

Why Build a Justice Interpretation Around “Shalom”?

by Robert C. Linthicum

Why is this biblical exposition on Justice entitled *The Gospel of Shalom*? What does *shalom* have to do with the Christian Year? And why would we entitle a justice reading of the lectionary scriptures *The Gospel of Shalom*?

Well, the word “gospel” simply means “good news”. We believe that these three studies on lectionary scripture (Cycles A, B and C) are “good news” to pastors and congregations alike regarding living and acting as people of faith socially, economically, politically and spiritually, as we seek to realize the “kingdom of God” here on earth. And the way to do that is to “seek the shalom of the city to which I have sent you” (Jer. 29:7).

There are many images used in scripture to describe the world as God intended it to be, such as “the Garden of Eden”, “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation”, “Zion”, “the mountain of the Lord” or “the kingdom of God”. Each of these terms represents the specific ways each writer has attempted to articulate God’s intentions for the world. But when one gets behind the specific image to examine its vision, one begins to note the significant commonalities running through all these images. In essence, whether one uses the term of “Zion” or “kingdom of God” or “the new Jerusalem”, one is talking about essentially the same vision.

There is one Hebrew word that encapsulates the Hebrew understanding of the world as God intended it to be. This word is the word most often used throughout scripture to describe God’s intentions for the world. It is the word *shalom*. It is a description of the people of God as ***the shalom community!***

What does the word *shalom* mean? When one works with the original Hebrew in the Old Testament, one is stunned by how often the word *shalom* is used and how rich the nuances of that word are. *Shalom* is used a total of 397 times in the Hebrew Bible! Its Greek counterpart, *eirene* is used 89 times in the Christian Bible (New Testament). Such heavy usage is a clear indication of how important a word it was – that it was a concept that permeated both Hebrew and early Christian society.

The second reality that strikes one is the multiplicity of ways *shalom* is translated into English. In order to capture the unique nuance of the Hebrew word as it is used in specific contexts, translators have had to use the following English words: weal, welfare, completeness, to cause to be at peace, to make peace, peace offering, at rest, at ease, secure, safe, to finish well, to prosper, to be whole, to be perfect, to be victorious. In other words, in any given context, *shalom* can mean any of the above English words.

The same is true to a lesser degree of the Greek equivalent of shalom, *eirene*. While not as rich a word as shalom, *eirene* still requires other English words to translate it besides “peace”; including unity, concord and to desire peace.

What this comparison reveals to us is that *shalom* and *eirene* do not simply mean what the English word, “peace” means. The English word is essentially a negative word – that is, the word “peace” is expressing the absence of something – war, conflict, violence or confrontation. Therefore, “peace” exists in conflict’s place. But the Hebrew word *shalom* goes far beyond that.

Shalom can be used simply as a greeting or a wish to a friend or loved one (“Shalom to you, my friend!”). But at its fullest, *shalom* captures the Hebrew vision of human society, the non-human world and even the environment in an integrated and relational whole where “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isa. 65:25). *Shalom* is the theology of hope of Israel and of the early church, its vision of what the world will someday be.

Shalom can best be understood as being presented in scripture for two distinct groups of Israelites – those who are in positions of power and influence (the “haves”) and those who have faced in the past or who are presently facing oppression and exploitation by those in power (the “have-nots”).¹

The tradition of the “have-nots” begins with Moses, and moves from him through Joshua, Samuel and most of the prophets, and then culminates in the New Testament in the person of Jesus. This is a *shalom* for people who live in a precarious place, who are economically exploited, politically oppressed or religiously controlled. Their *shalom* is understood in terms of their crying out in their pain and of being delivered – whether that deliverance is from slavery in Egypt, from precariousness in a new land, from the injustice of dominating and exploitive Jewish kings, from the persecution and humiliation of Babylonian exile or from domination by Rome and the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy. Such *shalom* is captured in such scripture as “The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God took notice of them” (Exodus 2:23-25).

Such *shalom* is an action of liberation, of salvation, of setting free – whether such setting free is from political oppression and economic exploitation (Egyptian slavery), physical deformity (Bartimaeus’ blindness in Mark 10:47-52) or was yet another domination. In all instances of *shalom* for the have-nots, the theme is one of being set-free, of being liberated. It is therefore a tradition of liberation and salvation.

But there is a second, and equally valid, tradition in the Hebrew and Christian traditions. That is *shalom* for the “haves”. This tradition can be traced through Noah, Abraham, David, the wisdom literature, Isaiah and the rabbis and culminating in Paul (who was a former rabbi). This tradition is for people who are essentially secure and who are consequently concerned about the appropriate management of the resources God has placed at their disposal as well as celebrating the good things of life provided for them from a generous God (e.g., II Samuel 7:8-16).

