

## **Pledge to build peace bridges with those on the edge: Harvest in a world of hunger**

---

Reflecting on Leviticus 23:22

The recent announcement of the 2020 Nobel Peace prize to the World Food Programme (WFP), one of the largest global humanitarian organisations, that has been addressing hunger and promoting food security is a wakeup call to the world to recognise the grave reality of the global food crisis today, where millions of people today suffer from or face the threat of hunger. The Norwegian Nobel Committee (NNC) announced that the WFP was given this peace prize, “for its push for international solidarity and for multilateral cooperation, for its contribution to bettering conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict.” In 2019, the WFP provided assistance to close to 100 million people in 88 countries who are victims of acute food insecurity and hunger. Especially in the face of the global pandemic this year, the WFP has demonstrated an impressive ability to intensify its efforts to address hunger, starvation, violence and conflict. WFP has stated, “Until the day we have a medical vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos.” In awarding this peace prize to WFP, the NNC has also exposed the intrinsic link between hunger and armed conflict and explained this link as “a vicious circle.” It further said, “war and conflict can cause food insecurity and hunger, just as hunger and food insecurity can cause latent conflicts to flare up and trigger the use of violence. We will never achieve the goal of zero hunger unless we also put an end to war and armed conflict.”

When the world this year is taken over by the Covid global pandemic, among 318 nominations for this year’s Nobel Peace Prize in 2020, WFP receiving this award under the category of peace has some theological significance that needs to be discussed. Before we do that, we need to set this conversation into perspective, and therefore firstly, we need to recognise that hunger is the deeper translation of conflict, and WFP, as an organisation striving to address such a conflict receives a global peace award, testifies to it. Secondly, it is time to acknowledge that ‘hunger triggers violence, and violence leads to hunger.’ Thirdly, it is food that has the strength to fight against the present chaos.

So, when we have now recognised hunger as the deeper translation of conflict, we now need to unpack hunger in numbers in our given context today. It is reported by the UN that 690 million people in the world are undernourished, which is about 8.9% of the world population in 2019. In the UK it is reported that 8.4 million people are struggling to afford to eat. 4.7 million of these people live in severely food insecure homes. This means that their food intake is greatly reduced and children regularly experience physical sensations of hunger, explains Fairshare, an organisation in UK fighting hunger and tackling food waste. Children from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic group communities in UK are more likely to be in poverty, which is about 46% compared to 26% of the rest of the communities. India is one of the world’s largest food producers, yet ironically, the country is also home to the largest population of hungry people and one-third of the world’s malnourished children. At another level, it is also reported that hunger could kill more people than the COVID pandemic in 2020, pushing another 132 million people into hunger than projected for 2020. Not to forget the number of children going hungry during holidays in UK has been on a phenomenal

rise. Covid also has exposed that today we live in a world filled with inequalities, including who gets food and who are not able to get food.

What does all these numbers explain to us? It explains that hunger is a reality in our localities, and it raises an alarm to know that there are many people who are going hungry every day in our known vicinities. This is only bird's eye view of about the world of hunger every day in 2020.

As I am preparing for a harvest Sunday service, I have been thinking what is the significance of such a Sunday when there is so much hunger for food in the world today? Are we celebrating harvest, just because we have always celebrated it in the month of October in UK, and in February in India, since it is part of a Christian calendar? What is the message of harvest for my children living in an urban context? Amidst these questions, I read this verse as a message for us this harvest.

*“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God.” Leviticus 23:22*

This Levitical law reminds the community of this text to know that God is a God who provides food for all, with a special provision to those people who are poor, migrants, foreigners living in your locality. At the heart of God all people are equal and all people deserve equal food. It is we the people, the society that have created divisions among people, and with our practices dividing the gap between the haves and the have-nots. In a way one of the questions we need to keep asking is can we address these structural divides, the root causes of poverty, and try to address them, which for me is a faith calling.

