

# Reaping our Rights

Lent is a season of preparation. Fasting reminds our bodies that we are entering into the suffering of Jesus and awaiting the good news of Easter. But Lent is also a time of imagining and encountering the world where Jesus walked—a world of imperial power, occupation and exploitation—the kind of place where proclaiming “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18) could get you into trouble.

Among the many people who would have heard Jesus’s message as good news were the multitudes of peasant farmers in Palestine. It takes work to transport our minds to that context, but understanding the world of peasants is also essential to understanding the life and death of Jesus, and to discovering what it might mean to follow Him in our own world of imperial power, occupation and exploitation.

Let’s take the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27) as an example. In Matthew’s version, a wealthy man gives three of his servants an amount of money before leaving his estate. While he’s away, two of the servants multiply the amount they were given. The third servant, however, buries the money entrusted to him in the ground. When the master comes back, he praises and rewards the two who grew his wealth. But when the third man returns the money he was given, the master rebukes him, saying he should have invested and grown the money. The master issues a command to throw his servant “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt. 25:30)

What is the moral of such a story? When we read the Bible, it’s easy to identify God with kings, rulers and people in power. In a capitalist society, too, we might think the first two servants are good, fiscally responsible entrepreneurs, while the third servant is irresponsible or lazy. Knowing something about the context and life of peasants, however, encourages a different reading.

In the ancient world, much like in our own, wealthy families grew their fortunes not so much by hard work as by investments and speculation, often dispossessing farmers of their land to increase their own land holdings. As the biblical scholar William R. Herzog explains, “The elites used their wealth to make loans to peasant farmers so that the farmers could plant the crops. Interest rates were high; estimates range to 60 per cent and perhaps as high as 200 per cent for loans on crops. The purpose of making such loans was not so much to make a large profit, at least by the standards of the ancient world, but to accept land as collateral so that the elites could foreclose on their loans in years when the crops could not cover the incurred indebtedness.”<sup>1</sup> Most likely, Herzog says, the two servants who grew their master’s wealth would have done so by investing it into peasant land through loans like these, charging exorbitant interest rates and taking land from those who could not repay their debts.

<sup>1</sup> William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 161.



In other words, two servants grew their master's wealth by exploiting vulnerable peasants. The servant who buried the money, by contrast, refused to participate in such an exploitative economy—he dropped out of the cycle of dispossession. When he returns the money, he boldly states, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” (Matt. 25:24) As punishment, the master casts him out with no money, land or home.

Herzog explains that the peasants hearing the parable would have had no trouble identifying the master and his favored servants as the villains of the story, since they would have heard of this situation happening before and may even have experienced it themselves. But what about the servant's punishment? Jesus's challenge to those hearing the parable is profound: could you accept a whistleblower, someone who is complicit in the system that is exploiting you but has made the difficult choice to drop out of it, into your community? Could you forgive, welcome and invite them to join you when the system of injustice has abandoned them?

It's a typical story from Jesus about reconciliation, peace and justice. But without knowing about the lives and challenges of peasant life, we lose the deep challenge of the parable. Knowing this context helps us also understand Jesus as a person prophetically engaging the economic and political injustices of His time, so radically that the authorities who relied on this exploitative system felt the need to execute Him. Through stories, miracles, and even a little political theatre, Jesus used different strategies to raise the consciousness of everyone from tax collectors to fishers to religious authorities, alerting them to both the injustices that their society produced and to alternative ways of living together.

Our own global economy is different from the one Jesus encountered, but it has striking similarities. In particular, peasant life is not a thing of the past. Most people in Jesus's day lived on very little, and peasant farmers risked losing their land through eviction, debt and exploitation, as they do even today. Mining operations, often owned or financed by Canadian companies and banks, push peasants off their land. Climate change is making land more difficult, sometimes even impossible, to cultivate. Economic value draining from the Global South to the Global North keeps some countries poor so that others can be rich, with peasants often at the margins of already impoverished societies.

Despite the intricate supply chains of industrial agriculture, 70 to 80 per cent of the world's population continues to depend on peasant labour for food, including from small farms, fisheries, urban gardens, and hunting and gathering. While we don't often think about peasant farmers, peasants are an essential part of the global food web. Small-scale peasant agriculture

is labour-intensive, but it produces richer crop yields and is far more environmentally sustainable than industrial agriculture, making peasant labour also especially important for the future of our planet. Peasant labour also keeps people employed and prevents internal economic displacement.

It can be easy to see this way of life as something of the past. There is often even something offensive about a term like “peasant,” suggesting a person is somehow “beneath” us. The lives of peasants are far from the consciousness of most Canadians, either in space or time, seen as a way of relating to the world that is out of step with what it means to be a developed, progressing society.

In fact, the lives and work of peasants are complex, creative and contemporary. Partners of Development and Peace—Caritas Canada, like PAYOPAYO in Indonesia and Fundación NUNA in Bolivia, show us just how textured, caring and diverse peasant communities are in the Global South. And yet, the lives of peasants are also threatened. As one of our partners, HOMEF (the Home of Mother Earth Foundation) in Nigeria, tells us, cassava farmers in Nigeria are pulling up their crops to find them covered in oil and toxified. Peasant labour is a crucial part of feeding the world and building an ecologically sustainable food system, but prejudices, power and economic precarity put their land and lives at risk.

This year, our **Reaping our Rights** campaign puts us in touch with partners defending and celebrating peasant life. As we prepare imaginatively this Lent, let us consider what it might mean for us to take up the challenge of Jesus today, joining in solidarity with those who believe a better world is possible.

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<sup>2</sup> GRAIN (2022) "Small scale farmers and peasants still feed the world", January 31, 2022.  
[https://grain.org/system/attachments/sources/000/006/695/original/31-01-2022\\_SMALL-SCALE\\_FARMERS\\_AND\\_PEASANTS\\_STILL\\_FEED\\_THE\\_WORLD.pdf](https://grain.org/system/attachments/sources/000/006/695/original/31-01-2022_SMALL-SCALE_FARMERS_AND_PEASANTS_STILL_FEED_THE_WORLD.pdf)