¹ I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann for his analysis of the two *shalom* traditions in Scripture – the traditions of liberation and of stewardship, and particularly his labeling of these two traditions as *shalom* for “haves” and “have nots”. Brueggemann’s primary development of these two traditions is found in his book, *Peace* (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 25-53.

This is a *shalom*, not of a tyrannized people but of a secure people, not of a people living under oppression, but a people of well being. Therefore, it is a *shalom*, not of liberation, but of celebration and of the wise management of the resources God has invested in you (in this case, management of the kingdom God has invested in David). Thus, this *shalom* is carried out in the recognition that when a community is economically or politically well off, that is an indication of God's blessings upon it. Therefore, with such a *shalom*, the community's task becomes the wise use of those resources (stewardship) as an investment made in that community by God and thus to be managed in such a way that justice and economic equality will result for everyone. People in this tradition do not want a disruptive act of liberation – God's "outstretched arm" freeing them, but rather the continuance of a social order that will continue to benefit them and those around them. They want security, not liberation!

The biblical message on *shalom* is that it is for both the "haves" and the "have nots". It is both for those who lack power and are in need of liberation and for those who hold power and seek to appropriately manage the resources God has placed at their disposal. Both kinds of people are in every church. And one of the essential tasks of the church is to bring together through Christ those searching for liberation or salvation with those who are the managers of society and seek security, so that they might work together to build a *shalom* that is truly just and equitable for all, that brings people into an ever-deepening relationship with God and each other and consequently contributes to the formation of society as God intended it to be lived.

What the Bible is essentially about, when it is dealing with *shalom* and *eirene*, is public justice, not private morality. Although it is concerned about morality, it is far more concerned with public life, and especially how the political, economic and religious powers seek or deny justice and economic equity and the people avoid or unite in engagement in public life (e.g., see Lev. 26:3-13; Isaiah 32:15-17; Luke 10:1-12; Romans 14:13-20).

In the scriptures, there were three primary indicators that God's intentions for a community, a city or a nation were actually being carried out. These three indicators of *shalom* occur in the economic, political and social/spiritual systems of a community. Since *shalom* has to do more with public justice than private morality, what does God intend for the political, economic and social/spiritual systems upon which society is built? How does God want a political system, an economic system or a social/spiritual system to operate? Intriguingly, the scripture is both universal and specific in its answer.

The primary indicator is whether or not the people exhibit a dynamic, personal relationship with God that is manifested in their relationships with each other. Exhibiting a dynamic relationship with God is not manifested by liturgy or ritual but by the way one treats his neighbor. Likewise, relationship with each other is manifested in acting justly and mercifully (Numbers 6:24-26; Philippians 3:10). The church, as a mediating institution in society, is to be about the task of seeking to pressure its society's institutions to be truly just in their management of public life while being particularly compassionate toward those who could become powerless.

The second indicator of *shalom* is that of political justice. There is no more famous statement that articulates that reality than Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk

humbly with your God?” What is being laid out in this magnificent summary of the Hebrew Bible is that the political task is twofold. Whether it is the ordering of a family, a church or synagogue, a neighborhood, a city or a nation, God intends that the primary political task is both to do “justice” and to “love kindness” (the Hebrew word used here is *chesedh* which refers to God’s unconditional love for us, but which the prophet Micah states we are to manifest towards others) within the context of “walking humbly” with God. All that God wants out of God’s people and their systems is three things: to do justice, to do *chesedh* and to be in relationship with God. That’s all God wants – no sacrifices, no liturgies, no rituals, no slavish practices, no observance. All God wants is a relational people, relational systems, a relational and just culture.

And, finally, a nation and culture built on relationship with God and a politics of justice for all in the nation must inevitably deal with how wealth is generated and distributed. It is in the book of Deuteronomy that the clearest economic indicators are given for a nation that truly desires to live under God (Deut. 6:10-12; 15:4-11; 23:19-20; also see Lev. 25). Deuteronomy is reminding Israel that all that they possess as a nation and as individuals is a gift from God. Any wealth the nation possesses is a free gift from God, a wealth that God has chosen to invest in them, a result of God’s own *chesedh* toward Israel. What, then, does God expect of Israel? There is only one reason why wealth is given to a nation, Deuteronomy states. God makes a nation wealthy for the purpose of eliminating its poverty (Deut. 15:4-11; Lev. 25; Deut. 23:19-20; 16:1-17). *The elimination of poverty is to be the primary agenda both of the systems and of each individual Israelite!*

It is intriguing to note that the commitment to compensatory economic justice was not only a part of Israelite culture. It was also central to the life and mission of the early Christian church (Acts 4:32-35). The early church was a communitarian culture because that was the acting out of Jewish religious, political and economic beliefs and actions about how the *shalom community* should live.

