



To Hear the Cry of the Poor: A Prophetic Challenge, A Gospel Summons John R. Donahue, S.J.

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A Prophetic Challenge,

It is truly an honor, to share some reflections on the challenge of the Hebrew prophets and the call of the Gospel as we confront the tragedy of worldwide poverty in our age. I will first try to hear the voices of the Hebrew prophets as they call for justice for the poor and the marginal, and then look at aspects of the teaching of Jesus and other parts of the New Testament as both a legacy from these prophets and a continuing challenge. Finally, I will offer some brief comments on how these voices from the past can echo through our lives today.

In the Old Testament concern for the poor and marginal ranks as one of the most pervasive themes. These scriptures have a rich and vivid vocabulary for the poor, which evoke images of people who are "wretched," "miserable," or "bent over." While the Bible has great concern for "the poor," poverty itself is evil.

A frequent refrain in all the Israelite law codes is concern for the poor, the orphan, the widow and the *ger*, the immigrant or non-citizen in the land. What these groups share in common is not primarily economic deprivation but powerlessness. Among the varied ordinances that follow the Sinai covenant is the command, "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry (Exod 22:20-22). Some of the strongest concerns for the poor come from the Deuteronomic legislation on the year of release and the cancelling of debts (Deuteronomy 15)

However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, (v.4) ... If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother" (v.7). . . . Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the

land. Therefore, I command you to be open handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land (vv. 10-11)

The statement that there will be always poor in the land is later quoted by Jesus, as "the poor you will always have with you," (Mark 14:7a) when the woman shows exuberant love by pouring precious ointment over Jesus shortly before his death. It has been one of the misquoted verses in the Bible and is used often to sanction the inevitability of poverty, when in both its Old and New Testament contexts it is a demand to come to the aid of the poor as the conclusion of Jesus' statement indicates, "and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but me you will not always have with you."

Concern for the poor and marginal in the legal codes has important implications for the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In one of the few major studies on these issues, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (2004), Leslie Hoppe, O.F.M states "the Torah makes it clear that the people of means have certain obligations toward the poor and the economically vulnerable in Israelite society," (p. 40) and again, quoting Hoppe, "In the Bible as a whole the poor are not simply those with little or no economic resources but those who are powerless to control their own destinies. People are poor precisely because the people of means can take advantage of them. Employers then are directed by the Torah to pay their workers each day so that their workers will be able to provide for their family. Creditors are not to embarrass or inconvenience their debtors in the manner they choose to secure the repayment of loans. Judges are obligated to avoid favoring the people of means in matters of legal dispute" (p. 40). The legal framework establishes that concern for the poor is a matter of justice, of right relationship to God and neighbor, and not simply of charity or love of neighbor. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted that A True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar: it understands that a society which produces beggars needs restructuring.

When a people forgets its origins or loses sight of its ideals figures arise who often speak a strident message to summon them to return to God. In Israel's history, the prophetic movement represents such a phenomenon. The prophet as the Greek etymology of the name suggests (*pro-ph_mi*) speaks on behalf of another. The prophet speaks on behalf of God; he or she is a "forth teller," who also speaks on behalf of those who have no one to speak for them, specifically the powerless and poor in the land. They are mediators of meaning who listen with two ears and proclaim with one voice. They hear the voice of God manifested in their traditions and in their understanding of God's will for the people. They also listen to the cries of the poor and marginal.

For decades, the social teaching of Israel had been virtually identified with the prophetic message, especially Amos, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah. While the various regulations of the Torah mandate concern for the poor and propose concrete means to alleviate their sufferings, the vivid prophetic oracles contain

strident denunciations of the excess of wealth and of oppressive and self-serving power. Echoes of their voices often sound strangely familiar today.

Amos, one of the earliest prophets, exclaims,

They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.
They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed. (2:6-7)

Early in his prophetic career Isaiah cries out,

The LORD has taken his place to contend, he stands to judge his people. I The LORD enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people:

"It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" says the Lord GOD of hosts." (3:13-15)

The prophets never see the oppression of the poor as an inevitable social evil or punishment from God, but as a result of human evil. In contemporary terms, we would say that poverty has been institutionalized by an economic structure and legal system that favors the wealthy. Isaiah lashes out at the codification of oppression: "Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!" (10:2). Isaiah voices his sorrow over the failure of the people as the vineyard of the beloved in ringing poetry, "The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice (*mishpat*), but saw bloodshed (*mishpaq*); for righteousness, (*tsedaqah*) but heard cries of distress (*tse_aqah*) (Isa 5:7).

