this presentation, furnishes us with a final preliminary remark. Arguably no papal encyclical has received such wide, positive publicity from all and sundry in recent years as this encyclical. His own inaugural encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, made comparatively less impact than *Laudato Si’*. Conservatives and progressives, those who normally dislike papal
pronouncements and who welcome them, believers and atheists, Moslems, Christians and peoples of other faith receive and praise this encyclical as long overdue. The encyclical, the subtitle of which is “On Care of Our Common Home,” and which he consistently calls our common home, is addressed “to every person living on the planet” (LS, 3).

*Laudato Si’* focuses not on land or land grab as such but on what we as inhabitants of the earth have done and are doing to planet Earth, “our common home.” The Pope emphasizes in the encyclical that the root cause of the abuse and desecration of the land, the sea, the air - in short our common God-given inheritance and home, given for all our vital needs - lies in the human heart. It grows from a distorted understanding of self, of the human, as well as those humans claiming to be God and those with freedom to decide what is good for them with or without God.

The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

This attitude is fundamentally anti-creational; it emerged before in the history of beginnings of humanity. “You will be like gods knowing, [i.e., deciding for yourselves] good and evil” (Gen 3:5). Historically, it reared its head in the Machiavellian philosophy and ideology of the “ascending self.” As Qoheleth, author of Ecclesiastes, says; “There is nothing new under the face of the earth.” Pope Francis calls on all to recognize that by exploiting and impoverishing the earth and its resources we are in effect mortgaging our own lives and our present and future existence. The exploitation and impoverishment of the earth that sustains our very lives in every way goes hand in hand with the exploitation and impoverishment of the poorest of the poor. To abuse, exploit and kill Earth’s resources is not only to exploit and kill ourselves, but also to mortgage our own lives and that of others. It is also to show the deepest seated ingratitude to God and ultimately indulge in the highest form of self abuse and self deceit: trying to be God, which we can never be.

With these preliminary observations, we take a closer look on how these issues are grounded in the Bible. A Google search on “the Bible and land” yielded ninety six million entries. The interest on the subject is undoubtedly high. But

---

4. See for instance, nos. 1, 2, 13, 17, 53, 61, 155, 164, 222, 243 and so forth.
5. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 2
Given the constraints of time, and the wide scope of the subject, we can simply summarize key biblical perspectives on land as follows. 1. The land is essentially God’s creation and God’s property. It is given to humans to use, not to appropriate, exploit or abuse. “The heavens belong to God; the earth He has given to human beings.” Because the land and all it contains belong to God, humans hold it in trust as a heritage; they are accountable to God for its use.

God provides enough land space for all human beings when He tells them to “Increase, multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). Any use of the land which transgresses the rights of others to live and find life sustenance therefrom is a serious sin of self-abuse and aggression towards others, a violation of their God-given rights and a serious offence against the Creator God. It is in fact stealing what does not belong to one. At no one point is the land the exclusive right of any of its inhabitants. Common sense makes us realise that we cannot claim as ours something we did not make, buy, invent, or bring into existence. All humans are land tenants who will give account to God for how they used it. “The earth is the Lord’s and its fullness, the world and all its peoples” (Ps 24:1-2).

Awareness that the land/earth and all it contains, “the world and all its peoples,” are gifts from the Lord calls for thanksgiving, reverence and praise. Scripture is filled with this attitude, especially the psalms; the most memorable and comprehensive being Psalm 104. Mary’s Magnificat is born of the same spirit. Recognition of God’s work from beginning to end in creation, in history and in one’s life calls for endless praise, thanksgiving, faith or grateful acceptance.

Recognition that the land and all it contains belong to God not only invites gratitude to their creator. It also calls for praise of the works themselves and contemplation of their beauty and mystery. Ancient peoples were so enthralled by the majesty of God’s created works that they worshipped them as gods (cf. Rom 1:18-23). Even the land/earth had a god, “Abasi Ikpa Isong” (the god of the heart of the land), the counterpart of Abasi Ikpa Enyong (the god at the heart of the sky), that needed to be pleased in order to get good yield from the soil, or appeased to atone for crime against the land.7 The earth and all it produced also served as schools through which humans could learn and continue to learn about God, about themselves and about creation itself.8

7. The designations are of the Ibibio people. It is debatable whether these were two separate gods or one God who operated differently in the different domains. The people did not seem to have many gods.
8. In the forensic parts of the Scripture, for instance, especially in the prophets, God calls on heaven and earth to witness against him and his people. Jesus invites his audience to learn from the fig tree a parable.
Lands apportioned to peoples are not absolute possessions, but trusts, or heritage, to be looked after and maintained in their integrity for future generations. Any argument to the contrary is disproved by death. As Qoheleth says, we die and leave our wealth to strangers. How the rich man dies just like the poor; how the wise man dies just like the fool.

