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“You shall be my witness” – Witness, Justice, Hospitality
Bible study – 1 King 21 – Naboth’s vineyard (June 2)

I - Asking questions to our context, daily life matters!

1) From where I am standing!

First of all, as a non-European – even though living in Geneva for 10 years – I can hardly say that I am experiencing and understand European local struggles of daily life.

Working in an international organization, like LWF or other, can create this strange feeling of not belonging to the soil you are living in; so, I am in Geneva, but, my daily work has to do with many other parts in the world that are not European. Therefore, I need to listen to others experiences, to the voices that are facing daily the struggles of being inserted and dealing with issues that are affecting life in the context of today’s Europe.

That said I am trying to touch in the surface and bring an assumed partial reading of the issues I want to address. **I am declaring: I do not have the intention to be exhaustive and comprehensive of the realities I am touching here. I assume my partiality in reading the context.**

The Bible text I was asked to work is in 1 Kings chapter 21, and tells the story of Naboth’s vineyard. The theme of the day is JUSTICE. So, these are entry points that I am using to read the “reality”, the “context” and the “bible”. **This is my methodology – learned with popular movements and contextual reading of the Bible in Latin America. It is a methodology that bridges life and sacred text; it is a dialogical exercise to visit daily life, with pains and challenges, and biblical text, in its context, bringing a relevant message an word to our life, faith communities and society today.**

2) What are the realities experienced in Europe today, that are evoking the notion of JUSTICE – in different meanings – justice as an achieved reality, or justice to be done, or the lack of justice, where justice is not yet there.

I want to use an image to evoke these realities where justice is in case, today in Europe – **A TOMATO**

Mohammed's story is typical of thousands of Africans working under the sweltering heat of plastic greenhouses.

He arrived illegally in southern Spain from Morocco in 2004 to work in the hothouses, having paid €1,000 to smugglers to bring him in a fishing boat. He said back then he could earn €30 for an eight-hour day. Now he's lucky to get €20 a day.

The legal minimum wage for a day's work is currently more than €44, but the economic crisis has created a newly enlarged surplus of migrants desperate for work, enabling

farmers to slash wages. Mohammed's home is a shack in the hothouse area that runs into the tourist town of Roquetas de Mar on the Costa del Sol. It is crudely knocked together from the wooden pallets used to transport the crops and covered with a layer of old agricultural plastic. There is no drinking water or sanitation.

There are 100 or so shacks like this next to Mohammed's. Jobs are sporadic, and come not with contracts but by the day or even by the hour. Sometimes, when he and his compatriots have been without work for weeks, there is no food, unless the Red Cross makes one of its food parcel deliveries. "We live like animals scavenging. No work, no money, no food," he said.

The situation of migrants working in the tomato, *pomodori* pepper, cucumber and courgette farms of Almeria is so desperate that the Red Cross has been handing out free food to thousands of them. Its local co-ordinator described conditions as "inhuman". Anti-Slavery International said the Guardian's evidence was "deeply disturbing", and raised the "spectre of de facto state sanctioning of slavery in 21st century Europe".¹

As we eat tomatoes during our meals, at this gathering, let us think about this story, and so many other stories and lives that are lacking the minimum of what we would name as justice. Let us think how our discussions about justice, at this bible study, are related to the tomato, the cucumber or the vegetable we eat, at this general assembly or in our daily meals in our homes.

That justice has to do with use and distribution of land – also here in Europe – and in the end it has to do with the awareness of the majority, like us, who do not have any more direct contact with land, but, maybe in our constituencies as churches, it is possible to create awareness of how land is used, how the chain of production to consumption of what we eat is handled.

And the discussion I want to raise here is not about the fruit or vegetable in itself, or we eat, or stop eating – what I am proposing is to ask question of justice and ethical choices in the midst of our daily life. It is not about creating guilt, individual solutions, but to create awareness of the role of faith and faith actors in contribution to a public debate on justice and human dignity. It is this what this assembly is proposing by choosing witness, justice, hospitality as key themes to orient its conversations.

It is all about the **model of agriculture and development, the model of use of land to plant tomatoes or the distribution and consumption of food that has to do with justice, with our ethical attitudes and choices related to our tables and food**. What I want to talk about is how we live out ethical choices, daily life conflicts with a just and righteousness perspective. How can we live our lives in a society with the standards of welfare as we experience in Europe, and continue to strive for justice to all, for a just and inclusive society, where all have a place.

