

World Vision Australia – Our Christian Identity

Statement 3 – Standing in the prophetic tradition



Desmond Tutu once said that Christians shouldn't just be pulling people out of the river, but that we should be going upstream to find out who's pushing them in. What he was referring to was the fact that performing works of development and relief are not enough on their own if we want to rid the world of poverty and injustice. Structures and systems that keep people in poverty must also be changed. This is the work of advocacy.

Inspired by the prophets and Jesus

As an organisation that seeks to follow in the biblical tradition, we draw our inspiration for advocacy from the prophets of the Old Testament and of course from Jesus himself, who stood up for the broken and the outcast to liberate those who were captive. From before he was born, Jesus was known as someone who would follow the example of the prophets. In Mary's Magnificat we read that in Jesus, God has "brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."¹ It is not only the prophets and Jesus however who inspire us. A consistent theme throughout Scripture is that we are called to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. [We are called to] speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."²

To neglect to speak up on behalf of those who are powerless would be to neglect the call of God who, while slow to anger, is nonetheless angry at injustice, and passionately desires that all creation be reconciled. It is Paul in writing to the Corinthian believers who says that God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, has given us the ministry of reconciliation.³ In our task of working with God to renew the world and show the compassion of Christ, we must also stand in solidarity with those whose voices are not heard.

The reality of sin and evil

Standing in the prophetic tradition in this way requires us to acknowledge that to do so runs deeper than seeking to change institutional structures and systems. We also recognise the reality of sin and evil in the world. In fact, "any development paradigm which does not take a realistic account of evil will, by definition, be inadequate."⁴

Tim Costello points out that "sin is the reign of evil and... is expressed in hunger, injustice, sickness and spiritual alienation – in short, all that cripples the image of God."⁵ Therefore our work must involve anything that seeks to overcome the reign of evil, and the only thing that can do that is the reign of God – the kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.

The reality of sin and evil might not readily be acknowledged by many in our own country, but as a largely secular nation, we in Australia live in a minority in today's world. The fact is that 84% of the world's population adheres to some kind of deistic spirituality and

¹ Luke 1:52-53.

² Proverbs 31:8-9

³ 2 Corinthians 5:18

⁴ Mitchell, B., *We are Christian: Mapping a Christian Theology of Change*, paper for World Vision Australia and World Vision New Zealand Executive, February 2011.

⁵ Costello, T & Yule, R. (eds.), *Another Way to Love: Christian Social Reform and Global Poverty*, Acorn Press, Brunswick East, Victoria, 2009, 14.

worldview, and the figures in countries in which WVA focuses are even higher.⁶ Therefore the need to not only acknowledge sin and evil, but to address it, is paramount, as these are the realities with which we work in the majority world. Just one example of this is that “the poor often live in fear of an unseen spiritual world of curses, gods, demons and ancestors”⁷. This is what we deal with, and these fears can traumatise people, having a “deep, ongoing, and destructive impact on their lives.”⁸

If we are serious about healing the effects of injustice and oppression in people, we simply must take into account all that seeks to perpetuate those conditions. It is perfect love that casts out all fear⁹, and this love has its source in the God of the universe. The Christian Gospel provides hope in the face of hopelessness, and love in the midst of fear. It “affirms that evil has been conquered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that evil must, in the final analysis, yield to the reign of God.”¹⁰ Therefore we must constantly take seriously the reality of sin and evil in the world.

Living out the prophetic life

A distinguishing characteristic of the prophets of the Old Testament, and of course of Jesus, was that they lived out the prophetic life. They did not just speak out, but they also walked their talk. For WVA to be able to do this consistently and in a sustained manner, prayer must be a high priority. It is through conscious communion with God – staying in close relationship with Him – that we are able to become more like Christ and be empowered by the Spirit of God to participate in works of change.

Prayer however is not only communion with God; it is also a prophetic act. As Jayakumar Christian says, “prayer defies the cosmic powers that keep the poor powerless.”¹¹ And Karl Barth adds that, “to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” Prayer is an act of defiant subversion. The gospels tell us that Jesus spent whole nights in prayer. These subversive acts clearly sustained him in his ministry, and they likewise sustain us.

As well as spending time in prayer, standing in the prophetic tradition means being in solidarity with our partners and supporters. Like other organisations, it means we

“work to help people living in poverty transform the systems in which they live so that they are able to access and utilise the resources they need to lift themselves out of poverty.”¹²

For supporters, this can mean seeking

⁶ http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html

⁷ Myers, 69. See also Jayakumar Christian *God of the empty handed: poverty, power and the Kingdom of God* (Marc Publishers, Monrovia, 1999) at Chapter 7 for a fuller explanation of the powers and principalities against which development work must contend.

