

In search of life in fullness

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“God is not a great heavenly tyrant who threatens and terrifies us with arbitrary unpredictable divine power that may be for or against us. Nor is God a great heavenly granddaddy (or grandmother) who does everything for us and makes our lives smooth, painless, and easy, without expecting or demanding anything of us. Both these Gods are dead idols... God is neither heavenly tyrant nor heavenly grandparent, nor a combination of both. But God is in fact far above us, yet with us, distant yet familiar, powerful yet loving, loving yet powerful – both at the same time.”¹

What kind of person is God?

Today, the missionary activity of our churches takes place in the framework of these times of dislocation, in which poverty, war, unemployment, the exploitation of the environment, the expulsion of people from the economic system, domestic violence, racial hatred and discrimination, child prostitution, and domestic violence are common to all contexts.

We are living at a moment when almost every aspect of reality is rife with conflict, and when each expresses a distinct form of individual or collective violence.

If we had to identify a common factor in all of this, we might call it disdain for the life of the other. The other – our neighbour according to the scriptures – is sociologically ignored, or economically excluded, or sexually subjugated. The other is absent from our headlines, or discounted in our stories, or, to put it plainly, simply doesn't exist for the record.

How do we talk about the love of God to those who live in a world that is hostile to them, to those condemned to misery or ignorance, to those excluded by society, to those who are alone in the midst of indifference? How do we interpret God's sovereignty in the midst of a deterioration of life not only at the macrostructural level of the global economy, but also, and perhaps as a consequence, at the personal and microsocal levels, which experience crisis not just in material terms, but also as a crisis of meaning.

Perhaps the most powerful “mission image” produced at the eighth assembly of the World Council of Churches (Harare 1998) was proposed by the theologian Kosuke Koyama, that God is the God who runs from the centre to the periphery (Lk 15.20), thus transforming the periphery into the centre. God turns the invisible into visible when the father, acting with motherly love, urges: “Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf.” (Luke 15.22f).

We need to recognize that the Christian doctrine of God has tended to accentuate the aspect of transcendent power, as befits a patriarchally conceived deity in the service of empire; but that in doing so it has severely jeopardized our understanding of the God testified to in scripture. What kind of living person is God to us?

Churches in the Reformed tradition (and in Christian tradition in general) have usually thought first of the attributes that point to God's sovereign majesty, using such adjectives as infinite, immutable, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most absolute (as in the Westminster Confession, chapter two, paragraph one, for example).

Then, in the second place, come the attributes of God's dealing with us: loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, forgiving, just. The first set of attributes is seen as the most important. Thus, in the following paragraph, the Westminster Confession returns to them and deals with them exclusively.

Many feminist theologians propose the adventure of attempting to transcend this theological scheme in order to enter into the mystery of transcendence beyond every image.

Closely linked to transcendence in this sense is *relation*, relation articulated among all human beings, animals, plants, earth, air, fire, water, cosmos. Everything that exists in relation and lives in relation, a vital energy in which we exist, a primary mystery that simply is.

Ivone Gevara writes of transcendence "as an ethical experience, that is, as invitation and summons to live as an absolute value. This ethical transcendence is experienced on the basis of human relations that 'transcend' us, go beyond us, make us move out of our egoism and lethargy. It is an experience that puts us in solidarity, in a state of mercy and love, with those who are different, with neighbours fallen on the byways of life... It is an experience of profound joy, of gracious action for acts of tenderness done in our midst. And it is also an experience of beauty that opens us to larger horizons, inviting and mysterious."²

Churches as prophetic communities in solidarity

To believe in "God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth" is to confess our faith in God as creator and sustainer of all creation. Expounding this article of the creed, Martin Luther says that in the creation, all that is necessary to support the human being in dignity is provided by God: food, clothes, shelter, health, and a good government.

Reality, however, severely contradicts Luther's statement. There is a gigantic lack of all that is necessary for human beings. Billions of people are hardly able to survive under the unbearable load of poverty and misery.