According to Isaiah 65:17-25, God’s intentions for human society are as follows:

- ? Decent, safe, sanitary, secure and affordable housing for everyone (Isa. 65:21-22)
- ? Jobs that provide adequate income and bring meaning and focus to people’s lives (65:21-22)
- ? Health care that adequately provides for all people, contributes to longevity and ends infant mortality (65:20)
- ? Neighborhoods that are stable, safe and mutually supportive (65:25)
- ? Environments that are healthy and are not dangerous to people’s health and safety (65:20)
- ? Wealth relatively and equitably distributed, so that there are no great disparities in income, wealth, position or status between people (65:21-23)
- ? People living in peace with one another (65:19, 25)

In the scriptures, the shalom community was no “pie in the sky by and by”! God’s intentions for our world, as taught in both the Old and New Testaments, was a very concrete, realistic and perhaps even achievable vision. It was not created by God to be unreachable, but to provide for us clear indicators of what God intends human society to be. As the people of God,

therefore, our responsibility is both to work for the achieving of such a dream while recognizing that it will not be reached in its totality until Christ returns to claim his kingdom.

But the shalom community is not the world as we experience it today. The primary corruption of society begins with money, according to both the Old and New Testaments. Whereas God calls a nation to be a steward of wealth in order to eliminate its people's poverty, spiritual collapse begins when it becomes greedy for wealth and therefore uses it to exploit the people (Jer. 6:13-15). Second, yielding to economic greed that exploits the poor and powerless inevitably leads to the practice of a politics of unilateral power that results in the oppression of the people (I Kings 21:1-24; Jer. 8:10; Ezek. 22:23-31; Mark 10:21-25; John 11:45-53).

But the practice of an economics of exploitation and a politics of oppression are always in danger of generating rebellion on the part of the people. Therefore, the Bible tells us, the political and economic systems collude with the religious system to use the trust that the exercise of religion has built with the people to manage and control their responses (Jer. 7:1-34). Thus, imitating their leaders, the people become the exploiters of each other, the oppressors of the powerless, the controllers of their societies (Ezek. 22:27-31). And the embrace of shalom is rejected by the nation and its people.²

In the light of the biblical emphasis that God's intentions for our world is that we might live in a society of shalom, "doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8), and yet in the light of the harsh biblical social analysis that we and the political, economic and religious systems we create to order our lives will corrupt our systems to oppress, exploit and dominate each other, what are we called to do as God's people in the world? How are we to work for the realization of shalom in our midst?

"Work for the shalom of the city where I have sent you; pray to Yahweh on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom" (Jer. 29:7). Here is God's promise made to the Israelites who were taken into captivity to the city of Babylon by their conquerors. But this command is meant not only for Israelite captives, but also for all of us called to be the church wherever we are. We are not in our community simply because of our circumstances – because we were born here, or moved here to take a job or get an education or simply accompanied our spouse here. We are in this community because the Lord our God has called us here – sent us here – needs us here! We are in the city or town or university or mission station by the intentional will of God, acted out through the particularity of our circumstances.

Therefore, what are we called – as God's sent people – to be and do in the place where God has planted us? We are called to the very same task as were those Israelite captives in the city of Babylon 2600 years ago. "(You are to) seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, . . . for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*." Our calling as God's people into whatever situation which God might call us is to seek that city's *shalom* -- its peace, prosperity, well-being, wholeness, fullness, reconciliation.

² Summarized from Robert Linthicum, *Building A People of Power* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Press, 2005), pp. 4-29.

Note where we are to seek the peace. It is not in Jerusalem – the “city of God”. It is in Babylon! This statement was profoundly, even revolutionarily shocking to the Israelites – beyond anything they could imagine or dare to speak! The Israelites are called to seek God’s shalom in the midst of Babylon. And they would not experience either personal or corporate shalom as long as Babylon was not a city at peace within itself!

What made this statement such a revolutionary statement was that Babylon was the ultimate symbol of evil to Israel! In the Israelite culture, Babylon was a virtual synonym for depravity. This attitude toward Babylon is reflected throughout scripture. Thus, in Genesis 11:1-9, the Tower of Babel (the Hebrew form of the name, Babylon) is the symbolic place of the “confusion of language” where the unity of the world (symbolized by one tongue) is shattered. Throughout the Bible’s historical books and the prophets (e.g., II Kings 20:12-19; 24:10-25:30; Jer. 25:8-14, Isa. 13, 14, 47, 48; Amos 5:27; Acts 7:43), Babylon is pictured as evil. And in Revelation 17-18, the elder John gives the name “Babylon” to human civilization lived in defiance of God, practicing a politics of oppression and an economics of greed and exploitation.

