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Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21: 1-10, 15-20)

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To be a prophet of Israel is to be concerned for justice. From Nathan to Jeremiah, from Isaiah to Micah to Amos, the prophets cry out on behalf of the poor and needy, speaking for those who are defrauded by the wealthy and oppressed by the powerful. This prophetic concern for justice is not separate from the prophetic condemnation of idolatry. In fact, these are two sides of the one coin. Since God is a God of justice and mercy, right acknowledgement of God involves doing justice and practising mercy. Unjust conduct is itself a sign of false worship; that is, of a life commitment to something *other* than God. Which brings us to tonight's reading, to Elijah's championing of Naboth and his vineyard, against the predatory outworking of Ahab and Jezebel's idolatry.

Injustice is being done, in this story, at a couple of levels. Most obviously, against poor Naboth who is set up, falsely accused and stoned horribly to death, so that the king may seize his vineyard. This is all bad enough, but there's even more at stake. The manner in which this injustice is perpetrated makes it not simply Naboth's private misfortune, but a subversion of three key features of Israel's justice system.

The first is about relationship to land. When Ahab asks Naboth to trade or sell his property, Naboth refuses saying: 'The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance' (1 Kings 21: 3). Traditionally, retaining inherited land was conceived as a sacred obligation,¹ and the law of Jubilee (Lev. 25) protected families against the permanent alienation of their property. Even if a family had fallen into financial difficulty and sold its land, every fifty years Israel's law required that it be returned to its original

¹ Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets – Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p.717.

owners. And in a kind of paradox, this was because ultimately no one owned the land. Says the Lord in the Book of Leviticus, 'the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants' (Lev. 25: 23).

So Ahab's resentful response to Naboth's refusal reveals his lack of respect for this fundamental principle of the inalienability of land, which is connected in turn to a fundamental understanding of the land as *God's* possession. And indeed it's striking, once Naboth has been murdered, how often Ahab and Jezebel speak of 'taking possession' of the vineyard. 'Go, take possession of the vineyard ... which he refused to give you for money', says Jezebel. Ahab goes down to the vineyard 'to take possession of it'; Elijah is told that he will find Ahab, 'in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession' and he's instructed to ask Ahab 'Have you killed, and also taken possession?' We're supposed to take the meaning!

The actions of the royal couple also undermine the social fabric of a community and its judicial processes. The elders and nobles who acquiesce to Jezebel's instructions are Naboth's fellow citizens. Three times, the narrative insists, they were men of his city who lived with Naboth 'in his city' (1 Kings 21: 8). These neighbours become his enemies. Not only that, but they're very deliberately induced to pervert the law of witnesses set out in Deuteronomy, which states that 'a single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime ... Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained' (Deut. 19: 15). This law was designed explicitly to protect those accused against 'false witnesses', but in a corrupt context it's easy enough – it seems – to find 'two scoundrels' who will do the job.

The third assault on justice in this episode involves the misuse of Israel's religious practice. Robert Alter notes that: 'A common function of an ad hoc communal fast was to supplicate God when some ill had befallen the community because of an offense committed within the community'. In other words, when you call a fast – you imply something's wrong. By the very act of calling such a fast, then, the elders of Naboth's

city set ‘the stage for exposing the purported crime committed by Naboth’,² although – ironically – the fact itself provided the occasion for the real offence. In all these ways, in relation to land, judicial process and religious obligation, Ahab’s ‘royal house undermines the very structures of social stability it has the obligation to uphold’.³

So the story of Naboth’s vineyard is a story about how the ungodliness of the powerful can have far reaching consequences. Self-aggrandisement and unfettered greed in the ruling class not only affect the prospects and lives of people unlucky enough to be perceived as obstacles (recall also David, Bathsheba and her unfortunate husband, Uriah). They also all too often affect the very laws designed to protect them and secure justice. And nothing much has changed. Which is why we need Royal Commissions, Independent Commissions Against Corruption, whistleblowers and prophets. It’s why we need to be thinking about questions of structural justice, and worried about Donald Trump, the organization of global industry, and off-shore tax havens among many other things.

All this, I take it, is relatively uncontroversial – yet it might seem to apply more to ‘them’ [those corrupt rich people out there] than to ‘us’. But there’s a final point to draw out from this most subtle of narratives, which hits (for me at least) closer to home. It’s to do with how the roots of injustice lie in a myriad of small choices to avoid, deny or misrepresent what’s going on, choices we might barely even notice we’re making.

Take Ahab. He’s disappointed that Naboth won’t give him the vineyard, even though he’s asked nicely. He goes into a sulk, making himself miserable around the house. When Jezebel asks him what’s going on, he says: I asked him to sell or trade his vineyard, ‘but he answered, “I will not give you my vineyard”’ (1 Kings 21: 6). Notice how he makes no mention of Naboth’s reason, his sense of sacred obligation. Alter notes: though Ahab seems to repeat Naboth’s words, he in fact drastically recasts them. ‘There is no pious, “The Lord forbid” ... In this version, for Jezebel’s benefit, Naboth [is

² Alter, *Ancient Israel*, p.718.

³ Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p.327.

made to sound] merely obstinate'.⁴ How easy, isn't it, to re-characterise the motives of those who've displeased us, and so implicitly to justify our response?

Jezebel says she'll sort matters out. She doesn't say how. Does Ahab wonder? Or doesn't he want to know? And how careful she is to let him off the hook. When she hears that Naboth has been stoned to death, all she says to Ahab is: 'Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead' (1 Kings 21: 15). Amazing! How convenient! Off Ahab goes, apparently happy to be in a state of plausible deniability – perhaps even to himself – while Jezebel looks the Lady Macbeth of the piece, decisive, ambitious and nasty. But perhaps, after all, *she's* the pawn. His moodiness is unpleasant. Maybe, writes one commentator, his 'apparent passivity masks a subtle form of manipulation'.⁵ Maybe she knows, without anything being said, that something is expected of her, that she must 'make it right'.

Injustice happens when people flagrantly disrespect and exploit others; when systems are abused and processes corrupted. But the roots of such flagrant injustice are mostly much less obvious, and much more pervasive than we like to think. They lie in our tendencies to exaggerate the faults (as we see them) of others and misrepresent their motives; they lie in our capacity to put a self-justifying spin on most of what we think and do. Every time we avoid looking at what we don't want to see – in ourselves or in what happens around us; every time we refuse to be responsible for the impact of our reactions and speech, we limit our capacity to resist injustice and expand our capacity to *be* unjust. Real justice, personal and communal, is the fruit of integrity – a deep connectedness to the truth of things. And that's why justice, as the prophets of Israel insist, is essentially linked to humility and true worship, to our turning away from false gods of self-justification and self-aggrandisement, and all the little denials and avoidances that enthrone them in our lives.

⁴ Alter, *Ancient Israel*, p.718.

⁵ Walsh, *1 Kings*, p.327.