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Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, a human rights activist and artist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980, stands with Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina in an undated photo. (Dreamstime/Elultimodeseo)



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March 18, 2022
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The Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem begins with commemorating Jesus's condemnation by Pilate in the traditional site of Pilate's Praetorium and ends at the Holy Sepulcher with remembering his interment in the tomb. At each of the 14 stations in this "Way of the Cross," pilgrims are urged to meditate on the events and meaning of Jesus' death.

Yet Jesus's path to the cross did not really begin in Jerusalem. Jesus' teachings and ministry were the first stages of his path to the cross in Jerusalem, as prefigured in Mary's Magnificat and proclaimed in Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. The seeds planted in verses read during Advent thus prepare us for Jesus's ministry, and Jesus's proclamation of good news for the poor and his critiques of power, wealth and oppression led inexorably to the Way of the Cross that we commemorate during Lent.

The Magnificat reflects on the nature of God's past actions to herald the forthcoming message of Jesus — specifically on God's liberation of the exploited poor, the marginalized, and the disinherited, and God's overthrowing of powerful, unjust rulers (echoing the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10):

> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
>
> and lifted up the lowly;
>
> he has filled the hungry with good things,
>
> and sent the rich away empty.

Jesus officially inaugurated this program of liberation when he began his public ministry, as Luke 4:16-21 relates. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read a text based on Isaiah 58:6 and 61:1-2:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
>
> because he has anointed me
>
> to bring good news to the poor.
>
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
>
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
>
> to let the oppressed go free,
>
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

After he finished the Scripture reading, Jesus said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This message of liberation is an important reminder that Jesus was an impoverished, first-century Jew who was a member of a politically, militarily and economically oppressed minority. Jesus's proclamation of release from Isaiah evokes the "year of release" in Leviticus 25 — the Year of Jubilee that includes remission of debts, liberation of slaves, and restoration of land to its original owners — a radical redistribution of wealth in an agrarian society.

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Jesus' "good news to the poor" includes, in effect, "bad news" for the rich, as the "woes on the rich" in Luke 6:24-25 demonstrate, and Jesus's call for justice and his denunciation of injustice, like the Hebrew Bible prophets before him, are key elements of his message.

Part of the injustice against which Jesus speaks stems from his first-century context in which an unjust redistribution of wealth by the wealthy elite forced many small

independent landowners into being landless, dependent laborers. The worsening economic situation of numerous Galileans led to growing resentment against these absentee landlords, and the economic hopelessness of the nonelite, including their inability to pay taxes to the rulers and pay off debts to the elite, was a central element of social conflict.

Aspects of Jesus's teachings must be interpreted in the context of this struggle over land and resources in which the wealthy elite relegated many nonelites to a bare subsistence level.

Jesus's core message of the kingdom of God engages with the harsh social realities of his hearers' daily lives and proclaims how life should be when God's reign is fully realized. He proclaims not just remission of debts to those who are broken down by oppression — the root of the Greek word for oppression that Luke uses here means *broken* or *shattered* — but also liberation and restoration.

The Argentinian human rights activist, architect, artist and writer Adolfo Pérez Esquivel won the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize "for being a source of inspiration to repressed people, especially in Latin America." His acceptance speech noted that he received the award "in the name of the people of Latin America and especially in the name of the poorest and smallest of my brothers and sisters."

The goal, for Pérez Esquivel, in contrast to the current social order in which "the rich become ever richer at the expense of the poor who become ever poorer," is "to achieve by nonviolent struggle the abolition of injustice and the attainment of a more just and humane society for all."

Pérez Esquivel's "Stations of the Cross," created for the 500th anniversary of the colonization of the Americas and made available with commentary by Alastair McIntosh, reflects on Jesus's death and connects his suffering with contemporary Latin American people suffering from colonialism, poverty, hunger, illiteracy, economic inequality and other oppression. These contexts mirror the oppression of the Jewish people during the time in which Jesus lived, taught and was martyred, so Pérez Esquivel's series of paintings seeks to provide a mode of response to such oppression — one espoused by Jesus — that bridges the gap between Jesus' era and our own.

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The sufferings of Jesus, in this case, reflect the sufferings of campesinos (landless, tenant and/or peasant farmers) and other oppressed people in Latin America. In this way, the life and teachings of Jesus are contextualized in a contemporary setting without the domestication of his radical message against the wealthy and powerful.

The image for Station 3, for example, where Jesus falls for the first time under the weight of the cross, includes images of war and devastation, such as the murder of Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador. The fallen Jesus is guarded by a Roman soldier holding a rifle, symbolizing the similar violence that afflicts the poor in contemporary Latin America by the ruling elite. The inclusion of Romero, in addition, reinforces that fact that Jesus proclaimed a prophetic message of active, nonviolent resistance to his followers, and Romero lays dying leaning against the eucharistic altar, where the death of Jesus is commemorated in the Roman Catholic Mass.

Station 7, where Jesus falls for the second time, illustrates the plight of the landless poor. The soldiers guarding Jesus wear contemporary uniforms and are equipped with a gun, clubs and a shield. Crowds of impoverished people march behind Jesus in protest, and their signs link his torture at the hands of the Romans with their oppression: *Reforma agraria* (agrarian reform) and *Derecho a la tierra* (right to land). In addition, most tellingly, the seven black ropes on the cross in the midst of the crowd represent murdered campesinos, McIntosh writes. The landscape in the background illustrates that abundant land is available for everyone in a just society.

In this situation, as Pérez Esquivel notes, peasants "battle for survival" in the "wholesale eradication of subsistence farming and its replacement by agribusiness for export." Pérez Esquivel calls for a nonviolent "battle" against such unjust repression, one based on Jesus's proclamation of good news to the poor and liberation of the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

Pérez Esquivel's "Stations of the Cross" thus modernizes Jesus and his message authentically, without, as Christian interpreters have tended to do over the centuries, domesticating Jesus — a first-century Jewish prophet of an oppressed people — or anachronizing his radical message. Pérez Esquivel's work should encourage all those who walk the Stations of the Cross this Lenten season also to meditate on Jesus' message of liberation of the oppressed.