To Israel, Babylon is the epitome of the wicked and darkest of cities. It is precisely in the midst of such wickedness and darkness, Jeremiah is saying, that we are to work for shalom. Shalom is not to be sought among God’s people, but among those who most reject God! And why? Because God loves Babylon, and can only transform it by sending God’s people there (even against their will).

In fact, Jeremiah takes it a step further. He states in verse 7, “for it is in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*.” Even one who is in relationship with God and within the embrace of a relational culture can never fully know peace for his own life, his family or his people, if his city does not experience peace. So God sends his people into precisely the darkest areas of human society to be ambassadors for peace there.

But what does it mean to seek the city’s peace? As we pointed out earlier in this section, the English word “peace” doesn’t begin to capture the rich nuances of the Hebrew word, “*shalom*”. Rather, *shalom* is an exceedingly rich concept, a comprehensive word dealing with and covering all the relationships of daily life, expressing the ideal state of life in Israel and, indeed, the entire world. The concept of *shalom* essentially has to do with what the Israelites saw as being foundational to life – and that was being in a sustained and sustaining community with each other.

Jesus built his theology around the concept of the “kingdom of God”. It takes very little reading of the Gospel accounts to recognize that what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God was simply the full living-out of shalom upon the earth. The “kingdom of God” was *shalom* personified and particularized in the life of God’s people.

The supreme gift of Jesus to his followers was to be *shalom*, which was to be lifted above the commonplace and the everyday to its highest level – living in unbroken union with God in the midst of the adversities of life, and manifested in our union as brothers and sisters in Christ (John 14:27). This comes about as the result of each of us, and all of us together, embracing the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as our own and in our stead (Acts 10:36; Ephesians 6:15,

2:17). Full *shalom*, therefore, is not something we can manufacture or earn, but comes as God's free gift to us – a gift of *amazing* grace (Col. 1:2, Rom. 1:7, I Cor. 1:3, II Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:3, Phil. 1:2, II Thess. 1:2).

Finally, *shalom* is the ultimate hallmark, the identifying mark of the authentic Church. Christ has broken down the wall of estrangement between all human dichotomies that separate and alienate us from each other (male versus female, slave versus free, parents versus children, race versus race, systems versus the people). Instead, God's free gift of *shalom*, continually provided to us as individuals and as a community, draws us into one body (Eph. 2:14-17; Heb. 7:2). This is God's continuing act of redemption, its intended scope being the restoration of the whole creation to its proper harmony (Col. 1:19-22).

When God commands us in Jeremiah 29:7 to “work for the *shalom* of the city to which I have sent you,” he is calling us, as God's people to the universal ministry of shalom-making (Matt. 5:9). The scope of such a ministry is captured in the varied English words used in Jer. 29:7 for the Hebrew *shalom*; that word is variously translated in different translations as “peace”, “prosperity”, “welfare”, “good”.³ Each translation seeks to capture the rich implications of this command – for, in a profound sense, our task is to be working for the peace *and* the prosperity *and* the welfare *and* the good of all the people, the systems and structures, and even the principalities and powers of our community. It means that nothing is outside the purview, concern or commitment of the Church, whether it is political, economic, religious, social, cultural, environmental or spiritual, whether it is in the public domain or in the private. To work for the full and total transformation of all the people, forces and structures of the city with the love of God is the call and responsibility and joyful task of God's people wherever they may be!⁴

Why, then, have we entitled this justice study of the lectionary, *The Gospel of Shalom*? It is because the Bible is essentially about the building of society as the “Shalom Community” – the kingdom of God. And if we are to do a justice reading of the scriptures selected for the lectionary, then what we will be uncovering in that reading are God's intentions for our society and, consequently, recognition of our calling as the church of Jesus Christ. For that which we are to be primarily about is not solely winning people to Jesus Christ, sharing the gospel with the world, working for social justice, building a community of believers, planting the church where there is none or building magnificent buildings. What we are to be essentially about is working for the realization of God's shalom community upon the earth. It is that reality that should permeate our reading of scripture and our proclamation of the gospel on every Sunday and holy day of the Christian Year. So selecting *The Gospel of Shalom* as our title reminds us constantly that such is what we are to be about, and therefore hopefully keeps us on that primary task to which God has called us.

³ The New International Version, the Living Bible, the New Revised Standard Version; the Jerusalem Bible.

⁴ *Building A People of Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-90. Used by permission.