⁸ Mitchell, 2011

⁹ 1 John 4:18

¹⁰ Mitchell, 2011

¹¹ Christian, J., *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*, Marc Publishers, Monrovia, 1999, p. 206

¹² Baptist World Aid Australia, *A Theology of Development*, http://www.baptistworldaid.org.au/pdf/BaptistWorldAidAustralia_ATheologyofDevelopment.pdf, accessed on 10 December 2010.

“to engage [them] in a biblically shaped, developmentally informed, whole-of-life engagement with the poor that includes framing poverty as a justice issue, giving generously to promote greater global equity, consuming ethically, advocating for just government, international and business practises, and praying regularly for justice for the poor.”¹³

In other words, standing in solidarity with our partners and supporters means inviting them on a journey of transformation.

In order to gain a measure of the importance of prophetic engagement for us as a Christian organisation, it is important to take the time to discuss the magnitude with which it was a part of the ministry of Jesus.

The prophetic ministry of Jesus

Perhaps one of the most overlooked areas in which Jesus displayed prophetic engagement was in his interactions with the religious leaders over the purity system. Early in his ministry, Jesus says that those who are pure in heart are blessed.¹⁴ In saying that purity is a matter of the heart, Jesus was explicitly denying that it was a matter of observing the purity system. This was a profoundly confrontational statement to make in front of the religious leaders. In Jesus’ day, Jews were generally considered pure and Gentiles were impure by definition. The religious leaders would have known full well that Jesus was referring directly to them, and Jesus would have known full well that they would have been deeply offended at what he was saying. The Gentile ‘sinners’ on the other hand, would have loved what he said, because they had forever been told that they were worthless.¹⁵

Prophetic engagement can mean challenging the dominant power systems of the day. The healings that Jesus performed were another way he engaged in prophetic action. Luke tells us that “as the sun was setting, all those who had people sick with various diseases brought them to him. He would lay his hands on each one of them and cure them.”¹⁶ These healings however were not just physical. Jesus violated the purity system in his healings by touching those the system considered unclean.

Jesus’ relationships with women also subverted some of the most sacred taboos of his time. In a society where women were considered second-class citizens and where their testimony was not valid in a court of law, Jesus constantly affirmed their dignity. His defending of Mary’s role as a disciple when questioned by Martha,¹⁷ defending the woman who entered an all-male banquet and washed Jesus’ feet,¹⁸ and welcoming women as disciples,¹⁹ were just a few of the ways in which Jesus transgressed the norms of the day by declaring the equality of women.

These examples illustrate that standing in the prophetic tradition requires courage and the willingness to take an unpopular stand. It means standing for what is right, regardless of the consequences. Perhaps the most well-known example of this in the gospels is Jesus’ highly

¹³ Baptist World Aid Australia, *A Theology of Development*.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:8

¹⁵ In fact Mark’s Gospel tells us that “the common people heard him gladly.” (Mark 12:37).

¹⁶ Luke 4:40

¹⁷ Luke 10:38-42

¹⁸ Luke 7:36-50

¹⁹ Luke 8:2-3

provocative act of turning over the tables in the Temple.²⁰ This was probably the final act that determined Jesus' fate. It was as a result of this outrageous demonstration of righteous rage that the authorities made concrete moves to have him eliminated. One reason Jesus was so angry and called the temple a "den of robbers"²¹ was because the part of the Temple where the buying and selling was happening was also the only place where Gentiles could worship. Therefore the buying and selling of goods in this area deprived Gentiles of this opportunity. This is why Jesus reminds the people that "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations."²²

Taking a stand against anything that seeks to undermine human dignity generally involves sacrifice. History is littered with the bones of those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for standing up for what is right. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Oscar Romero are just a few. Jesus of course was another. As explained above, it was His provocative acts of defiance of the powers that played a major part in Him being put to death at the hands of the authorities. As Padilla says,

"we must not assume that the theological understanding of Jesus' death that was understood by the early church is unrelated to Jesus' public career...the historical evidence provided by the gospels leaves no doubt regarding the political dimension of his crucifixion...he was crucified because he proclaimed that the kingdom of God was coming...and the leaders of Israel felt that their position in relation to the Roman Empire was under threat."²³

Speaking truth to power

What we see in the prophetic acts of Jesus is that He was unquestionably political. He knew exactly what He was doing and He knew the consequences of His actions. For WVA therefore, prophetic engagement sometimes requires us to also speak truth to power, to say publicly what might be unpopular, and to lobby our Government and powerful interests to act justly and to change systems that oppress God's people. Sometimes the consequences of such actions might not be pleasant, but we undertake them not simply to be provocative, but because they are right. God has made the creation 'good', and this includes humans, who are made in His image. Anything that undermines this inherent dignity must not go unchallenged.

