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The Least of These

Who are the widows, orphans and aliens in our society?

BY DONALD E. BURKE

The prophets of ancient Israel were clear: Israel was called to show generous concern for the weakest and most vulnerable in their society. In the language of their day, the weak and vulnerable were identified by three groups: widows, orphans and aliens (not extra-terrestrials, but resident non-Israelites or refugees). These groups had no right to own land in Israel and therefore were marginalized economically, socially and politically. They had few legal rights, fewer economic rights and no political standing whatsoever. So when it came to reaping the benefits of any economic boom or suffering the perils of any bust, these groups would be tossed about like so much refuse. Even in the best of times, daily life was precarious—the widow, the orphan and the alien would be the first to starve, the first to be prosecuted for minor offences and, ultimately, the first to die.

Prophets such as Amos, Micah and Isaiah were sensitized to the plight of

the widow, the orphan and the alien in Israel because they preserved the memory of Israel's sojourn in Egypt where the Hebrews themselves had been aliens; where they were without legal standing; and where they were the lowest economic, social and political class in Egypt. The Hebrews were the "disposable" people. Their life was hard, violent and hungry. With its penchant for understatement, the Bible describes Israel's situation as "bitter" (see Exodus 1:14).

The Character of God

Alongside the collective memory of this hard slavery, the prophets also preserved the memory of the Lord's attention to the cries of these oppressed, powerless and hopeless Hebrew slaves (see Exodus 2:23-25). Israel learned that God hears the cries of those who are marginalized and oppressed. This became one of Israel's first confessions about the character of the Lord their God. As Moses reminded Israel in Deuteronomy

10:17-19, "the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the stranger, providing them food and clothing... You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (*NRSV*).

Moses claims that it is fundamental to the character of Israel's God to protect and love the widow, the orphan and the stranger in the land. In other words, God's character is evident clearly in this divine concern for those who are most vulnerable and most easily oppressed. For its part, Israel, as the people of the Lord, was to embody this concern. Israel was to make special provision for the widow, orphan and alien. So, for example, every third year the entire tithe was to be set aside to provide for them (see Deuteronomy 14:28-29); the Sabbath rest was to be granted to slaves and aliens among others (see Deuteronomy 5:12-

15); part of the harvest was to be left in the fields to provide food for the poor (see Deuteronomy 24:19-22); and justice was to be executed for the widow, the orphan and the alien (see Deuteronomy 24:17-18). In Deuteronomy, there is a definite tilt in God's favour toward those who were most vulnerable. And just in case you haven't got the message yet, all who deny justice to the widow, the orphan and the alien are cursed (see Deuteronomy 24:19).

What the Scriptures assert is that Israel, as the people of this God, had a vocation to be a community in which those who are weakest, most vulnerable, and most easily consigned to the garbage heap of society, are to be the recipients of special attention. They are to be protected, provided for and sheltered—even non-Israelite refugees who settled in the land. No strings attached.

Identity and Vocation

The tragedy is that Israel did not live up to this vocation. The prophets make that abundantly clear. For the prophets, this was not a peripheral issue; it was central to Israel's identity and vocation. Israel's amnesia concerning its own experience as slaves in Egypt and its failure to recognize the deep commitment of God to the marginalized led to the oppression of the poor and dispossessed—both Israelite and non-Israelite. According to the prophets, this was endangering Israel's covenant with God. It was this warning that Amos sounded when he confronted Israel. In fact, the overwhelming mistreatment and disregard for Israel's weakest compelled Amos to announce on God's behalf, "The end has come upon my people Israel!" (Amos 8:2). It was this injustice that prompted Isaiah to sing a parody of a love song concerning the Lord's vineyard (Israel) that ends with the promise that the vineyard itself will

be destroyed (see Isaiah 5:1-7).

Lest we dismiss this as simply so much Old Testament mumbo jumbo, let's remember that in Luke's Gospel, Jesus introduced his mission with the announcement that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to bring good news to the poor, the imprisoned and the sick (see Luke 4:16-30) and that, according to Luke, Jesus spent the vast majority of his ministry among those who were marginalized. It was to the weak, the poor

and the sinners that Jesus devoted much of his attention, and it was these same disenfranchised people who responded most readily to the gospel. When we read Luke with eyes opened to the social status of those Jesus interacted with most often, we learn that his ministry was largely directed toward those who held little influence or wealth in the community of his day.

Others or Neighbours?


But what does all this have to do with us who are Christian? I think that the general tenor of Scripture compels us to recognize that Christian concern for the most vulnerable in our world is not peripheral to our faith. It is not an optional add on. Instead, the very foundation of our Christian faith leads us to active concern. The core of our mission is found in our service and advocacy for the widow, orphan and alien among us. If we neglect the poor, our worship and

our piety will ring hollow—just as Israel's worship rang hollow in the time of the great prophets Amos, Micah and Isaiah.

We also need to ask ourselves, "Who are the widows, the orphans and the aliens in our society?" Who are the most vulnerable and who are marginalized most easily? We may see them as outsiders, intruders, "others." Look for those who are often viewed as being a little less "human:" those who are said to "invade" or "infest" our land. Listen

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for language that strips them of their dignity as human beings. But it is these people whom God views with special concern—and so should we.

What we learn from the Bible is that the quality of a society is not to be judged by its wealth, power or affluence, but rather by the way it treats (or mistreats) those who have the least—the least influence, the fewest resources, the lowest standing in the courts. We shall be judged according to how we deal with "the least of these" (see Matthew 25:31-46). Our praises to the God revealed in Scripture sound like clanging cymbals when our neighbours are hungry, homeless or incarcerated. And if the prophets are to be believed—and if Jesus himself is to be believed—a society that mistreats its widows, orphans and aliens will not endure. God will not permit it. 

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