

'SPIRITUALITY AND JUSTICE: BEING HUMAN IN A CHAOTIC WORLD.' II.

'A religious community which does not hunger and thirst for justice to be done bears false witness'

Prophetic voices are those which read the signs of the times in the light of the justice and love of God, and speak out against all which distorts or diminishes the image of God in human beings. In doing so, they may come into conflict with the status quo, with powerful interests who have an investment in the way things are. They may struggle with questions of resisting and confronting established power.

Millions in the world today find themselves at the sharp end of the dominant power that is our economic system. In the global economic landscape, there are whole communities, even countries, which are almost entirely redundant to the global economy. They have no capital. Their labour is either unwanted or low-waged. They have very little consumer clout because they don't have enough spending power to be attractive, except to the people who sell money, (or, to give them their old name, moneylenders), to the drug dealers and to the arms traders. Furthermore, these communities are most likely to be politically irrelevant and culturally expendable. Most of them can't vote, don't vote, or their votes are taken for granted. Their voices are not heard, and others presume to speak for them when decisions are made which shape their lives and communities.

This scenario is one that relentlessly distorts or diminishes the image of God in human beings. It is also one in which people come into conflict with the status quo, with powerful interests who have an investment in the way things are. They too may struggle with questions of resisting and confronting established power. This is a hegemony, an overbearing power, acutest of course in the poorest countries of the world, but equally present in pervasive ways in western countries, as much as the one which confronted the people of Israel. But as people of faith, we believe that in the face of the poorest, most powerless, most insignificant person, we see the image of God. And we believe, with Jacob, with Moses, with Mary, with Peter and James and John on the mountain with Jesus, that when we see the face of God, the place whereon we stand is holy ground.

So we are called, as people of faith, to be prophetic voices, reading the signs of the times in the light of the justice and love of God, and speaking out against all which distorts or diminishes the image of God in human beings. This is a both a spiritual and a political calling.

As Christians oriented towards Jesus, hungering and thirsting for justice, for right relationships, we try to follow him through **discernment**, directed and nurtured and challenged and inspired through the ways we pray, sing, share word and sacrament, keep silence, laugh, weep, struggle and hope. So, we trust, we may be guided and moved to appropriate and just public witness, community action, political lobbying, creating the alternative local economics which challenge powerful hegemonies, and standing in solidarity with those who are treated unjustly.

In reflecting on a spirituality for justice, I have been inspired and challenged by the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. Reflecting on Israel as a community of intentional resistance to the oppressive power of Egypt, he identifies what he calls **liturgical resistance**, the imagination of a free space outside the hegemony of the oppressor.

Through the regular re-enactment of the Exodus story, using poetry, sacrament, sign and drama, it provides a script for an alternative practice, which incorporates:

- The public voicing of pain
- A critique that ridicules established power
- The song and dance of the women as a gesture of defiance

To imagine a free space outside the reach of oppression, a holy ground where people are no longer defined by their powerlessness, their low status, their invisibility, but instead by their valuation in the sight of God, where they may live for a little by God's economy rather than the markets, I find empowering. What might this alternative practice look like?

The public voicing of pain

How long, O Lord, will you quite forget me?

How long, O Lord, will you turn your face from me?

How long, O Lord, must I suffer in my soul?

How long, how long, O Lord? (2)

After weeks of visiting British churches, an Argentinian asked, 'where in your worship do you express your suffering?' 'Do you mean, where do we pray for the world or confess our sins?' was the reply. 'No' he said, 'I mean, where in your worship can your people say, this hurts me, or, I am angry about this.' No one could answer him. We do not have the confidence of some of the black majority churches in Britain, where the leader will say openly, 'our brother, our sister is troubled', and will depart from the order of worship to listen to their story and speak words of consolation and encouragement. I almost said, stop the worship. But it's not stopping it; it's simply grounding it in the lived reality of the people.

But it's not just about words, it's about singing. People have for centuries sung their pain, and found that singing can express what the spoken word stumbles, or is trite about. The metrical psalms for my Presbyterian tradition, the chanted or intoned psalms of catholic traditions have served that purpose for generations. My colleague John Bell has made wonderful arrangements of the Psalms to contemporary or folk tunes, and they have resonated deeply with many. This is the powerful attraction of gospel music, of spirituals, of the blues, of soul music. Pain needs music that can speak to, and of the soul.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see

And am seen. The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama has written:

Grace cannot function in a world of invisibility. Yet in our world, the rulers try to make invisible the alien, the orphan, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned. This is violence. Their bodies must remain visible. There is a connection between invisibility and violence. People, because of the image of God they embody, must remain seen. Faith, hope and love are not vital except in what is seen. Religion seems to raise up the invisible and despise what is visible. But it is the 'see, hear, touch' gospel that can nurture the hope which is free from deception. (3)

