

IS PROPHETIC WITNESS THE APPROPRIATE MODE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON THE GLOBAL ECONOMY?

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ABSTRACT

This article critically addressed various aspects of prophetic ministry and its impact on public life, especially within the context of the global village. Prophetic ministry was shaped by Jesus' prophetic role in his own ministry, which was portrayed in language by Luke, who wrote that Jesus began his ministry by saying: 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to captives, and recovery of sight to blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed' (Lk 4:18). These words open up a way of challenging ministers in engaging in prophetic ministry in the public arena. Prophets always address injustices that isolate and destroy God's image in others. In other words, the role of prophetic ministry becomes an important element that needs to be addressed, especially with regard to the economic structures that oppress the poor in the global village of today. This kind of ministry also focuses on the often unheard voice of the oppressed. Finally, the main question that this article posed was whether prophets can play an important role in today's community.

INTRODUCTION

To answer the question of the role prophets can play in today's community, one needs to refer to the beginning of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Luke records these powerful words uttered by Jesus:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

(Lk 4:18)

The above quotation sets a scenario in which God takes the side of the poor. Jesus begins by participating in the public sphere, focusing especially on the poor and oppressed people. He launches a ministry of caring for them, articulating how he is going to address the issue of their marginalisation in the community. In other words, he seriously addresses the experience of the rejected and their ways of survival as they seek to discover the meaning of their own suffering. Jesus brings them back to the centre of life. This mode of dealing with humanity reminds me of Cone's (1997) analysis on how he dealt with slave issues, in which he says:

For them is not the experience in the here and now that comes from just having an awareness of the reality of the situation, and then taking whatever action is possible to overcome the oppression.

(Cone 1997:56)

This process leads to a new awareness of Jesus Christ as a liberator of the oppressed and the marginalised. The reader thus gains a better understanding of the opening statement of Jesus' ministering to the oppressed in the gospel according to Luke. Jesus begins by addressing them in their own situation. He also challenges the system that continues to oppress them. Cone (2000) articulates this idea effectively by saying:

God is recognized by the oppressed as the inner power of the Movement of liberation, because God became incarnate, revealed God's self in Jesus, and is now present in the movement towards their liberation.

(Cone 2000:31)

In short, Cone introduces us to a prophetic ministry – the role of those who care for troubled souls. We cannot avoid being the voice of the voiceless and Fiorenza (1990:131) rightly expresses this idea by saying that, '[t]he kingdom vision of the great shepherd makes people whole, healthy, cleansed, and strong. It restores people's dignity and life'.

Gerkin (1997), on the other hand, reminds us about the role of prophetic ministry, especially in conflict situations. In this regard to this, Gerkin (1997:29) writes that '[i]n that situation of cultural conflict and uncertainty, the Care and protection of the community became a dominant concern of Christian pastoral leaders'. Gerkin is clear that prophetic pastors have to intervene in situations of conflict and turmoil, as shepherd of the flock. He further says:

Pastoral care within the community took on an air of reconciliation, as Care for the community and care of individuals was combined in modes of caring for those who were oppressed.

(Gerkin 1997:29)

As a mode of pastoral care, reconciliation should focus on caring for the oppressed, marginalised and rejected people of God. It should also address those who oppress them. In other words, the prophetic ministry of caring raises up the needs of the oppressed in the same way that Jesus did, according to Luke. For Jesus, pastoral care has a crucial communal dimension, initiating persons into communities that nurture the faith and sustain individuals in their efforts to lead faithful lives while under the stresses of everyday life in a predominantly secular world. These days we are challenged by a circular global village that continues to create poverty through the greed of a few rich countries (cf. Hughes 2008).

THE PROCESS OF GLOBALISATION

One will understand these days how the global village continues to isolate, reject and create a gap between the rich and poor people. Globalisation and the economic and political forces associated with it, have dramatically changed the world in which we live. Despite progress in technological development and signs of economic growth in certain places around the world, poverty and underdevelopment continue to limit the bounds of human potential.

