

Theological reflections

Prosperity Raymond, Country Manager (Christian Aid) for Haiti, recently spoke movingly in an interview about that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon of 12 January 2010. The earthquake, whose destructive power would soon be seen on TV screens around the world, struck the city with terrible force in the late afternoon. Prosperity himself was at work in his office in Port-au-Prince.

Within moments, he was trapped in the collapsing building, unable to move. With all the power that few words convey, Prosperity recalls that the very first people to come to the aid of Haiti on that day were other Haitians. And in his own case, the people who finally, sometime later, pulled him out of the rubble were the people who lived in the neighbourhood. As soon as the earth stopped shaking, they began to try to locate survivors, and to dig them out with their bare hands. I am committed to working alongside the most vulnerable, Prosperity now says simply. It was the most vulnerable who saved me.

But of course Prosperity, and other like him who partner with the PCI through Christian Aid and Tearfund, were already committed to the well-being of the poor and vulnerable. They already understood that the world in which we live is rife with structural injustice, which readily takes many forms: trade and tax rules skewed to benefit the few, entrenched forms of class and cultural privilege, and gender inequalities maintained by the use of violence, just to name a few. And they already understood that when people work together, these structures, for all their stubborn power, can be changed.

Today, almost five years afterwards, what the earthquake has made visible, for those who have eyes to see, is not only the dignified grace of the most vulnerable, bearing the image of God, who came to the help of their neighbours in extraordinary ways, and before anyone else could reach them. What the earthquake has made visible once again are these persistent structures of injustice which, as long as they last, continue to enable the well-being of a few to rest on the hard work and yet continuing poverty of the many. In a terrible sense, those structures continue to trap the poor into propping up the very systems which keep them poor, and to protect the comfortable from having to face the scandal inherent in the way things are.

For the Christian community, however, these continuing structures of injustice pose a questions which cuts right to the heart of our identity. A key insight given expression in the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament, upon which Jesus drew so profoundly and repeatedly, insists that the integrity of the people's worship is inextricably linked to their practical and urgent willingness to engage in dismantling those structures.

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58.6)

In our conversation about the 2014 Appeal, and with our Haitian partners in minds, members of the World Development Committee were drawn to Isaiah's promise that:

"Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in." (Isaiah 58.12)

It is a moving image. And yet we forget at our peril that it has a context. Isaiah is addressing a people whose worship renews them, and whose seeking of God uplifts them (Isaiah 58.2). Their worship is vibrant, and even a joy to them. But they are continuing to conduct their lives in ways which do not take account of or seek to address the very visible and scandalous ways in which the poor who are their neighbours continue to be bound and yoked by hunger, poverty, and homelessness.

And yet, of course, what Isaiah notices is that this vibrant worship is both a source of delight to them, and confusingly, a source of anxiety.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see?" the people cry out.
"Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" (Isaiah 58.3)

Somehow, even at worship, the people are troubled by uncertainty and dismay at what seems to be God's lack of attentiveness to them. And it is Isaiah's task to confront them with an alternative: the costly truth that only in working to remove the yoke of injustice which rests heavily on the shoulders of others will they open themselves to a healing and a richness of life that they do not yet even fully realise they lack.

For to share your bread with the hungry (Isaiah 58.7) is to learn a new vulnerability before God. And those who call to God out of that vulnerability, and not only out of the confidence of their worship, are those who will hear the voice of the Lord, answering them, and saying: "Here I am" (Isaiah 58.9).

In Haiti, Christians and others are "restoring streets to live in," creating not only spacious new rooms in which the homeless poor can live, but also creating room for hope in their daily lives. And in our partnership with them, and by the grace of God, the foundation of our own lives and worship is also being rebuilt. Building together, we are also being built.

In a small church in Balan, in Haiti's Central Plateau, the community gathered for worship at the end of June. "Even the poor are called to the dignity of this worship," the preacher reminded us. "Our calling is to seek the good of one another."

Fede Dunois, who features in one of this year's short videos, prays that God will give us many more opportunities to partner with communities like his in their work. For as Isaiah insists, the energy of our worship must not only be life-giving for us, if it is to be true worship, worship that somehow, deep inside, no longer leaves us anxious. It must also engage our hands in the loosening of yokes, the untying of bonds, in accordance with the mission of God in the world.

For our greatest task, the evangel we have to announce, is the character of the God of Jesus Christ, in whose work we have been invited to participate. Life in all its fullness, on this earth at least, means many things, but it means at least this: an earth that flourishes under the discipline of sustainable development for human communities everywhere; and people who flourish, who are able to trust in the reliable and concrete provision of their basic daily needs, but who also flourish in the dignity of what they can offer to others. Including, perhaps, the possibility of a vulnerable openness to the redeeming work of God in the world.

There is perhaps no greater missional imperative today than to bear witness to the character of this God, the God of such intentions for us, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As Fede Dunois put it, may we not miss this opportunity now being given to us to be partners in this work.