There must be places where pain can be publicly voiced, one place where people's suffering is not tidied away. The things that that move us and disgust us underneath the faces we show to the world, are not the things we are comfortable with in church. What we do with our money; the embarrassing agonies of adolescence and the equally real agonies of facing a lonely old age; sexuality and the messy, endlessly fascinating business of relationships; difficulties at work or the confidence-shattering experience of redundancy; the weariness

of single parenthood or the paralysing fear of failure, of dangerous streets and a dangerous world; all the pleasures and frailties of body and spirit, **these** are the places where we live on the knife-edge of faith. If we cannot honestly express this somewhere, then our spirituality becomes sanitised, talking about everything except what is **really** important to us. Disconnected from our lives, it ceases to refresh, to matter. Ultimately, it dies. Finding the words and shapes to name and share our lives is not easy. It is exposed. It may be painful, inadequate, odd, faltering. But then, so are our lives! And song has an important part to play, because it allows people to express their pain publicly without violating their privacy. More grace might feel more like good news to the poor, and even to us.

A critique that ridicules established power

*Don't tell me of a faith that fears
to face the world around
Don't dull my mind with easy thoughts
of grace without a ground
I need to know that God is real
I need to know that Christ can feel
The need to touch and love and heal
The world, including me (4)*

The critique that ridicules established power is mostly not an easy one for churches to hear, although we are quite good at making it. One of the things that gives the great prophetic voices of the Old Testament such power is that they speak from and to all sections of society, calling the people of Israel to account for their crimes;

The oppression of the weak by the strong
The expropriation of peasants from their land
The eviction of smallholders
The enslavement of children

Now we know very well that nearly three thousand years later, none of these crimes has disappeared from the face of the earth, and we rightly stand in judgement against them, condemn them, may be actively involved in campaigning against them. By the authority of scripture, with the authorisation of church and tradition, we read the prophetic texts against a world which practises such things, and the world is found wanting.

But at this point, it may be important to remember that the words of the prophets were actually addressed quite specifically to the community of faith, to the people of the covenant. The prophets of the Old Testament did not appear out of nowhere, their critique was not an external one; they stood within a prophetic tradition and it was because of their belonging within the community that they understood so well the nature of the faith of Israel. Their critique was historical, contextual, directed against specific concrete social and economic practices in a particular place at a particular time.

And it was precisely because they were people who had been liberated by the Exodus, had received both the Law and the promise, that the community of faith was particularly under judgement. Of all people, they were the ones who should turn from oppressing and enslaving others.

And as followers of Jesus, sharers in the new covenant, we too have to take a relationship to the judgement of the world. By the authority of scripture, church and tradition, we stand in

judgement on the world and find it wanting. But that judgement is a two-edged sword. For in confronting the world with our texts and dogmas, we are in turn confronted by the world, which shows us to ourself as church.

So the critique of established power also includes the power of the church.

*Don't sate my soul with common sense,
Distilled from ages past,
Inept for those who fear the world's
About to breathe its last.
I need to know that God is real
I need to know that Christ can feel
The need to touch and love and heal
The world, including me (5)*

There is something important about songs and liturgies which are concrete, specific, rooted in daily life; which use language which people can understand, which name names.

*Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by need and pain,
Informed of God's own bias, we ask God once again,
'How long must some folk suffer? How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self-interest turn prayer and pity blind?*

*From those forever shackled to what their wealth can buy,
The fear of lost advantage provokes the bitter cry;
Don't query our position, don't criticise our wealth,
Don't mention those exploited by politics and stealth. (6)*

These are questions that need to be asked as much of the church as of the society.

A critique is not the same as a criticism. It's one of the ways we learn. Here is Koyama again.
*The one God embraces the one world which speaks more than 7000 dialects and languages.
God is open to all cultures and nations. How many languages does God speak? All of them! No
people can speak in an isolated language and have an exclusive self-identity. ...The church is
in the world and the world is in the church. God's word to the church is God's word to the
world. There are not two words of God, one for the church and another for the world...'*
(7)

There is a connection between invisibility and violence. There is also a connection between **inaudibility** and violence. The first time I travelled outside the west, to Asia, my well-meaning, white, western liberal map of the world was shredded into tiny pieces. The experience shattered my illusions, my confidence and all but shattered my faith, as I knew myself for the first time as part of an oppressive, dehumanising world order. I became voiceless, I had nothing to say that could adequately express my shame. Silence seemed the only appropriate response. I had come face to face with the complicity with evil into which I had been born, my original sin, if you like. It took me many months to see that, though I had been born into complicity, I was not responsible for what I did not do. I had no choice about the complicity I had been born into- but I was responsible for the complicity I **did** have a choice about. I could say, 'this is the way things are - but I beg to differ.' I could be a non-conformist. I could choose in every way open to me to put an end to complicity.