We may now take a closer look at select biblical texts that consolidate these facts.

**The creation accounts (Gen 1:1-2:4a; 2:1-2)**

In *Laudato Si’,* Pope Francis recalls that God created us in God’s image and likeness and ordered the earth to provide nourishment for our lives. We saw from the little exercise at the beginning that as people endowed with feet, not wings (like birds) or fins (like fish) we and all we physically do are integrally linked or tied to the land. In this reflection, Earth and land are used interchangeably, though the two are not synonymous. The earth is bigger than the land. It embraces everything under heaven, including the sea, though Genesis separates the earth from the sea. “God called the dry land earth, the mass of water he called sea” (Gen 1:10). When we speak of the earth, we include the sea as well. Our focus is primarily on that part of the earth, the land, which we can manipulate and control more so than we do the sea. The land emerged from the water (Gen 1:9).

Once again, we state that of all parts of the earth, the land is our particular natural habitat. On the land we live and operate and carry out all we do as humans. From it we gain all our needs for food, recreation, medicine, cures and so forth. Secondly, God has so made it that we cannot personally benefit from or eat the produce of the land more than enough at a time. Here we can learn from the animals; even such animals as lions only hunt to eat, not for sport as we do. If a lion is not hungry, the urge to kill is not there. The craving to hoard is a serious temptation which Jesus addresses in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21).

The very composition of our bodies derives from the earth (minerals, etc.), “our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.”9 The author of Genesis explains succinctly why this is so.

---

The story of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4 is most familiar, being one of the obligatory readings set for the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. The fundamental truths in this creation story (a foundational narrative told to explain the origin of things) is that God brought the entire creation, the heavens and the earth into existence out of nothing, but by word: “God said let there be; and so it was.” The Psalmist says, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made by their breath all their hosts.” Consider also the story of the mother of the seven sons of the Maccabees, saying to her youngest, “Observe creation and see that God made them from nothing; the same applies to human beings” (2 Macc 7:2). If that is the truth, then the whole of creation, and for our purposes the earth/land in particular, belongs to the creator God to own in perpetuity, not to humans who are mere tenants in it.

The creation narrative shows how God lovingly prepared for humans what they needed for life before bringing them into existence. Of particular interest for us, a fact often overlooked, is that humans, mammals and all creatures living on the land were created on one and the same day, namely, the sixth and last day. Genesis 1, the more theological of the creation accounts, does not describe how humans were created. This narrative, coming during the Babylonian Exile some four hundred years later than what we call the second creation account (Gen 2:1-24), presumes knowledge of the second creation account which historically speaking is the first. This priestly, theological narrative emphasises the fact that we and the earth are created the same day; that we have a mission to care for this Earth and God has empowered the earth to bring forth.

Another point to note in this account is that the narrative projects the earth as something that is alive. God empowered the earth to bring forth all vegetation and plant life with their seeds inside them (1:1-12). In the narrative the empowerment of the earth to bring forth plant life is part of its creation. It is as though the narrator could not think of the earth as existing without plant life. More surprisingly is that God also empowers the earth to bring forth all animal and reptile life: “Let the earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures: cattle, creeping things and wild animals of all kinds” (1:24).

The implication of this is that the earth itself is a living creature. Otherwise, how can that which has no life bring forth life? This awareness has great implications for how we treat the earth and helps us to understand why Pope Francis embraces the vision of Saint Francis who calls the earth "Sister." In Africa we

---

10 The passage is used for the First Reading of Wednesday 33rd Week in Ordinary Time, Year 1.
speak of Mother Earth. What difference would it make if we truly saw the earth as having life in herself? Would we be filled with horror and rage about her treatment, the way we are about the ill treatment of humans? Would we be on fire to protect the earth from being massacred and exploited by over-farming and all kinds of toxic wastes?

