Can Kingdom Theology Guide Us Towards Land Justice in South Africa?

Sesihle Manzini: Founder and Curator: Anno Domini Magazine.

Understanding the times in which we live requires a unique set of tools that enable us to diagnose societal problems and get to the core issues.

Recently, I had the privilege of hosting an event in Gqeberha in collaboration with Joy to the Nations Church.

This event featured a screening of my recently released documentary film, A Piece of Ground, which explores the history of land dispossession and forced removals in Cape Town, from Dutch colonialism and British rule to the apartheid era.

The documentary is a project under ANNO DOMINI Magazine, a non-profit organisation I founded.

Our mission is to use digital media to educate and foster conversations that help believers, like the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32), to understand the times we live in and respond in truly transformative ways.

The film shows how land was used as a tool to push Africans into exploitative wage work and limit African political participation.

As the church, our solutions should not only address symptoms but also tackle root causes.

Through our media productions and public dialogues, we aim to create safe spaces for churches and their leaders to do this work, fostering a community known for its love and compassion towards people's history and lived experiences.

The film we screened at Joy to the Nations uses the stories of three individuals to craft a compelling narrative, illustrating how colonisation, loss of Khoi land, slave labour, and urban economies have shaped the spatial geography of Cape Town and many other South African cities.

The event ignited a conversation on several critical issues: how historical land dispossession shapes today's economic disparities; the role of theology in shaping perspectives on land ownership and justice; and how land dispossession intersects with issues of belonging and national identity.

We had an expert panel composed of Prof Janet Cherry from NMU, Rev Dr SW Leleki from the Methodist church, Palesa Kadi, the chairperson of the Names council, and Rev Dr Gustav Claassen from the Dutch Reformed Church.

The only drawback was that we certainly needed more time to delve deeper into each topic, which perhaps opens up an opportunity for the people of Gqeberha to consider gathering again and hosting more spaces for such discussions.

These conversations may seem out of place in a church context, but readers of this column will understand the power of theology.

How we interpret the Gospel matters.

If we only focus on spiritual matters, we miss much of what it means to manifest the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We need to understand what it looks like to live in kingdom theology.

In the film, I began by asking my protagonists where they lived, why they lived there, and who else lived in their neighbourhoods.

This simple question not only encourages self-awareness, but it broadens our analysis beyond ourselves towards larger systemic issues.

Why are some neighbourhoods predominantly white while others are predominantly black?

Why do black people often occupy service roles, such as gardeners and maids, in some communities?

These are not merely "social justice issues," "economic issues," or "housing issues." They are "love your neighbour" issues — they are Gospel issues.

This topic is particularly relevant now, not only because of the recent elections and South Africa reflecting on 30 years of democracy, but because as followers of Jesus, we are mandated to be ambassadors of another kingdom.

This kingdom has a sociopolitical vision.

Scriptures like Isaiah 65:17-25 provide a picture of this kingdom: a world with robust health systems, adequate shelter, and where people enjoy the fruits of their labour, a contrast to exploitative working conditions that endanger people's lives.

It depicts a positive connection to land and an economics rooted in abundance rather than scarcity, centring the most vulnerable.

Despite Jesus' over 80 references to the Kingdom of God in the gospels, kingdom theology seems to be lost in the Church today.

If we paid close attention to Jesus' words and the socio-political context that produced them, we would see that justice for all is integral to our witness and discipleship to Jesus.

As a Christian ministry, my focus is always on how the church and people of faith can support progressive causes that call for this justice.

By creating this organisation and this movie, my invitation to churches, people of faith, and faith-based NGOs is to ask: "how does this fit with our scriptures?"

Given our scriptural mandates, what can we do with the resources we have to pursue land and spatial justice in our cities?

This reflection is not easy.

It challenges us to consider how others have been systematically excluded from the benefits others enjoy.

Our faith calls for sacrifice and generosity in how we use and share our resources, and that is never convenient. But this is the work we are called to do, to pursue justice and equity in tangible, impactful ways.

As we continue these conversations and seek to understand the times we live in, I hope we can respond in ways that reflect the kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven.