

Seek the Peace of the City - The Prophetic Mission of the Church

Ulrich Hahn

1. The City

When part of the Israelite population was being held captive in Babylon, this name referred not only to a city, but also to the then great and mighty kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar.

In his letter to the exiled Israelites, the prophet Jeremiah exhorts them specifically to seek for the peace, not of the nation, but of the city.

Then as now, the state was marked by relationships of power. The German sociologist Max Weber defined the state in 1919 as "the one community that successfully claims the monopoly on legitimate use of physical force."

Fundamental to every State is the exercise of internal (police) power and external (military) power. The limits on these powers are not generally the result of natural development nor the expression of a successful consensus among peoples living on either side of the border; rather they result from wars and military might.

The city, however, is a place of peaceful coexistence and interaction—most often commercial—among people from within and from without.

The order of the city can at times be characterized by a cooperative regulation of affairs, rather than by the exercise of power over people. In the Middle Ages, the saying "City air makes you free" reflected the common law practice that feudal lords could not enforce serfdom within the boundaries of the city. Even today, the principle of self-government applies to cities and townships. Bismarck's remark that no state can be built upon the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to the city.

For Jesus, the "City on a hill" is effectively a symbol of successful social structure. Of course there is injustice in our real-world cities, there is a gap between rich and poor and a corresponding domination over people. But in contrast to the nation-state, the fundamental structure of the city allows the possibility of a non-violent and just coexistence among its inhabitants.

For this reason, the structure of the city also allows for collaboration with the people of God in a common search for the peace of the city. This should mean providing for the basic living conditions of the people in it, establishing justice for the least among its citizens, securing through consensus a peaceful order of coexistence of all.

2. The Church

The call of the prophet in his time was to the people of God in a foreign country; for us today it is a call to the church in the midst of the world.

I understand "church" in its original meaning as ecclesia, the gathering of Christians. Size is not a pre-condition for the presence of the Spirit. Jesus spoke of "two or three gathered in his name" and Simone Weil adds: "He did not speak of 20 and 30, not 200 and 300, but of two or three."

At least in its early stages it may be small like the seed that is to become a tree. Crucial is only that the goal of the gathering is to do the will of God in the here and now.

It is not enough to have the right creed ("to say Lord, Lord"). In his Olivet Discourse, Jesus includes among the people of God those, and perhaps only those, who practice mercy, regardless of whether they are even interested in God.

If the church conceives of herself as a gathering of people who are called upon not only to participate in the world, but also to exercise a prophetic office, then she first needs to fulfil the same conditions as the prophets themselves.

a) freedom from any form of state authority

The prophets of the Old Testament stood apart from the power of the state as its critics. The Bible describes as "false prophets" those who stood in the court of the kings legitimizing their power.

b) freedom from economic power

According to our understanding, the prophets did not belong to the wealthy upper class of their society. They had no part in the privileges of the rich and powerful.

In our age, domination and exploitation occurs more commonly within economic structures than through the agency of the state. Wherever churches entangle themselves in financial markets with investments worth billions, they forfeit the impartiality necessary for a critical detachment from the world.

3. The Prophetic Mission

The mission of the prophets was on the one hand always related to a concrete situation. On the other hand, similarities can be observed in the prophetic intent:

a) Truth

Prophets come to the point. They address unpleasant truths, facts which are known to many, but collectively repressed, because hardly anyone dares to speak them out loud.

The prophet assumes the role of the child who calls out, "The emperor is naked."

In the present age he might remind us that usury is not an endowment from heaven and that great wealth stems more from the labour of others than from one's own.

He could condemn the fatal consequences of structural violence in areas of famine throughout the world, yes even in the Mediterranean ("We let them starve and drown"), while under the pretext of responsibility ever more weapons are produced and new wars are fought around the world.

b) Justice

Along with the truth about hidden and repressed injustice, the prophet recounts the precepts of justice. Especially the example of the Old Testament prophets shows clearly that since time immemorial it is justice that had and still has the role of restraining the exercise of power.

In its purest form, justice remains powerless in her confrontation with power and does not resort to violence.

Of the nonviolent servant of God, Scripture says: "In faithfulness he carries out the law" (Isaiah 42.3).

Wherever justice acts otherwise and makes use of power or governmental authority, or wherever violence appears decked out in the cloak of justice, then it is might that prevails, not—or not necessarily—right.

c) Resistance

Out of the confrontation between justice and existing injustice follows equally the determination to resist, at the very least in refusing to co-operate with injustice. In the case of governmental injustice, this means disobedience to unjust laws and orders.

God is always to be obeyed rather than men, and this applies also in relation to the state or local authorities.

An entirely different question is whether a Christian should even participate in the government. This seems to me at least in such situations untenable where the role involves the use of force, whether directly in its execution (military or police) or indirectly in some bureaucratic capacity.

Christians have no biblical mandate to accede to or engage in the governmental use of force.

For most of the well paid jobs in parliament, administration and judiciary, there are plenty of other candidates. Christian rulers have in general been no better than their non-Christian competitors. Torture, slavery and other forms of oppression were overcome mostly under enlightened kings, not under their Christian predecessors.

d) The Community Model

It has been and still is part of the prophetic mission to make visible and tangible the dawning Kingdom of God in a model of community that stands in contrast to society.

In the structured parallel existence of society, the law of contract applies - do ut des: I give only to the extent that you also give to me.

In the organic co-existence of community, each member contributes what s/he can and receives what s/he needs without any notion of compensation.

Typically, we experience this kind of community today only within the nuclear family. But it is also the integrational element that God wills for the "City on a Hill," which is founded on the voluntary commitment of all its members (not on contractual or other obligations), whose order is love (and not law), and which lives out the prophetic message of God's emerging kingdom (and not an organized society, no matter how democratic).

When and where this community will successfully reach fulfilment, we do not know. Our task is to make a start.

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