**Genesis 2** narrates that God formed the human species from the dust of the earth and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, and the species became a living being (Gen 2:7). The name *adam* in both narratives signifies that which is taken from the earth (soil/ground), *adamah*. Essentially we are earthed creatures, born of the earth as it were, by God’s doing. Paul reminds us that “the first Adam, human being, was from the earth” and so earthly; but the second, Christ, being spiritual, is from heaven (1 Cor 15:45-49). This is why our integral connectedness with the earth is crucial. An African proverb states that it is a crime to desecrate or abuse the land in which one's umbilical cord was buried. How much more sacred the land is when understood as that from which one was fashioned, as that which constitutes the very fabric and substance of our being as humans?

What differentiates us from the soil in this creation narrative is “the breath of life” which God breathed into us to make us living beings - created in God's image and likeness, consciously capable of reasoning, of living in partnership as man and women, husband and wife, of working together for the common good, caring for the earth, seen as a beautiful garden given to us as a heritage, something not to be alienated exploited or abused in any way.

**The Jubilee Year Index of God’s Ownership of the Land**

The stipulation or law enjoining the practice of the jubilee year is intended to drive home the truth that “all lands belong to God” (Lev 25:8-55). Briefly, in the jubilee year, made up of seven sabbatical years plus one, the people were to return to their ancestral homes and there live as they had done during the desert days when they had no lands apportioned to them, when they were totally dependent on God. It was above all an exercise in living awareness of the truth that all land belonged to God, that all peoples had equal right to the land and its produce and no human or animal was to be used to labour or exploit the land for personal use.

The jubilee year could have been celebrated away from the ancestral home, but it would not have made the same desired impact as it did in the ancestral home, which properly speaking was where one was located and could claim as one’s own. Living in this land as a stranger was intended to drive home the fact that all land belonged to God who caused the land to produce its yield of its own ac-
cord for every human being. Accordingly, the land was not to be tilled; whatever crops it produced were not to be gathered into barns but were to be freely accessible to all.

Liberation of captives and cancellation of debt were core pillars of the jubilee year celebration. Not labouring the land was a way of setting it free. Similarly, slaves were to be set free, animals that would normally plough the land were given rest, even as the land itself was given rest to operate on its own terms. Fairness and social justice was to prevail in all transactions. In short, the jubilee year could be tagged a year when Israel practised general amnesty among themselves in their own ancestral (owned) land. Jesus picks up this theme of the jubilee as general amnesty by declaring that in him God has established general amnesty to all humans and creation: “the Lord’s year of favour” (Luke 4:18-19).

The earth, our God-given common heritage

What does it mean to call the earth our common heritage? How did the peoples of the Bible see heritage? I may be permitted here to cite what I have said elsewhere concerning Jewish laws and stipulations on inheritance.

The law has clear stipulations on “inheritance” (Hebrew yerussah): “If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall let his inheritance pass on to his daughter; if he has no daughter, you shall give his heritage to his brothers; if he has no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his father’s brothers. If he had no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his nearest relative” (Num 27:8-11). In this legal provision, “Unlike modern law, it is not the individual who appoints his heirs but the law of the Torah, though one may give preference to one rightful heir over the other. The illegitimate children or children of prohibited marriages have the same rights as their legitimate brothers and sisters.”¹¹ A father had no right to disinherit his son. If in his lifetime he gave his estate to a stranger in the form of a gift, that gift would revert to the rightful heirs after his death. A parent could also appoint “a trustee” (epitropos) to take care of the estate until the heirs come of age. Paul, for instance, sees the law as our epitropos until faith and grace came in Christ (Gal 3:21-19).

Inheritance, like grace, is not something one works for, merits or deserves. It is essentially a pure gift that goes with belongingness to the family. One comes into it by birth or adoption. It is passed on from generation to gen-

eration. Secondly, one could only inherit after the death of the father or whoever passed on the inheritance. Thirdly, by God's law, inheritance was inalienable; one had no right to alienate the family inheritance. This is why Naboth prefers to stick to his small family heritage than exchange it for a bigger one from Ahab, though he is murdered as a result (1 Kgs 21:1-16).

Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kgs 21:1-16) as example

The story of Naboth and his vineyard could have taken place in Africa. Naboth had an ancestral vineyard close to the king’s palace. The palace was not originally his heritage, but a conquered land, unless we see the royal palace as a heritage bequeathed to him by his ancestors (David and Solomon). Heritage was part of the land apportioned to the people of Israel during the settlement. The law of the land strictly forbade any person to sell or alienate the inheritance because it did not belong to the person. It was the property of the entire clan, successively descendants came into it, and they were to use it as trust and pass it on to the next generation. The most stringent sanctions applied to whoever would alienate the heritage of the family and clan. This truth helps us to understand the depth of the sin of the prodigal son when he requested for a share of his inheritance while his father was still alive and sold it out for nothing, thus cutting himself off his moorings for good.