The creating God cannot allow the current bad concentration and distribution of wealth. The abuse of nature is also a threat to the whole of humanity. From the theological point of view, the world today is more than a

sinful perversion of creation: it is a negation of the creating God. Any attack on life is an attack on God.

This is as true in these difficult times as at any difficult time in the past.

Under the Hellenistic and Roman empires after 333 BCE, the people of Judah developed various forms of resistance as their last option in working for alternatives.

Strategically, the key instrument was saying no when everybody else was saying yes. Daniel 3 describes the three Jewish men who resist, refusing to bow down before the golden statue, the incarnation of absolute political, economic, and ideological power.

In the apocalyptic resistance literature, persistence is nurtured by the hope that the kingdom of God with a human face will overcome the beastlike empires (Daniel 2-7).

Konrad Raiser expresses the need for alternatives in the phrase, “opening space”. For him, “this metaphor responds to one of the essential features of a globalized world, ie its closed character. For the first time in human history, the world is being experienced as a closed and inescapable interdependent system... It is against this background that the metaphor of opening space captures the dynamic of Christian mission in an age of globalization.”³

We are called to be “communities of transformative justice”. The study on “ecclesiology and ethics” helps us to understand this call.

The church as historic institution is... undergoing a process of “moral formation” guided by God, a process which will continue until the full reign of God dawns. Thus the tasks of spiritual and moral formation and discernment will always be part of the church’s life and mission. This is to say yet again: in the church’s own struggle for justice, peace and integrity of creation, the *esse* of the church is at stake.⁴

We have a responsibility and a real challenge to speak of the God of life and love, when reality appears to be governed by selfishness and death. In these objective social conditions, we must face up to our own mission.

Salvation and judgment

John 10 is the last chapter on the revelation of Jesus in the fourth gospel. It falls into two clearly marked parts: the first part (Jn 10.1-21) is on the good shepherd and his flock. There are two brief speeches on the general topic, and each of them is followed by a declaration on the effect it brought about in the audience. The disciples do not understand what Jesus says (Jn 10.6); “the Jews” are divided, for and against him (Jn 10.19-21).

This incomprehension, rejection and division is characteristic in the speeches on revelation in John’s gospel. We have seen it several times before (Jn 7.20, 7.43, 8.42-52, 9.16). According to Raymond E Brown: “We should not be surprised by the fact that the reaction to parables is characterized by the

incapacity to understand, because in the synoptic tradition parables are also received with the same lack of comprehension (Mk 4.13).”⁵ It is not an intellectual problem; it is a deliberate refusal to accept the challenge of the gospel.

In the synoptic gospels this challenge is focused on the kingdom; in John it is focused on Jesus himself. The well-known synoptic phrase, “The kingdom is like...”, has its parallel in John’s “I am” sayings.

The dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish leadership focuses on the word “work” (Jn 10.25, 32, 33, 37, 38): his works not only bring healing but also provoke frank opposition in those who had power and authority in the institutions of that time.

In order to understand this passage on the good shepherd and his sheep, and the thief, the bandit, and the hired hand, we must compare it with God’s judgment on false prophets and shepherds in Ezekiel 34.

This symbolic text on the people of God as the flock of the good shepherd (God, but also the messiah) and on the false, usurping and murderous shepherds, is very similar to Jn 10.1-18. In both cases, Israel’s corrupted leaders are denounced as false shepherds of the flock of God. Instead of feeding the sheep, they eat them; instead of protecting them, they let them stray. As a result, the flock is broken up and devoured by the wild animals. Therefore, such shepherds will be removed from their trade, and God will find his sheep like a shepherd finds his flock on a day of clouds and thick darkness. God will bring them back (Ezek 34.14-16).

Ezekiel 34 is a severe judgment on false shepherds, but it is a liberating promise to the whole flock. The prophecy finishes with an emphatic divine proclamation: “You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God.” (Ezek 34.31).

In Ezekiel it is Yahweh (the Lord), in John it is Christ, who does saving and liberating works when he rescues, leads and knows his sheep.

In John, we find more features that enrich the picture presented by Ezekiel. The shepherd lays down (*titheimi*) his life for the sheep, he gives himself voluntarily and vicariously, and the life he gives is abundant and eternal life (John 3 and 6).