Poverty is closely associated with wealth, greed and the powerful countries that continue to abuse the resources of developing countries. The main question to ask, then, is: Why is the gap widening among the rich (powerful) and poor people? According to the World Bank, the number of people living in a situation of extreme poverty has halved since 1981 (Huston 1991). Yet, it is interesting to note that more than half of the people on this planet live under poor conditions. In fact, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) poverty report, *Overcoming human poverty* (2000) listed that,

over 3 billion people earn less than \$2.00 a day, 1.75 billion lack safe drinking water, 100 million are homeless, 800 million go hungry every day [and] 150 million are under nourished.

(U.N. development report of 2000)

These alarming statistics reveal how much further we need to go to make this world a truly better place for all people.

Who can better address these devastating issues that trouble poor and oppressed people? I believe the church is in a better position to enter the debate, because their master has already addressed the problems faced by downtrodden people. Hence, Jesus' statement in Luke's account, which reminds us of his ministry in serving the poor of the world. The beginning of his service is centred on 'the good news to the poor.' This becomes a top priority for his ministry. When Jesus is asked by John if he (Jesus) is the one to come, or if we should look for another, Jesus' words become another prophetic utterance:

Go tell John what you have seen and heard ... The blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to Life, the poor are hearing the good news.
(Lk 7:22-23)

It is important to note that Jesus' response is one of compassion to the spiritual, physical and economic needs of those who lived with him in Palestine. Another example of Jesus' compassion in this regard can be found in that time when the crowd was hungry and Jesus responded by feeding them, saying: 'Make them sit down' (Mt 15:35). His response also sometimes took the form of actions rather than words, to the extent that there were leftovers. Prophetic ministry or care does not need words at times, but action. His ministry of caring reminds us that God created the world for all to enjoy, not just the powerful nations who dominate it and who tarnish the image of God in others, or abuse the resources that God gave to all. In his address during the Global Knowledge Conference 1997 in Toronto, Canada, the then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, said:

We are all here because we believe poverty to be intolerable in a World of plenty. And we are all here because we are convinced –indeed we know– that poverty can be ended in our life time, with our own Hands.

(Annan 1997)

Annan (1998) also challenged the faith-based organisations by reminding them that there are rich people that worship in our churches who need to be challenged: 'So long as every fifth inhabitant of our planet lives in absolute poverty, there can be no real stability in the world'. These are prophetic words challenge believers to act upon this problem affecting over half of the world. It is clear that doing or acting on public theology simply means participating in the public life as churches. It means embracing a public paradigm of caring for poor people in the same way our Lord did.

We are called to participate in all aspects of God's mission to all those whom God loves: the neighbour with his or her own dignity, the stranger with another viewpoint, the believer with another opinion, as well as the fellow citizen. In this way, we are involved in the prophetic ministry of caring in the public arena. In other words, we are both bearing witness to the one whose ministry in the streets, crowds, synagogues and temples is the very embodiment of this way of being in public.

DEBT CRISIS

In view of the above, let us now analyse the way our continent is affected by debt. African countries, like all developing countries, are caught up in debt. As a result, poor people suffer a lot due to careless administration and the careless decisions that made by our leaders. Why does the church allow this, when it is meant to minister to the poor in our continent? How do pastoral care givers say to the poor, who are hungry, that 'God loves them, and leave them with empty stomach?' (Gutierrez 1998). This same question was asked by care givers in Latin America.

How do you ask this question in a world that has created a gap between the rich and poor? Recently we have experienced a recession, in which the poor were affected more than the rich, who simply have to adjust their lives to the conditions they find themselves in. The boomerang effects of the debt crisis within the developing world, along with the recession, have seen people resort to selling their body parts in order to survive, or put bread on the table. Witte (1996:37) summarises this issue by saying that, '[t]he negative effects of reduced social spending and limited job creation have perpetuated conditions of poverty for many people. Some are selling their body parts for [money]'. This is done in the name of coping with poverty in their communities. These body parts are sold to rich people who are able to live a better life. Why? Let me give an example, many countries whose purchasing power was not directed towards acquiring goods made in the United States of America, China and other parts of the world, are now directing their spending towards debt service.

As members of a global community that is increasingly interdependent, the crisis that disrupts the economies of trading partners eventually affects the economy in South Africa and other countries elsewhere. What I am trying to say is that the problem of the international debt crisis has today become a global problem. Developing countries spend more money on their debt services, while less money is spent on social and human service programmes, which contribute to the development of the whole person.