Land grabbing - concentration of land²

Research about the use of land in Poland and Hungary - Official statistics are showing, that 1 or 2 % of the land are sold to foreigners – but... reports and stories of local farmers are telling a different number. "More than 200,000 hectares of land in the province of West Pomerania have been bought by foreign companies of Dutch, Danish, Germany and

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/feb/07/spain-salad-growers-slaves-charities>

² Social Europe, the EU-Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the Hans Böckler Stiftung teamed up in a project investigating various aspects of the inequality issue with a specific perspective on the European dimension of inequality. https://www.fes-europe.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Inequality_in_Europe_-_final.pdf

British extraction. This has been done through the use of what are called substitute or 'dummy' buyers or in other places, pocket contracts – where small farmers, who meet the legal requirements for making a limited tender and who are hired by foreign companies to buy land and who then transfer control of it to the later."

- *Represent a deep rupture with the European model of family farming and the structural goal of a diversified and multifunctional agricultural system.*
- *Involve the capturing of decision-making power over land (how land is to be used, by whom, for how long, and for what purposes) and a far-reaching reordering of the socio-economic and ecological relations of agricultural production*

In France, for example, a huge zone of fertile farmland is lost every year due to changing land use and re-zoning plans. Farmland being sold off for many times its original price for a whole variety of purposes, including for so-called environmental conservation or green energy production (also known as 'green grabs') such as in the case of the controversial photovoltaic energy project in the town of Narbolia in Sardinia.

The intertwining of climate change, environmental and economic crises and food price instability raises serious concerns about the widespread model of agricultural production widespread in the North. It suggests the urgent need for a more sustainable, decentralised and locally based farming system that is capable of addressing current risks and challenges. This means a focus on reducing carbon emissions, shortening food miles, enhancing local food-production systems and improving access to land and the right of existing and future small-scale farmers and family farms to cultivate it.

... Land use is shifting further towards an extractive model, and away from the family farms that could provide the basis for more sustainable and localised agrarian systems. Extractive agriculture relies on the exploitation of resources, regardless of their need to regenerate themselves, on monoculture and high levels of energy consumption.³

Use of land & food sovereignty (not security because it is a state policy, it is not about the control of food but, the right to food!!⁴

It is not only about the tomatoes – it is about vineyards...

II - The biblical text 1 Kings 21. 1- 11 – Naboth's vineyard

1Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. 2And after this Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house, and I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money."

3But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers."

4And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite

³ Antonio Onorati and Chiara Pierfederici. Land concentration and green grabs in Italy: The case of Furtovoltaico in Sardinia In: https://www.tni.org/files/download/05_italy.pdf

⁴ This brief aims to fill this research gap by examining the scale, scope, drivers and impacts of land grabbing in Europe. Drawing together cutting-edge findings from the study Extent of Farmland Grabbing in the EU, commissioned by the European Parliament (EP) and presented to the EP Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (COMAGRI) in June 2015, it shows that there is significant evidence that land grabbing is underway in Europe today.

<https://www.tni.org/en/publication/land-grabbing-and-land-concentration-in-europe>

had said to him, for he had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food.

5But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?" 6And he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money, or else, if it please you, I will give you another vineyard for it.' And he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" 7And Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Arise and eat bread and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

8So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and the leaders who lived with Naboth in his city.

9 "Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people. 10And set two worthless men opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death."

11And the men of his city, the elders and the leaders who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. As it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, 12they proclaimed a fast and set Naboth at the head of the people. 13And the two worthless men came in and sat opposite him. And the worthless men brought a charge against Naboth in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king."

So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones.

14Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

15As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money, for Naboth is not alive, but dead." 16And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

17Then the word of the Lord came to **Elijah the Tishbite**, saying, 18"Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. 19And you shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Have you killed and also taken possession?"' And you shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood."

20Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. 21Behold, I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. 22And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. 23And of Jezebel the Lord also said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel.' 24Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat."

25(There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. 26He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.)

27And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. 28And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 29"Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house."

Possibilities for a contextual interpretation

We might be misleading to read this text – as we might do in other situations where the conflict mix religion and land – as a fight between two main religious systems and Divinities: the religion of prophet Elija versus the religion professed by Jezebel. The God of the prophet – Yahweh versus Baal, the God of the queen. And in this dual reading, one is the good and the other, the woman, the foreign woman whom King Ahab married, is the bad, the evil, or ... the idolatrous.

I invite then, to see some details in the text, in this purpose to discuss justice related to land use, production models, and consumptions responsibilities.

Ahab, the king

The general belief was that kings were divinely chosen and that they were expected to abide by the covenant –

Ps 72 and Isa 32: 1-2 calls upon God to grant the king divine justice and righteousness so that he might rule the people properly, the king to rule in righteousness so that his officers will govern with justice.