I want to bring in to your attention three things from this given verse. Firstly, this verse emphasises a **preference to the people on the edges** – the poor and the foreigner residing among you. Reading it in our context, it is those people who are on the margins of our society today, people who are as asylum seekers, people who are as refugees, people who are as migrants, people who are on food vouchers, people who have lost the jobs, people who cannot afford to eat a proper meal a day, that needs to be given a preferential option. For among such people and communities, God comes alive, for God is working with them in addressing hunger.

Secondly, this verse is a call to **build peace bridges with a definite provision**. Harvest is a call not to accumulate food all for one-self, or reap the entire fruits of the field for one-self. The law reminds them not to do certain thing, which is not to reap to the very edges of a given field or gather the gleanings of the entire harvest. The law is to leave certain parts and portions of the harvest for the people on the edges, which is an act of building bridges of peace. If hunger is a deep translation of conflict, the poor, the stranger, the migrant, the refugee when they don't own a land, harvest should remind us that we are called to build bridges by sharing our fruits, harvest, gifts and care with those on the edges and address this conflict called hunger. These people of the edges are more likely to go on hunger as they can't afford a harvest, but as a faith community, we need ensure to be a local food programme providing food for them. Building bridges of peace is God in Jesus' activity, and the divine invites us to join with Jesus in building peace bridges with those on the edges.

Thirdly, this verse is a call **seeking a pledge to practice just compassion** towards the poor and the hungry and proclaim food as a faith issue. This verse is a Levitical law, that demanded a pledge, a commitment from that wandering community, to see to it that this law is put into practice in its fullest sense. Harvest demands a preference, a provision and a practice of sharing food with the poor and hungry. The pledge is not limited to one crop or a certain crop in the year, but to every harvest of every fruit in the field. Harvest calls for a just compassion. The one who works hard on the field can ask, since I have been working hard, I need to enjoy all the fruit of the harvest. But this verse counters such arrogance of selfishness and calls for a compassion based on justice, with a preferential option to the least and the last in the society. Harvest should challenge us to ensure that there should be food for all. Food serves as an important factor in community building, and harvest demands an unequivocal pledge and commitment in addressing hunger and food insecurity.

For us as churches harvest today is about sharing food, providing food and striving towards tackling hunger and inequalities in our society. In the context of climate change, this harvest invites us as a church to pledge to care for our planet overcoming all those 'dominion' narratives against the creation. As churches we are called to be with our local communities in challenging poverty and in demanding our governments to accountability to ensure welfare of all people and not just the few. With nearly 6 million people in UK struggling to pay their household bills during this period, the call for #resetthedebt is a campaign we can as a church join work for today. In my reimagining church today, I envision churches to be hubs of serving food for all, addressing poverty, tackling hunger, sharing our resources. So, as a person of faith living in an urban context, harvest is a time to reflect on the creation, is a time for sharing and caring those that are poor and hungry and is a time to pledge to work towards addressing climate change in saving our planet.

This year's #Worldfoodday on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2020 theme: "Grow, nourish, sustain. Together. Our actions are our future" is an invitation for our churches to engage in actions for food security addressing hunger.

Allow me to conclude this reflection by sharing the "Ten Commandments of Food" produced by the World Council of Churches, for us as a food for thought and action this harvest time:

1. You shall give thanks for the food you eat.
2. You shall provide food for those who have no food.
3. You shall eat mindfully and in moderation.
4. You shall be grateful to those who grow and prepare food for your table.
5. You shall not waste food.
6. You shall reduce the ecological footprint of food production and supply.
7. You shall protect the biodiversity of the sources of food.
8. You shall support fair wages for farmers' efforts.
9. You shall strive for all people to have access to affordable and nutritious food.
10. You shall rejoice and share the sacred gift of food with all.

May the God of harvest, who is always generous in compassion be with us in our pledge to build peace bridges with people on the edges and work with us in our efforts to tackle hunger and address poverty in our times today.

*Rev. Dr. Raj Bharat Patta*  
*15<sup>th</sup> October 2020*