

Year C

1 Kings 21

We live in a world where people are hungry for power and control. So often those in authority are tempted to abuse their position to gain control. King Ahab occupied the highest position in society. In the story in the book of Kings, his words set the actions in motion, yet he was in many ways a passive participant. Jezebel held something of a “middle-manager” role, to parallel the image that Jesus used in the Gospel story that we are now quite familiar with: she appeared to

be the most active and influential in directing the course of events.

Naboth was affected by the actions of the more powerful in society, and experienced dramatic life-changing consequences.

Naboth experienced the ultimate exclusion from his land: an experience still known by too many people around the world today.

Today in India, millions of people are excluded from society because of the caste system; they live with prejudice and exclusion from birth. One in five people in India are Dalits, who are regarded as outcasts. Members of this community, and

women in particular, do not have the rights to secure a sustainable, independent future for themselves. They rarely own land, but often work long hours doing menial jobs in fields belonging to others. Not only is it back-breaking work, it exposes them to dangerous agricultural chemicals. This is an exclusion that Christian Aid partner SAAL is determined to change.

The land was in his name: he was Naboth the Jezreelite. Jezreel was fertile and lush – just as the land of Tamil Nadu in India once was. For Ahab to ask Naboth to leave his

ancestral home showed a profound disregard for both the law and the land. Leviticus 25:23 states that the Israelites should not sell their inheritance. As far as Naboth was concerned, the land belonged to God, who had given it in trust to Naboth's ancestors.

Naboth was far from powerless. His reverence for God and the land gave him the strength and conviction to resist Ahab - but at the cost of his life. Defenders of human rights and land rights still all too often face this violent fate today.

Naboth's reverence for the land is a value that those determined to pursue modern chemical farming have neglected. As one farmer from Tamil Nadu explains: 'Chemical farming makes you dependent, it damages the soil and the environment.'

We do well to remember from Naboth that the land belongs to God - we get to steward it for a time. As Wendell Berry challenges: 'If we believe, as so many of us profess to do, that the Earth is God's property and is full of His glory, how can we do harm to any part of it?' Chemical farming also damages people. Farmers in Tamil Nadu describe the health

damage they believe that farm chemicals are causing, including diseases of the stomach and uterus, lungs and skin.

This is why Christian Aid partner SAAL runs an organic EcoVeg project in India. It educates people in the advantages of chemical-free production, and provides training in organic methods and farming as a business.

Demand for natural, nutritious food is growing. Not only is it better for the land and healthier for those growing it, the project provides an income opportunity for India's excluded communities. EcoVeg has reached

nearly 5,000 farmers. Over one-third are from excluded communities; nearly half are women. It is changing the lives of many for the better!

Jesus demonstrated that wealth can be used differently. Like the land, it belongs to God and is to be used for the purposes of God's will. Money itself is to be put in its rightful place in society.

In many cases, it can be used to overturn social hierarchies and to create new, more equal relationships: 'Indeed, outsiders and those lower down on hierarchies now become the very ones we depend upon to welcome us

– not only in their homes in this life, but even in the “eternal homes” or tents we were reflecting on a few weeks ago.

As a member of India’s higher Thevar caste, Selvi has chosen to use her wealth and position in just such a way. She opened her home to Kasthuri, a Dalit woman who had been abandoned by her family and excluded even from her own community. “I want to break any form of slavery and exploitation of women, whether it is due to caste, class or gender”, she says. Selvi also shared her land to set up a women’s farming collective. The women are part of the EcoVeg project. They

are trained in natural farming techniques, and have received marketing and logistics support to start a business. It has given Kasthuri - and Selvi too - everything they wanted: a place where excluded people can build a better future for themselves.

The oppression and abuse of the marginalised does not go unnoticed by God. Elijah is sent to speak truth to power and pronounce judgement on Ahab and his household for their actions. The ancient story of Naboth's Vineyard serves as a reminder to all who use their power and

privilege to exclude and oppress others. Their actions do not go unheeded, no matter what lengths of deception they may resort to.

God sees when power and privilege exclude and marginalise across the world today. With the prophet Elijah, the EcoVeg project speaks truth to the powers that seek to marginalise and exclude in India today.

It demonstrates a season for change and this is something that we can all participate in -

sharing our resources, campaigning for justice and praying for change.¹

¹ <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/harvest-appeal/resources>