(Deut 17:14-17 - When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," 15you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose. He must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You must never return that way again." 17And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.)

But there is also another perspective to see the role of king and monarchy in the Old Testament:

1Sam 8-12 – a very critical way of presenting the rights of the king

"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; 12and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and

give them to his courtiers. 15He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.

16He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. 17He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

Jezebel, the queen,

"And [Ahab] took as wife Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians"(1 Kgs 16:31). Surrounded by the nouns "wife" and "daughter" Jezebel enters Israel in an arrangement between males. Husband and father define her.⁵ She is foreigner, Phoenician.

The queen mother played an important role all the time, but most of all in times of transition from one king to the next. **As queen mother she had a great influence. She served as an advocate, taking petitions from the people and presenting them to the people.**

1 Kings 2:19, Jeremiah 13:18, and Proverbs 31. Are some references to the role of a Gebirah – a queen mother.

(In 1 Kings 2:19, the queen (Bathsheba) sits at the right hand of the king (Solomon) on a seat (throne – royalty) which is brought to her. In Jeremiah 13:18, the queen mother is mentioned along side of the king – “say to the king and the queen mother: Take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crown has come down from your head.”)

It was the primary mission of the king and queen mother to serve the people and to see to their needs. Throughout the history of Israel that was not always the case. In our text, it is clear that the king’s omission to take responsibility and be accountable of his duties to lead the people. He is counting with the astute help of his wife, who benefits from being foreigner, and builds a plan to catch Naboth in a trap. It is remarkable that there is need to create a whole story to make Naboth to fall and to be stoned to death. It seems that the text needs to create a justification to do what the king could do with out any modesty. He could simply take the land – but, there is a need to make the transgression and wrongdoing to look like all done in terms of the law.

Not always what is done in law, following the law is JUST and RIGHT.

And just to remember... it is not privilege of Jezebel, again, as a quick reading using lenses of good& bad, could lead. King David in the story of Bathseba did almost the same – that text (2 Samuel 11) has almost the same structure – the king is looking outside the balcony of his palace, he sees in this case a beautiful woman, and wants her to be his property, like Ahab, with the vineyard. Also, here King David needs to create a whole situation, sending the husband to the front battle, making up a situation that would seem to be in righteousness, following the law...

Naboth

His piece of land was family heritage (*nahala*), and therefore, not for sale – Numbers 33:54; Joshua 13- 19; it is a very important concept in biblical texts. It has to do with social and juridical status – the one who has his nahala, his piece of land, belongs to the group, is part of the community, has received a gift and therefore, is accountable and responsible to care for it.

If the land is lost, in debts, there is a law, in the jubilee that it will return to the family.

⁵ Phyllis Trible, “Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers,” *Journal of Biblical Interpretation* 114/1 (1995).

Ahab's offer asked Naboth to forsake his birthright, his heritage. And why? Because he wanted to enlarge his property. He would not need this exact piece of land in order to make his kingdom stronger – but he is greedy and wants to possess also that piece that would make him powerful... it was an issue of power. He could just use his power

Who is invisible in the story? Naboth's wife and children⁶

For the wife and to children to take away the land would mean impoverishment – they would be deprived of the economic means that would maintain them as subjects in the society; she was also deprived of any dowry to her children; she would need to return to her father's household;

To be a widow in a patriarchal society is to be in a very vulnerable position, subject of charity –

Deut 10:18 He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing; 26:12 When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled; Job 29:13; Jer 7:6

2 Kings 9: 21-26 – memory of Naboth's land and children's heritage - *26'As surely as I saw yesterday the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons—declares the Lord—I will repay you on this plot of ground.' Now therefore take him up and throw him on the plot of ground, in accordance with the word of the Lord."*


Again, a superficial reading could be just to see the opposition in the king's desire of a garden, and Naboth's stubbornness / inflexibility to negotiate – the king was offering to pay, to give another land... why would Naboth be so stupid and go against the power? What is the main conflict here? Is it that the king wants to enlarge his palace garden, to plant more flowers, or vegetables, like some translations? Why not? Flowers are making garden beautiful...

It is not about Naboth's vineyard or King Ahab's tomatoes!

What seems to be at stake here is that

"King Ahab with the support of Queen Jezebel was trying to drag Israel into line with the world of the market, where land could be bought and sold rather than held in perpetuity by a single family. One of the king's subjects, Naboth, was resisting him, not because the price was too low or even because he wanted to hold on to a vineyard. The land had been allocated to his clan in ancient times as part of the Israelites' covenant with God as a community of liberation.