Borne out of sympathy with God

As we delve into the prophets and the gospels, we see that standing in the prophetic tradition is closely linked to acts of compassion. A distinguishing characteristic of the prophets was not simply a humanitarian concern for the welfare of the oppressed. The deep emotional responses of the prophets was borne out of an immense sympathy with God. We see this consistently in Jesus who was strong in relating to the powerful and gentle in relating to the powerless. For us to engage in prophetic action today is to do likewise. While Jesus stood up for justice, we must always be reminded that He also said "blessed are the merciful."²⁴ The point is that prophetic action always treats people with dignity, especially

²⁰ Mark 11:15-16

²¹ Mark 11:17

²² Mark 11:17

²³ Padilla, R., 'The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church', in Hoek, M. & Thacker, J. (eds), *Micah's Challenge: The Church's Responsibility to the Global Poor*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2008, p. 72.

²⁴ Matthew 5:7

the people to whom the prophetic action is directed. We need to remember what we want to draw people to.²⁵

Treating people with dignity is an act of both prophetic action and compassion, which involves entering into their suffering. Brueggeman further explains this link between compassion and prophetic action:

"Without the cross, prophetic imagination will likely be as strident and as destructive as that which it criticises. The cross is the assurance that effective prophetic criticism is done not by an outsider but always by one who must embrace the grief, enter into the death, and know the pain of the criticised one."²⁶

Prophetic engagement must involve transformation of the human heart

While prophetic engagement involves seeking to change structures and systems, for WVA as a Christian organisation, it goes further in that it seeks a change in the human heart. If we do not take into account the transformative power of the Gospel, then our works of justice are in vain. Without personal transformation, the oppressed will eventually become the oppressor, and the cycle of injustice will perpetuate itself. Martin Luther King highlighted this when he said that "darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."²⁷ The transformation that we seek involves the work of the Holy Spirit in changing us into people who are more loving – more like Christ. It also seeks to turn the oppressor into a friend. Loving your enemies is a deeply subversive act.

In engaging with those in power, we recognise that we must always be aware of the ease with which we also can succumb to the abuse of power that we sometimes need to critique in others. This is the reality of human nature. It was Alexander Solzhenitsyn who said that

"the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts."²⁸

To stand in the prophetic tradition requires us therefore to walk with integrity. The personal transformation that we seek must first be evident in ourselves. The prophet Micah reminds us that what God requires of us is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.²⁹

A reversal of power relationships

To live out this command of Micah is what the kingdom of God is about. The kingdom of God is about a reversal of the power relationships that we see in the world that push the poor and vulnerable to the bottom of the pile and keep them there. Jesus always resisted the

²⁵ The points about the prophets' sympathy with God and treating people with dignity are taken from a workshop on prophetic engagement with the powers at Voices for Justice 2010, the annual conference of Micah Challenge Australia.

²⁶ Brueggemann, W., 'The Prophetic Imagination', Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1978, in Christian, J., *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*, Marc Publishers, Monrovia, 1999, p. 182.

²⁷ King, Martin Luther., *Strength to Love*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1963.

²⁸ Solzhenitsyn, A. *The Gulag Archipelago Two (1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation III-IV)*, http://www.archive.org/stream/Gulag_Archipelago_II#page/n619/mode/2up/search/separating, accessed on 3 February 2011

²⁹ Micah 6:8

abuse of power. As the One through whom all things were created, He chose instead to lay aside his power and became powerless. For Jesus, the kingdom of God is about a different type of power. It is about the power that is demonstrated in powerlessness – the powerlessness of the cross.³⁰ Jayakumar Christian reminds us that "[Jesus'] crucifixion was more than the death of a noble man; it was the ultimate act of prophetic criticism."³¹ Therefore, our "mission among the poor is a prophetic kingdom-based presence that critiques the world's understanding of power that keeps the poor powerless."³²

The great paradox of Christian faith is that God's power was shown in utter humiliation. Any prophetic engagement must therefore stand with Jesus and demonstrate this alternative way of power. This is what standing for justice involves. As Martin Luther King said, "power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love."³³ The undeniable fact highlighted in Scripture is that God has a preferential option for the powerless poor. God takes sides, and it is always the side of the voiceless ones.

Conclusion

Ultimately, all that we do at WVA is done entirely in dependence on God. In order to undertake genuine, Christlike prophetic engagement, our understanding of power needs to be transformed. Jesus came to renew the world, showing compassion and standing in the prophetic tradition. At WVA, standing in the prophetic tradition is seen in our engagement in a range of activities which advocate on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Some of the campaigns we have been involved with include Don't Trade Lives, Child Health Now, Micah Challenge, and Make Poverty History. We also work on issues relating to climate change and fair trade.

You can click [here](#) to find out more about our advocacy work. We constantly seek to follow Jesus, empowered by His Spirit, transformed by His love. This is the upside down kingdom, and it transforms the world.

³⁰ Colossians 2:15

³¹ Christian, 1999, p. 182.

³² Christian, 1999, p. 223.

³³ King, Martin Luther., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Beacon Press, 1968.