Secondly, it was the duty of rulers to ensure that citizens kept safe and intact the heritage received as a gift for the next generation. The irony then is that the very king who should have done everything to protect and defend the heritage of Naboth is the one who wanted it in exchange for another. Most remarkably, the plot of land is a vineyard for Naboth. We recall the importance of the vineyard in the history and tradition of Israel. Israel itself is the Lord’s vineyard (Isaiah 5). From the story, the land given in exchange is supposedly bigger and better than the one which Ahab covets. What does he covet it for? He covets it to plant a vegetable garden to satisfy his whims. Vineyards took long to plant and nurture to maturity, but not so with vegetable gardens. Naboth, true to the covenant and the laws of the land, staunchly refuses to alienate that which was not in his power to alienate: “God forbid that I should give away the land of my ancestors.” “God forbid” here could be an exclamation: “May God forbid!” More fundamentally it is an invocation of God as authority behind the prohibition to alienate the ancestral land, an authority which both Ahab and Naboth are bound to respect and obey.

---

Ahab ignores this appeal to God and goes ahead, kills Naboth and forcefully acquires the land, reportedly/purportedly through his wife Jezebel, who is both a woman and a foreigner and therefore not held accountable by the laws of the land. When God moves to address the situation through the prophet Nathan, God addresses Ahab, not Jezebel. Since the lot of the husband fell also on the wife (sell the wife and all his property), Jezebel also shared in the fate of those who grab the land, the heritage of the poor.

The land is our common heritage, our common home. We came from it, live on it and eat from its produce. When we die we are buried in it (An Ash Wednesday ritual asks us to “remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return”). We did not bring the land into existence and cannot carry it with us when we die. Rather we return to it, to become once again part of it for the continued nourishment of living beings. Of what use then is an Ahab attitude? When all is said and done, the land will have the priority over us, even if we lived up to a hundred years.

The Promised Land

We cannot speak of land in biblical perspective without addressing the issue of the Promised Land. Here we have to distinguish between truth and ideologies and theologies which we employ to make God operate according to our image and likeness. A fundamental truth of Scripture is that “the earth is the Lord’s and its fullness.” No part of it is left out; it embraces “the world and all its peoples. It was He who set it on the seas and on the waters made it firm” (Ps 24:1-2). As God set the boundaries for the sea not to overtake the land, so God apportioned land to all creatures. Indeed God intended to multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:28).

However, they refused to continue to move to fill the earth and instead settled down to build themselves a tower into God’s territory, the second example of the ascending elf. God scattered them from that very spot (mishami) and confused their language to prevent them from doing more collaborative harm to themselves, just as he drove the man and his wife from the garden to prevent them from eating of the tree of life. That humans can die is a grace which enables them to change, be born afresh and gain new life. As in Adam all died, so also in Christ will all be caused to live (1 Cor 15:22).

The story of the Promised Land goes back to Abraham. God promised him a land as wide as the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River (Gen 15:18-20). God also promised him that his descendants would be as numerous as the sands on the seashore (Gen 22:17). One biblical tradition limits Abraham’s descendants to the Jewish people, the chosen people, those of the Sinai covenant who claim the right to the land at the expense of others. That tradition reports God as ordering
the total extermination of the occupants of the land for fear of being contami-
nated by them, the unclean; the Jews being the holy and a chosen people. The
Book of Numbers at the time of the settlement even documents the atrocities
committed in the process of a rapacious possession of the land, using God as au-
thority for it, based on the ideology of a chosen race as a holy people, a people
set apart for God. This ideology in history found its repeat in the rapacious oc-
cupation of the land from the Indians and the Zulus of South Africa.

Yet another tradition proclaims that the earth is the Lord’s and all its peoples.
God cares for the land and its waters; he provides for humans who work during
the day. This is a Judeo-Christian tradition. When the Israelites were drowning
at the Red Sea, the angels burst into song and rejoicing. But God turned to them
and said, “My children are dying and you are rejoicing!” This view is from the
rabbis. Later in the tradition Israel became aware that the destruction of one
people for another is not entirely according to God’s will since the world and all
its peoples belong to God (Ps 24:1-2). In biblical view, Israel may have been the
first born but he was not the only born.