I spent a year working as worship and counselling co-ordinator in a church-based neighbourhood centre in post-industrial Glasgow. This was an extraordinary initiative taken by two poor churches in a community devastated by unemployment, poverty, drugs, and all the other ills that blight many such places in Britain today, with an additional helping of deep-rooted sectarianism thrown in for good measure. They had come to the end of the traditional way of being church, of doing mission. It had failed to engage with their community, to meet their own needs and had left them feeling demoralised and despairing. They started an Urban Theology Group, and, not really knowing how to begin, they started where they were. They shared their own stories.

We told our own stories-

That's all.

We sat and listened to

Each other

And heard the journeys

Of each soul.

We sat in silence

Entering each one's pain and

Sharing each one's joy.

We heard love's longing

And the lonely reachings-out

For love and affirmation.

We heard of dreams

Shattered

And visions fled.

Of hopes and laughter

Turned stale and dark

We felt the pain

of isolation

and the bitterness

of death. (8)

For a whole year, they did nothing but tell their stories and identify their own needs. It's my experience that this is quite an unusual thing for a church to do. It requires a willingness to be open and vulnerable, to listen, to tolerate silence, to let go of that wonderful Christian need to **fix** things. It requires the capacity not to justify one's existence by busyness. It requires refusing to put forward answers to every unsolved question.

When people attempt to break the culture of silence, whether it is the silence that conceals the abuse of power in any form or the silence of their own disempowerment, it is important not to underestimate what has been described as 'the ordeal of testimony.' It takes more time and patience than our society and our busy churches usually allow to do what Quakers call 'hearing people into speech.'

It was only after a long time of testimony that the Urban Theology Group was able to discern the social and economic and political patterns that had shaped their own experiences, to understand that bad things didn't only happen to them because they were bad people, or because God was punishing or testing them, but because they were subject to huge global market forces that would mean they had to stop producing steel, even though they were producing more and more efficiently than ever before, because it was more economically viable for companies to buy it in from cheaper Eastern European sources. And

that there was no disabled access in any of their public buildings because people with disability simply did not have enough visibility or clout in the eyes of those who had drawn up the design briefs. And that they had few shops and those there were sold little fresh produce because they did not figure in the market economy- not as shareholders, not as labour and not even as consumers.

Even then, they didn't produce a blueprint for action. They went and asked other people what they thought, what they wanted, what their needs and hopes were. In pairs, they went door to door in their parish. They went to every organisation, voluntary and statutory, to the schools, the police, the other churches. They attempted to discover a shared story of suffering and hope.

And then, only then, they went to the Bible. And there, they discovered that an odd thing had happened.

*But in each brave and
Lonely story
God's gentle life
Broke through
And we heard music in
The darkness
And smelt flowers in
The void.*

*We felt the budding
Of creation
In the searchings of each soul
And discerned the beauty
Of God's hand in
Each muddy, twisted path
And his voice sang
In each story
His life sprang from each death.
Our sharing became
One story
Of a simple lonely search
For life and hope and
Oneness
In a world which sobs
For love.
And we knew that in
Our sharing
God's voice with
Mighty breath
Was saying
Love each other and
Take each other's hand. (9)*

If you reflect on your life in the light of the gospel, then you will eventually come face to face with two questions.... *Who do people say that I am?* and....*who do you say that I am?* Jesus was always asking questions....*God or Caesar?*....*do you want to be healed?*....*who then,*

loved him more?....do you love me? These are wonderfully direct questions, requiring a direct answer. Sometimes, the ability to theorise and speculate can sometimes be a way of escaping engagement. George MacLeod said: *There are times when our prayer life is refreshing; but analysed, they turn out to be the times when the pressures have been so weighty that you have simply had to go with them to God. But this is precisely the recovery of the knife-edge. The religious moment flows from the practical. When we have wrestled with our state and given it to God, the illuminative becomes our urgent need and not our pious obligation. In such a mood, the Bible is not something that 'ought' to be read, but its opening becomes a sheer necessity of our condition.....(10)* There are a lot of people who, when asked, what is your value, cannot retreat into theories of the atonement, but struggle with the question in a way that is neither simple nor unthinking precisely because their society treats them as practically valueless. As Martin Luther said, *'A man does not become a theologian by reading and knowing and understanding, but by living and dying and being damned.'* This is the praxis of liberation theology.

The song and dance of the women as a gesture of defiance

*I shall praise you, O God, from my soul
I shall praise you, O God, from my soul
Though my song be at odds with the will of earthly gods
I shall praise you, O God, from my soul (11)*

Above all, the song and dance which is a gesture of defiance is so because it expresses hope and liberation. I knew a woman whose life had been completely turned around from being an alcoholic in an abusive marriage. She had been a Christian before, but had started to attend a Pentecostal meeting. I asked her what had made the change happen. She said, 'my priest could only offer me the cross-to go on enduring suffering. But the Pentecostal meeting gave me the hope of resurrection. **It gave me back my life.**'

It is of the essence of Christianity that it is historical; it does not apply to some abstract or spiritual realm outside the temporal. Reality does not allow us to escape from history. In worship, we restore to memory **and hope** the broken body of Christ, in whose wounds are named all the violence of the world.