A prophetic ministry of caring seeks to address the problem of poverty, hunger and other problems faced by poor people. It fights unemployment, underemployment, war, conflict and violence, racism, sexism, discrimination, repression, oppression, human rights, et cetera. I believe international debt is at the centre of all these ills. Surely the church has to be a voice that rises above all other voices in addressing these issues?

RESPONSES OF CHURCH COMMUNITIES

There are several ways in which churches have responded to the issues listed above. The World Council of Churches (WCC), the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC), the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference, as well as various Catholic bishops, have all responded to the crisis. For example, the bishops of the Anglican Church responded to the problems of international debt and economic justice by saying:

We believe that God created a good world for all persons. It is a world in which we are bound together in our community, formed in God's image and in which each person has equal dignity and value.

(Lambeth Conference 1998)

Thus, prophetic utterances remind us that God has given bountiful resources for all to share. Therefore we are responsible to hold God's gift in trust for one another, seeking the good for all. This prophetic statement lifts up and praises the generosity of God, the gift of God to the world. We are challenged to care for one another and share resources given as a gift to all. If we are to have a better world, then we must respond to the needs of the poor.

Therefore, the eradication of poverty must be our top priority. In spite of the utterance, prophets need to be careful that they do not force others to succumb to the word of God. The main question to ask is who checks that they are speaking on behalf of God? This question is vital and will help us to check whether prophets are not carried by their own egos.

CONCLUSION

The Lambeth Conference recognised the linkage between the doctrine of creation and issues of international debt. As a matter of economic justice, we cannot view one another apart from our innate dignity as children of God and part of the divine creation. Through the SACC, African Churches during apartheid did rise to prophetic ministry as people were humiliated by the system. The *Kairos document* and other theological utterances challenged the government of that time, which finally changed for the better of all people, reminding us that 'God has generously given to the nations of South Africa, immense resources which are to be held in trust and used for the well being of all' (SACC 1979).

The reader will now realise how prophets can call those in power to succumb to God's will. The call was focused on the will of God for all human beings. In other words, all were created in the image and likeness of God. The timing was right; the utterances became relevant to all who were living in South Africa, especially during the time of apartheid. The other significant part of the church was the AACC, which condemned Rwanda's genocide by challenging leaders of the church and government to stop the killing of innocent people. They reminded them and the world that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and thus have to be treated with dignity (AACC 1989). The AACC (2008) also recently reminded the world that '[t]he fundamental way in which human beings ought to be in relationship with one another is not by means of lending and borrowing, but of mutual Giving'. This statement is based on delegates who were analysing Africa and its problems, especially its market systems. To the AACC, borrowing has its place only in as much as it releases growth for human well being. The WCC finally said that power concentrated in institutions is misused if it does not stem the potential for damage resulting from reliance on loans as a way of dealing with problems of development.

The reader can now see how prophetic ministry interacts with both the oppressed and oppressors. In other words, churches are called to the prophetic ministry of caring on behalf of the oppressed, thus exercising Jesus' ministry based on Luke's account in his Gospel. As the church, we are called to remind the G8 and other powerful countries that the resources they are abusing are God's creation. Therefore, the issue of the international debt crisis has brought us to a very crucial place in our lives where we are forced to examine our values, our leaders and our leadership, especially in our churches. This process is forcing us to realise that we are indeed our brother's and sister's

keeper. Mutuality and independence are a must if we are to live in a world where all people are respected, where dignity, worth and the values of all God's creation must be celebrated.

In conclusion, I believe peace will come when we do what is right and good, when we act justly and walk humbly and faithfully with our God (Mi 6:8). When will nations put away guns and beat their swords and spears into plough shares? Peace will come to all of us when we are able to eradicate poverty. The gift of prophetic ministry opens a door to welcome the stranger and even bring him or her to the centre of public life. This is our call to ministry, shown by our Lord while caring for the oppressed. We should never forget the powerful words that shaped Jesus' ministry:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

(Lk 4:18)

This is our calling – we are called as a church to be the voice of the voiceless.

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