Still in the Jewish tradition, Paul reinterpreted the promise to Abraham from
the idea of a chosen, self-centred people to whom all others become nothing, or
at best slaves to service their needs, to show that the promises to Abraham
were for the good of all nations, not at their expense: “In you all the families of
the earth will find a blessing” (Gen 12:3; 22:18). The descendants of Abraham,
his true descendants, therefore, are those who live and act according to God’s
will. It took God a splinter of a second to demolish the idea of a chosen people to
the exclusion of others. We see this in the case of Peter and his conversion in the
case of Cornelius: “The truth I have now come to understand is that God has no
favourites” (Acts10:34). We also see it in the case of Paul who declares that
“God as no favourites” (Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6). These are two Jewish pillars of the
Christian faith, apostles to the Jews and to the Gentiles, respectively. In the case
of Peter, God expressly asked him, “Who are you to call unclean what God has
sanctified?” What we learn from these biblical examples is the need to be very
careful about how we interpret God or create God in our image and likeness. It
is a sin, a deviation from God, to co-opt God into our cultures of exclusiveness
and possessiveness while reducing others and the land itself to serving our
greedy and selfish needs.

To take possession of the land from others is to deprive them of their very liveli-
hood. It is to fly in the face of God who apportioned each its place. It is to kill
and bury them as Cain killed and buried his brother, whose blood cried out to
God from the soil (Gen 4:10). Scientists and biologists, traditional medicine
men and women in Africa (and maybe in other parts of the word) tell us that
the land has not only the sources of what we need, but also the medicine to cure
all our ills. Today a common saying about moringa, for example, called “wonder
plant, ”is that “it cures all diseases and prevents all the rest.”

**Conclusion: The Gospel and the Land**

As Christians, we cannot limit our discourse on the land to the present life only. It may help in our efforts to prevent people from grabbing land from others and for the supposedly poor giving away their rich heritage for a paltry sum that perishes in the receiving, to remember that we have here no lasting city. It will also help us to remember that ultimately God will bring into existence “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 1:1-2). Yet Scripture warns us that the way we use the land and all earth’s resources today, the way we treat others in need, will determine our place in the new heaven and new earth which God will surely bring into existence as He did the first one. The parable of the rich fool and that of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) among others are sober reminders of this truth, as is the last judgment (Matt 25:31-46).

In the Great Charter of the Kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus counsels us to learn from God’s loving provision for nature so as to order our lives aright and gain the liberating awareness of God’s loving and lasting ability to provide for all our human needs. A life that is goaded by an insatiable urge to acquire material possessions and land at the expense of others would, in the view of the psalmist, qualify as that of the fool who “says in his heart that there is no God” (Psalm 1). This ordering of one’s life as if God did not exist is the greatest illness of which the land grab is a symptom. In our efforts to cure the symptom, we need to tackle the cause. Pope Benedict reminded us at the Second African Synod that “Africa represents an enormous spiritual ‘lung’ for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of hope;” However, he warned that the lungs can be infected by the viruses of materialism and fundamentalism, and to this the Synod fathers added the virus of ethnicism/tribalism.

In sum, the biblical perspective on land obliges us to develop a sense of stewardship towards the land. To see ourselves as its tenants; to guard it as a heritage for generations yet to come and not to alienate it for any cause whatsoever. It also obligates us to find effective ways of letting our brothers and sisters who grab land and abuse it know that the greatest casualty of such a deed is themselves. As Scripture says, “We brought nothing with us to this life and can take nothing back.” In the last analysis, we will all return to the earth, and our physical bodies will feed and nourish it. The earth itself is yearning and groaning for liberation with all God’s children. (Rom 8:22). It is futile to store up for oneself that which does not belong to one to the deprivation of others. It is equally futile to collaborate with exploiters to deprive oneself and one’s fellow human be-

ings of land that does not belong to us. A fundamental understanding of justice, in my view, is truth in relationship: our relationship to ourselves, to others, to the land, to creation as a whole and to the Creator God. May the truth, the biblical truth about land and our fundamental relationship to the land, set all God’s children free. May we who participate in this conference be God’s instruments to help make this happen.

*Constructed on*
18-19, 22 November 2015
*Slightly edited 26 November 2015*