Here two economic systems are competing with each other: the economy of Yawheh and the economy of Baal. King Ahab was introducing his modernization plan in the name of efficiency, productivity and prosperity. The Baal economy recommended by his wife from Tyre was a perfect ideology to pursue the plan. However, for Naboth, justice, equality and communality in the Yawheh economy inherited from the Exodus community were a

⁶ MAKHOSAZANA K. NZIMANDE. Reconfiguring jezebel:  a postcolonial *imbokodo* reading of the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–16)

These two projects in conflict here will give us some insights to read this story in dialogue with the entry points in Europe today's society, with the question of justice. The conflict is not about the final view of the landscape, if there are flowers, tomatoes or garden, or vineyards...

To discuss justice is not based on the view of landscape but on the implications for the life of the people to maintain the beauty of the landscape.

III – Questions, challenges and opportunities as we journey seeking JUSTICE among tomatoes and vineyards in Europe today

- 1) The challenge is to be able to read beyond the conflict of tomatoes of vineyards and see the complexity and ability of the capitalist market to transmute itself. It will invent, create new technologies and renewable energies and so, it seems that environment is being a preoccupation of the global market system...but, it is not going to root causes and they will not serve to dignify the life of the excluded. On the contrary, if these technologies continue to maintain exclusion, limiting the access of the benefits of green energy, of a so called environmental friendly energy, for example, then it is make up, and must be seen in critical eyes.
- 2) The root cause will ask – who is benefiting? Who has access? Who controls the access? where is justice? Not, what is written in the law, following the law... what is regulated in society, but how this is distributed and open to be accessed by all, the entire people of God.
- 3) The conflict is far beyond tomatoes/cucumbers or vineyards – it is about the model of development and how this model will treat people and land – it is not about possessing land – it is about the use of land and production to ensure life and dignity, food and well being. Not always justice is clearly articulated or seen as a clear way in the midst of conflicts– sometimes it is masked behind other conflicts
- 4) In the end, what we belief is that God redeems broken humanity. We humans do not ourselves create redemption, but we *do* respond to it by loving others. In society, this responsive love takes the form of justice, justice for the neighbour.⁸
- 5) And what this conversation has to do with this assembly, in its discussion on **witness, justice and hospitality?** I would suggest that this study can bring some light to the public responsibility of the church as prophetic community to be witnessing signs of hope in the midst of our confusing and divided, intolerant and conflictive society.

There is a need to read conflict beyond good & bad, beyond right/what is in the rule of law & what is just. Faith communities and faith actors have an ethical responsibility to build awareness and to maintain a critical approach in analyzing context. Our Bible reading can help us to discern responsibilities, and not creating guilt or shame, or even apathy – these feelings are not constructive and are not transformative.

Faith and community life can play a potent role in societies creating this feeling of belonging, helping to build identities and to cement groups and communities attached to a common purpose. And this is beyond this spread notion of secularization in European societies – challenging the notion that secularization with the need to articulate spirituality and faith that is part of human beings and relations. Witness – Justice and hospitality are potential concepts to help churches in Europe to contribute in the journey to be relevant actor in the society today.

⁷ *Sarojini Nadar* .Struggles for Justice in an Ambiguous World, 15 July 2013.

https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/bible-studies/struggles-for-justice-in-an-ambiguous-world#_ftn1

⁸ Mary Streufert

Go!

Go in haste!

Never stop walking out of the church room,
out from peace and tranquility, into the noise and discomfort,
out, to laughter and tears.

Carry with you the living bread,
as a treasure in your hands and your heart .

Share it over and over again.

It will always be enough, as long as you continue to break it.

Hans Olav Moerk, Norway; English translation Kari Veiteberg, from the worship at the Church City Mission in Oslo **Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden 11 - 17 March 2018**⁹

<https://www.tnp.no/norway/panorama/toxic-waste-from-norwegian-hydro-amazon-water-brazil>

Half state owned Norwegian aluminum company Hydro is accused of serious environmental damage in Brazil. In addition to a leak of toxic mining debris that has contaminated several communities in Barcarena, the Norwegian giant Hydro is accused to have used a "clandestine pipeline to discharge untreated effluent", according to Brazilian media.

Norwegian energy group Norsk Hydro, accused of causing environmental damage in northern Brazil, on Monday apologized for the unauthorized discharge of untreated water into a local river from its aluminum factory Alunorte, the largest in the world.

The incident poses risks to fishermen and other communities living near the Amazon River as the water they drink and bathe in have high levels of aluminum and heavy metals, according to an institute reporting to Brazil's ministry of public health.

⁹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/prayer-cycle/week-11>