The prophetic message is not simply one of indictment but a call for conversion and a challenge to people in power. When the people complain that their prayers are not heard, Isaiah proclaims,

Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!
Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.
"Come now, let us reason together,"
says the LORD.
"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool (Isa 1:15-18)

Shortly before the exile to Babylon, Jeremiah expresses the ideal of kingship as he confronts the exploitative sons of Josiah with the example of their father:

Woe to him who builds his house on wrong, his terraces on injustice; Who works his neighbor without pay, and gives him no wages. Who says, "I will build myself a spacious house, with airy rooms," Who cuts out windows for it, panels it with cedar, and paints it with vermillion. Must you prove your rank among kings by competing with them in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink? He did what was right and just, and it went well with him. Because he dispensed justice to the weak and the poor, it went well with him. Is this not true knowledge of me? says the LORD. (Jeremiah 22:13-16).

What an extraordinary statement! To know the God of Abraham, the God who called Moses to lead the people out of Egypt and covenanted with them at Sinai, is to secure justice for the weak and poor.

A Gospel Summons:

Without a deep understanding of the legacy of the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament can never be properly understood or appropriated. Concern for the poor permeates every block of literature in the New Testament. I would like to single out first the Gospel of Luke as best embodying the teaching of Jesus and then indicate briefly some other dimensions of concern for the poor that characterize the New Testament.

In Luke's list of Jesus' beatitudes it is simply "the poor" (6:20; cf. Matt. 5:3, "poor in spirit") who are blessed, and Luke adds a series of woes against the rich and the satisfied (6:24-26). The early chapters provide an overture to the whole Gospel. The infancy narratives portray the dignity of the *'anawim*, people without money and power. Like many poor pilgrims, Mary and Joseph cannot find lodging in an inn, and the first proclamation of Jesus' birth is to people on the margin of society ("shepherds," 2:8-14). The sacrifice "of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons" offered at the presentation of Jesus in the temple is that determined by the law for poor people (Luke 2:24=Lev. 5:11); Simeon and Anna (a widow) represent powerless people who are faithful and just (2:25-38).

Jesus is a "prophet" in Luke. Luke stresses the title of prophet for Jesus (4:24; 7:16, 39; 9:19). Like Hannah, the mother of Samuel, Jesus' mother, Mary, prays a canticle which is itself prophetic and anticipates his mission to "bring down the mighty from their thrones and to raise up the lowly" (1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55). Jesus is to be a light for the revelation of the Gentiles (2:32, cf. Isa 42:6). His inaugural sermon is a prophetic proclamation in the words of Isaiah: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach

good news to the poor, and release to captives, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18-19). Like the prophets he has concern for the stranger in the land (the Samaritan, 10:29ff); the outcast lepers (17:11ff.) and the widow (7:11 ff. 18:1-13), He suffers prophetic rejection (4:28-29) and his death is that of a prophet (see 13:33).

Most of the material on wealth and poverty occurs in material found only in Luke's Gospel. Luke contains the parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-21), introduced by a warning against greed (*pleonexia* lit., the desire for more). In this tragic parable a man who had hoped to secure his future through wealth is struck down in the middle of the night, dying alone isolated from family and friends. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the rich man only sees the poor Lazarus who lay at his gate when he is in hell and Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom. His wealth blinded him and vision came sadly too late. Only in Luke is the “great banquet” to be celebrated with “the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind” (14:13, 21). Luke contains the parable of a widow (mentioned frequently in the OT with the poor, e.g. Deut. 14:28-15:11; 24:14-17; Job 22:7-9) who seeks justice from a callous judge (18:1-8). Luke alone recounts the story of Zaccheus the “chief tax collector” (19:1-10) who, as a “son of Abraham” receives salvation” gives half of his possession to the poor (19:1-10).

At the risk of oversimplification, I will offer some initial generalizations about Luke's understanding of wealth and poverty. Luke takes over and intensifies the strong prophetic and Intertestamental criticism of wealth. Riches are dangerous because, as in the case of the parable of the Foolish Rich Man, they lead to greed, which the letter to the Colossians will describe as idolatry--worshipping the creature in place of the creator (Col 3:5; see also Rom 1:25). Riches are also evil as in the case of the Rich Man and Lazarus because they cause blindness to the suffering neighbor at the gate. At the same time Luke calls the poor blessed (Luke 6:20), not because of their poverty, but because they are the prime recipients of the arrival of kingdom. (In fact, the New Testament while blessing the poor, never praises poverty as such). The kingdom or reign of God as proclaimed and enacted by Jesus will confront those attitudes and conditions, which enshrine poverty as part of the human condition.

