

**A Bible Study on 1Kings 21:1-16**  
**Rev. Rex RB Reyes, Jr.**  
**General Secretary**  
**National Council of Churches In the Philippines**

Over the weekend a BBC news title said “Farmers torch Tax Office in France”. I was not able to listen to the full story but what struck me about the title was not the act of torching the tax office but the desperate situation of the farmers. Normally patient, gentle with the land and hard-working it is easy to imagine that food producers have to contend with increasing taxes for land use and decreasing subsidy from the government. A couple of years ago, I visited an agricultural community in North America. A farmer said the harvest was going to be his last. Obviously, he was lamenting the fact that it was in his generation that the land will be lost and that neither he nor his children will be stewards of that piece of land anymore. He said he broke his back and paid hands to pick and prepare the land for planting were hard to come by. On top of that he was receiving less and less subsidy from the government. It is sad to think that today, the farmer can no longer do what he loved doing – producing food as he lost the land. Sadder still to think that the prime agricultural land is either lying fallow or used in some ways aside from its best use – the production of food.

Narratives in the Old Testament about land, justice, community, empire, power relations, the quest for peace, food and family come alive vividly in our time. Even Old Testament personalities come alive today. In this case, we have: a) Naboth- a tribesman of Jezreel who owned a vineyard near the palace of the king and holds on to the value of close affinity with the land; b) Ahab – the king who could have otherwise used his power but was aware of the prophet Elijah’s God; and, c) Jezebel – the scheming wife of the king and represents a dangerous opportunist.

The scene is a conversation between Ahab and Naboth – one a king and the other a peasant. The king is telling Naboth that he was willing to swap a vineyard for or buy the vineyard of Naboth which was near the king’s house. Naboth refuses either offer saying the land was his inheritance. Ahab leaves “vexed and sullen . . . and would eat no food”. Upon knowing what bothered him, Jezebel plots a scheme to grab the land. The plan was to use a temple ceremony to lay a false charge of blasphemy on Naboth to be punishable by death. With Naboth dead, Ahab goes on to possess Naboth’s the land.

Land-grabbing is sadly a common practice in our time. It is coveted much more for its commercial value and for territorial reasons. The systematic land disenfranchisement weighs hard especially on the farmers and indigenous peoples/aborigines/first nations compromising food production severely.

A particular context of systematic land-grabbing is the Philippines. An archipelago endowed with natural resources, it remains to be a country of impoverished people. Genuine agrarian reform is a struggle as landowners control political power. Indigenous people lead in the struggle to preserve the forests and mountains which are the targets of multinational

corporations for massive resource extraction. In the name of investment and development, the government through the state forces, enforces these policies violating human rights with impunity. Government pays lip service to the viciousness of rice and vegetable cartels. At the same time the rules of world trade obligates the country to import food from other countries to the detriment of local farmers. Prime agricultural lands are converted into housing estates or planted with non-food crops. Certainly, this situation is anathema to the promise of abundant life. It is not life-sustaining.

In small discussion groups the following questions are offered as talking points:

1. How are the stewards of the land (e.g. farmers, indigenous peoples/first nations/aboriginals/) experiencing land-grabbing in our own communities and by whom?
2. In what ways can the ecumenical community be in solidarity with those who are victims of systematic or forced land-grabbing?

### **Some concluding thoughts for further reflection**

*"The land is not for sale!"*

*"Genuine land agrarian reform and fair trade!"*

*"We have inherited this land!"*

*"We do not own the land. The land owns us!"*

These are the cries of food producers all over the world. These are not only cries for justice, but also, calls for a change of heart, a call for more sustainable relationship with the land. Justice was meted out to the unheeding and unrepentant Jezebel. King Ahab died in warfare and "the dogs licked his blood" (22:37f).

There are still Naboths of the world today and they need Christian solidarity. Perhaps, only the farmers and the indigenous peoples/first nations/aboriginals can fully grasp the meaning of "land is life" in a sustainable way rather than from the perspective of commerce, domination and control. In the former is a spirituality that recognizes the intricate and inseparable relationship between land and life. Such reverence also includes a deep awareness of accountability to the welfare of future generations. Thus, there is reverence for land as befits its title as Mother Earth providing the life-sustaining forms, mainly food. Vineyard and the wine from the vineyard are symbolic of abundant life which is to be shared. Ecumenical advocacy then is captured by the first line of the refrain of a popular song: "Until all are fed, we cry out!"

A North American Indian prophecy speaks of the day when those who have despoiled the land will turn towards the Indian to enquire on what is to be done to avert ultimate destruction.

To hold on to the perspective of stewardship of the land as our inheritance is to be partner with God in creation and re-creation. This is the intention when the Creator “took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen. 2.15).

---

Rev. Rex RB Reyes Jr. is the first IP (indigenous people) General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. He is also one of the Presidents of the Christian Conference of Asia and a member of the WCC Central Committee.