Who are the leaders (and which are the nations) that show themselves cowardly, greedy, violent and seeking their own welfare? Ezekiel’s prophecy is a “judicial sentence” against such unworthy leaders (Ezek 34.10). Who denounces today’s powerful economic, social and political leaders for stealing, murdering, ill-treating, exploiting and forsaking those for whom they should care?

Who are the good shepherds in the people of God, and who are the hired hands? “For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.” (Rom 16.18).

An ethic of common welfare

Ezekiel calls us to strengthen the weak, to heal the sick, to bind up the crippled, to bring back the strayed, to seek the lost and never rule them with force and harshness (Ezek 34.4).

Isaiah also presents Yahweh as the liberator of his people and the good shepherd: “See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” (Is 40.10).

In John, Jesus is the good shepherd. “Good” here is the Greek “*kalos*”, which literally means beautiful, righteous, adequate, and conveys the aspects of righteousness, togetherness, moral sense and adequate behaviour: “Not only his absolute character, his resolution, is what is said through the adjective ‘*kalos*’, but also his being-for”.⁶

To speak of laying down his life for the sheep (*tithenai ten psykhen*) radicalizes the commitment to be for others, as Bultmann says. This is an important soteriological theme that appears throughout the gospel of John. The God of Jesus is a God of love who performs a deed of salvation and liberation. Jesus offers life to others by laying down his life for them. This offer of life extends to all humanity: there will be one flock and one shepherd (Jn 10.16). By contrast, the thieves, attackers, bandits or killers (*lestes*) steal, kill and destroy. They take life away instead of giving it.

These texts from scripture pose an existential challenge. They question each and all of us about our ethical future as Christians and as churches in a world full of injustice and inhumanity. To what kind of commitment are true followers of the gospel called today? What risks must we take in reaching out to others and dedicating our lives for their benefit so that they may have eternal and abundant life? Franz Hinkelammert and Henry M Mora call us to practice an ethic of common welfare, marked by resistance, questioning, intervention and transformation.⁷

This ethic of common welfare introduces values to which any ethical or self-interested calculation must be subject:

- respect for human beings and their life in all its dimensions, as well as respect for the life of nature, and
- mutual acknowledgement among human beings, as well as acknowledgement of our common environment.

These values are the foundation of our common life, without which it is undermined and destroyed. “We cannot be human until all are human.”⁸ Nobody can live, unless everybody lives.

These values challenge the absolutizing of market relationships. The market is blind. It recognizes no values. It cannot distinguish life and death. When markets are torn from their context in human community, human life is distorted

and nature is destroyed. The market becomes a juggernaut, rolling carelessly over heaps of the slain.

An ethic of common welfare leads us to oppose a sinful world order. An ethic of common welfare reminds us that Jesus came that humanity may have life and have it in fullness – and calls us to follow him.

Questions

1. What kind of alternatives or “open spaces” do we need in our congregations and churches to capture the dynamic of Christian mission in an age of globalization?
2. How can our congregations and churches respond to the call to be “communities of transformative justice”?
3. What commitments do your congregation and your church make, and what risks do they take, as you try to be true followers of the gospel today?
4. Can you think of examples where your congregation or your church has practised an ethic of common welfare through resistance, questioning, intervention or transformation?

Notes

1. Shirley C Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, revised edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p.101.
2. Ivone Gevara, “The Face of the Transcendent as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Perspective*, ed Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp.178-180.
3. Konrad Raiser, *To be the Church: Challenges and Hopes for the New Millennium*, Risk Book Series (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), p.36.
4. Thomas Best and Martin Robra eds, *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Engagement, moral formation and the nature of the church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), p.47.
5. Raymond E Brown, *El Evangelio según San Juan I-XII* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1979), p.641.
6. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), pp.375-378.
7. Franz J Hinkelammert and Henry M Mora, *Coordinación Social del Trabajo, Mercado y Reproducción de la Vida Humana* (San José, Costa Rica: DEI, 2001), pp.329-331.
8. David Jenkins, *The Contradiction of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1976), p.102.