In a society where shortage of food was endemic, Luke highlights the motif of abundant food. Jesus feeds the hungry, urges people to invite the poor to their banquets, and the early Christians share their resources at communal meals. The Church at Jerusalem has a system for care of the poor (Acts 4:32-27) the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). The communities of Asia Minor respond to the needs of the churches in Judaea during the famine under the emperor Claudius (Acts 11:27-30). An allied motive, especially strong in Acts is that of hospitality or welcoming of people. The Christian mission spreads because Paul and other missionaries are assisted often by leading women in particular cities who cross social and economic barriers (e.g. Lydia, Acts 16:11-14). Luke presents an image of a community where the needs of the poor become the

criterion for the use of resources, and where those social barriers normally associated with wealth and status are broken down.

The Gospel also offers to the church of Luke's generation a normative vision of their origin and roots. Jesus pronounced the poor blessed of God and enacted God's saving love toward them. Those who first followed him were willing to renounce all their possessions at his summons. The founding fathers and mothers of the community are not the rich and powerful of the world, but the poor, who have God on their side. I would claim that by handing on and accenting the vision of a poor Jesus who took the side of the poor Luke wants his community never to forget their origins. The Gospel came to them from the midst of the poor and is to touch the poor in their midst. The warnings of Jesus against the destructive power of wealth are to speak to their generation late in the first century, no less than to the founding generation.

Confronting the sufferings of the poor is pervasive in the New Testament. Paul recounts that the resolution of the dispute over required circumcision for converts between himself and the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church was sealed by "the right hand of fellowship," and an agreement "that we remember the poor which was actually what I was eager to do" (Gal 2:9-10). Paul castigates the Corinthians because their celebration of the Lord's Supper reinforces the distinctions between rich and poor so that they treat the "have nots" with contempt. (1 Cor 11:17-22). Paul devote chapters eight and nine of Second Corinthians to plans for a collection from the more prosperous Greek churches for the poor of the Jerusalem, and on the journey to Jerusalem with the collection, he is arrested and subsequently imprisoned in Rome where he is martyred during the reign of Nero.

Other New Testament books continue the double focus of concern about the danger of wealth and alleviation of poverty. In biting sarcasm the Jewish-Christian letter of James, mocks the situation: "when a man comes into your assembly wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in," and they offer the rich man a fine seat and leave the poor man to squat on the floor. James reminds them "my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor." (James 2:2-6). The first letter to Timothy which is replete with pastoral instructions to a settled community urges hospitality to the stranger sharing of goods, and cautions the community about the danger of riches, with the memorable phrase "the love money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim 3:6-10)—which somewhat prophetically has special relevance during this election season.

From The Bible to Contemporary Life

The Bible contains traditions that were formed over a millennium, and at every stage of this formation, material poverty and marginalization of humans are seen as human evils, not willed by God. Simultaneously these traditions embody laws, prophetic exhortations, narratives, and imaginative visions of a world where the cries of the poor are heard.

The location of concern for the poor and powerless in the legal codes of Israel and in Jesus' vocation to proclaim justice to the nations shows that confronting poverty is not simply a matter of benefaction or charity, but of justice. The poor are not simply without resources but without power and self-determination. While redistribution of goods remains a bulwark against the effects of poverty, just redistribution of power may ultimately be the greatest challenge facing both church and society.

The biblical vision of concern for the widow, orphan, poor and stranger in the land unfolds in a panorama of vivid poetic images often enshrined in gripping narratives and parables. The Bible does not speak of rank injustice but tells how Nathan the prophet confronts the brutal power of King David convicting him of murder and adultery by telling him a parable about a rich man who feasts on a poor man's little sheep, "which was like a little daughter to him" (2 Sam 12:1-12). When the Lukan Jesus wants us to shock us into the deepest meaning of love of God and neighbor, he tells a story about how the hated stranger in the land (the Samaritan) embodies this love by coming to the aid of a naked and half dead man (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus does not use the language of "empowerment," but describes a poor widow confronting and wearing down a heartless judge by her quest for justice (Luke 18:1-8). The Bible provides us with an alternative vision of the world, a glossary of images that counter the pollution of the imagination that we suffer from a distorted media.

In his synthetic and interesting study, *Power and the Spirit of God*, Bernard Cooke reflecting on the Apostle Peter's citation at Pentecost of the prophet Joel, "your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:17) says, "Dreamers may not always be thought of as powerful but their dreaming has the power to shape history. Such dreaming is a sacramental manifestation of the eschatological embrace of human history (p. 119). At this conference, we will listen to the dreams and hopes of those who will shape the history of our planet.

The literary critic Hugh Kenner once wrote: "Whoever can give his people better stories than the ones they live in is like the priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul, and he may think of forging in some invisible smithy the uncreated contents of his race" (*The Pound Era*, p. 39). We who are gathered for this meeting are called not only to hear those better stories that resound throughout the Bible but also to give people images of hope and create better stories than the ones they live by. Our conference will end with a liturgy, but everyone here has this priestly mission of

feeding the very soul and forging the uncreated conscience of our often-beleaguered human family.

References:

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