From Koyama again;

Is hope related to the future? Yes. But even more, it is related to love. Hope is not a time-story. It is a love-story. The gospel dares to place love above time. All the healing stories of the gospels, and ultimately the confession of the faith that 'on the third day he rose again from the dead' point to this awesome truth. Hope is as impassioned by love as is every healing word and action of Jesus. (12)

When people's lives are bleak in so many respects, when they feel powerless and despairing, the most truly counter-cultural thing people can do is live, even for a little while, joy and hopefulness. This is not escapism. It is liturgical resistance. But it needs to be of the body and mind as well as of the spirit.

The Iona Community

The Iona Community did not begin on Iona but among the shipyards and poverty of Glasgow in the Depression. To end, let me try to share something of its justice spirituality, in the terms I used earlier, of our inner life, our decisions and actions and our relationships. Our spirituality has been shaped by our own context, with its distinctive history, geography and

emphases, which is as much urban as island, as much industrial as pastoral, and has had an ongoing and central emphasis on economic justice and on peacemaking. As a community, we are most deeply moved by Jesus, the word made flesh. Our orientation, our ultimate concern, is to follow Jesus in living in solidarity with the just and loving purposes of God here and now. Our spirituality is firstly an incarnational one.

We believe our decisions and actions have to reflect that in every part of life, not just our prayer life or our devotional practices, but in how we spend our money, how we use our time, how we engage with the civic and political life of our society and of the world. We do not separate the spiritual from the material, the sacred from the secular, prayer from politics. We think it's all just life, so our spirituality has to embrace all of life. It is an integrated spirituality.

Our relationships flow from that integration - we want them to be characterised by inclusiveness, equality, mutuality and interdependence. We are an ecumenical community, whose common life is created not by talking about ecumenism, but by doing things together. I would be the last to claim that we've got there, but that's where we want to go. We also think that if you can't loosen up and have some fun, it's all over, so right relationship for us strongly emphasises the communal joys.

We share a common Rule, which is not an end in itself, but is designed to nourish and support our spirituality and its practice. The first part of it is a commitment to Bible reading and daily prayer for our fellow members and for the world. In this life of prayer, we reconnect with our source, reorient our concern and remember ourselves as a community.

Secondly, we commit ourselves to economic sharing and accountability to one another for how we use our money and how we use our time. Money and time are the main currencies in our society; the decisions and choices we make about these show up where our priorities really are, what we really value. In doing this, we are saying that there is no such thing as private money, private time-all of it is gift.

We commit ourselves to making time for all our different ways of meeting together. We prioritise the common life.

And we are committed to prayer and action for justice, including ecological justice, and peacemaking. This is spelled out in our Justice and Peace Commitment, which was first agreed by consensus in 1966, and has been added to since then only by agreement of all the members.

Many people first encounter the Iona Community through its worship, not just on Iona, but in the resources of liturgy and song which we have sought to share with the wider church. It is important to stress that these resources do not arise primarily because people have decided to sit down and write something for publication. They have been shaped out of engagement. They have been written for use on demonstrations and blockades, in anti-poverty campaigns, in industrial disputes and in prisons, for pastoral crises and situations of deep tragedy, such as the killing of children at Dunblane. These places are our holy ground. The prayers, and particularly the songs, thread through our lives, not just our services.

*God asks, 'who will go for me?
Who will extend my reach?*

*And who, when few will listen,
will prophesy and preach?
And who, when few bid welcome,
will offer all they know?
And who, when few dare follow,
will walk the road I show?'*

c. Kathy Galloway

- (1) *Alice Walker, in 'Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful', c.1984 Alice Walker, pub. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1984*
- (2) *John L Bell & Graham Maule, from 'Heaven Shall Not Wait', Wild Goose Publications 1987*
- (3) *Kosuke Koyama, from an address given at WCC General Assembly, Harare, 1998*
- (4) *Bell & Maule, from 'Enemy of Apathy', Wild Goose Publications 1988*
- (5) *Ibid*
- (6) *Bell & Maule, from 'Heaven Shall Not Wait'*
- (7) *Koyama, ibid*
- (8) *Edwina Gately, 'The Sharing' From 'Celebrating Women', SPCK 1995*
- (9) *Ibid*
- (10) *George MacLeod, from 'Only One Way Left', Iona Community 1956*
- (11) *Bell & Maule, from 'Love and Anger' Wild Goose Publications, 1997*
- (12) *Koyama, ibid*

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