

# WHOSE HELP IS IN THE NAME OF THE LORD?



## THE RICH MAN IN HIS CASTLE

“Just the other day I opened an envelope containing my periodic pension account statement. It told me that my choice to invest my funds in stocks had paid off handsomely in the recent bull market.

Here I was, celebrating my gains while still working away on a book manuscript dealing with greed! I could make the case that I put my money in a portfolio of companies screened for their social responsibility. That helps, I suppose.

I can also point out that my holdings are rather modest when compared to the holdings of many others; mine is not the portfolio of a wealthy person at all. (I would not want to make that claim against more than two-thirds of the world, however.) I could go on to talk about my charitable contributions, if that would help.

Even if I were able to successfully portray myself as a generous person of modest means, however, the fact remains that I am a full participant in our economic system and have some responsibility for how it works.

I cannot escape the grip of its often confusing and vexing choices or its glaring inequities. I am obliged to deal with it as responsibly as I am able. I cannot abdicate involvement in the ethical issues of economic life by simply saying that this is the way of life in a sinful world.”

Source: James M Childs Jr's, *Greed, Economics and Ethics in Conflict* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000) pp.126f.

## THE POOR AT THE GATE (PSALM 146)

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” These words drawn from Psalm 146.5f. are often used in Reformed churches to call us to public worship.

But we don't always know where they come from, and we aren't always aware that they

introduce us to a biblical position on a crucial public debate: the age-old question about the plight of the poor in the order of the economy. Let's read this call to worship in its biblical context.

It is the hungry and the oppressed, the Psalm tells us, whose help is in the name of the Lord (v.7). The first economic announcement in our order of service is about their plight. This is very different from any economic announcement we may find in the newspapers. And the first biblical fundamental of our worship is the affirmation of the role of God in the economy. God “executes justice” for the poor. This is also very different from our everyday experience, where confidence in the market is regarded as the most fundamental affirmation of the economic good.

The first affirmation of our public worship is not about the market, but about God. It is an affirmation in “the name of God”.

God's name is revealed to us in the acts of God in creation and in the work, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Psalm 146 restates this teaching. If you want to know the God from whom we worshippers expect our “help”, look to God's acts.

The rest of the Psalm, often simply excluded from the call to worship, is all about the ways in which this God is revealed. Take time to read it carefully. The creator of “heaven and earth” (v.6) is a God who provides justice (v.7a) and bread (v.7b), frees prisoners from captivity (v.7c), heals illnesses that poverty exacerbates (v.8), embraces the stranger, the illegal alien so often the target of our societies' hostility (v.9), and upholds the poor widows and orphans (v.9). The God of our public worship is a God with unfashionable prejudices.

Put the Psalmist's point the other way around, and this unfashionable God is the maker of heaven and earth. Before all human claims to property and



other economic goods, God stakes a claim to the whole creation. This is the most fundamental claim on which the economy rests: God created heaven and earth. From this claim derives everything that Jesus taught about the kingdom or reign of God. The Psalmist affirms a position further advanced by Jesus: The reign of God is already among you.

### QUESTIONS

1. HOW CAN WE WITNESS TO THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD TO ALL GOD'S CREATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD OF ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION?
2. IS THE CURRENT ECONOMIC ORDER AN EXPRESSION OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS?
3. ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES THAT CAN MODEL BETTER THIS PROCLAIMED FAITHFULNESS OF GOD?

### PRAYER

*Dear God, help us to remember those that we so easily forget even when we receive your abundant blessing in our own lives. Teach us to share, to stand in solidarity, to love and to embrace the excluded peoples in our world. Teach us to love your world as you do. Amen*

### AUTHOR

H Russel Botman is from South Africa and a member of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. He is a professor of missiology at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. He is also a consultant on the Alliance's Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth process.



### FOR THE HEALING OF THE NATIONS

*For the healing of the nations,  
Lord, we pray with one accord;  
for a just and equal sharing  
of the things that earth affords.  
To a life of love in action  
help us rise and pledge our word.*

*All that kills abundant living,  
let it from the earth be banned;  
pride of status, race, or schooling,  
dogmas that obscure your plan.  
In our common quest for justice  
may we hallow life's brief span.*

*Verses one and three from the popular English hymn.  
Words by Fred Kaan (Netherlands).*

