

This morning let's delve into the world of the Old Testament. Sometimes Christian churches all but ignore the Old Testament and it's lessons unless they have something – or someone—to exploit from it, but it has lessons that influenced Jesus' ministry, and may sound achingly familiar.

The ancient ruling systems—many scholars call them the ancient domination systems, began around 3000 BCE. They developed for two reasons: large scale agriculture that was coming into being, and surpluses that were the result of this large scale agriculture.

People were able to settle in large numbers in smaller and smaller areas. This produced a need for organization, as it is difficult for people to live closely together without some rules and laws. This produced the ruling class.

These people, usually monarchs and the wealthy aristocracy constituted about 2% of the population. Then there were “retainers” those who ran the system, administrators, military commanders, stewards, scribes and others—another 5-7% of the people. The rest of the people—roughly 90%, had absolutely no say how the system was structured.

The ruling elites shaped the system for their own gain and self-interest. The consequences for the 90% were dire: systemic poverty, inadequate food, poor shelter and sanitation options, and a life expectancy that was half of the ruling class.

These ruling classes used violence and the threat of violence to keep the 90% subservient.

The ruling classes were legitimized by religion. Kings were crowned in the name of God.

This is world of the Old Testament, and this is what Moses waded into to free the Hebrew people from this exploitative system.

The Exodus from Egypt brought people to a new way of life. The 90% were able to begin again, with new ways of ordering their lives.

Under Moses every family was to have a piece of agricultural land to support their family . They were able to have a home, and raise their own food. This agricultural land could not be bought and sold. It belonged to the families.

Debt was not entered into lightly, and when circumstances forced it, interest was not allowed to be charged on what was borrowed.

Every seventh year all debts were forgiven, and indentured slaves from other parts of the world were set free. Every 50th year, all agricultural land was returned to the original families, without charge.

Our spiritual ancestors created a world as far from the excesses of Egypt that it could. There was no aristocracy, no ruling class, no hoarded wealth, no unlimited power.

Then we get to the time of the Old Testament reading this morning.

Up until the time of Samuel, the Israelites had been ruled, not by a king, but by a judge. It was the commission of the judges to ensure parity and justice among the people of God.

But the people of God yearned for something quite different. They wanted a system more like Egypt's. They yearned for a powerful nation, a proud nation, a nation of wealth that was admired far and wide.

Samuel could see the danger. He could see that they were going to put themselves back into slavery—the slavery that would come from putting the wealthy few back in charge of the many.

Samuel told them what the Lord had said to him: Note the words that are repeated 6 times:

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

What was the repeated phrase?

His words were repeated again and again by the prophets who came after him: Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah. They criticized those who took for themselves at the expense of the many. And they spoke of God's dream.

God's dream is for a kingdom that is not based on unnecessary human misery, but on justice for everyone.

This is kingdom of God Jesus preached and which we try and build today.

Today is June 6, the anniversary of D-Day. Let us remember that voices are still calling out for an end to unnecessary human misery, the misery of people chosen to be scapegoated—the Jews of Europe then, anyone who is made “other” now.

Let us remember that we must still struggle for justice—economic justice, societal justice, justice for all—so that we may honor those who struggled up that beach so that all people might have a plot of land, something to eat, and the peace to enjoy it.

Jesus’ kingdom is something we can choose to build right now so that in the future God’s words speak true:

“Nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, nations shall not lift up arms against nations, neither shall we learn war anymore. We shall sit under our own vines, and no one shall be made afraid.” Amen.