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Christians Must Be Engaged in Social Justice Actions

Shawa Gosbert F.

Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if each of you deals justly with his neighbor; if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; if you no longer shed innocent blood in this place, or follow strange gods to your own harm, will I remain with you in this place, in the land which I gave your fathers long ago and forever. (Jer 7:5-7)

Before I can look more closely into the main topic of my reflection, I need to recognize some of the challenges we face in using Jeremiah's text as a guide in the modern Christian social life. These challenges apply both to us who see Jeremiah as a charter for Christian social life and for guidance of other kind or search Jeremiah for help in a more applied way. Obviously Jeremiah continues to speak not just despite his antiquity and very different cultural origin, but sometimes even because he presents an understanding of human existence so sharply distinct from the assumptions of the twenty-first century. Before reflecting on Jeremiah's text I need first to understand the religious, social-political, and cultural context of the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a prophet during the reign of Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was a typical tyrant—cruel, selfish, and indulgent. He subjected his people to forced labor to build his magnificent palaces. To him, being a king meant living in luxurious style. In addition to playing the tyrant, Jehoiakim revived the paganism that his father had tried to eliminate. Every member of the family had a part in making cakes for *Ishtar*, Queen of Heaven. The barbarous rite of child sacrifice was practiced in the valley of Hinnon and pagan idols were set up in the Temple. To make matters worse, social abominations were perpetrated in the very shadow of the Temple. All these things rankled in Jeremiah's heart. He began his message with a sharp summons, "Amend your ways and your doings."

We Christians must be engaged in social justice actions. We cannot afford to do it in abstract, universal, non-analytic terms. "We must also bear in mind the methods and motives of oppression, the constant changes in the style of tyranny, the increasingly threatening presence of transnational corporations and the ideologies of national security and limited democracy that have for their purpose the preservation of the capitalist system and its oppressive structure."¹ The oppressor steals from the oppressed and impoverishes them.

The principal motive for oppression is the eagerness to pile up wealth and the desire is connected with the fact that the oppressor is an idolater. There is an almost complete absence of the theme of oppression in European and North America biblical theology. The absence is not surprising, since it is possible to tackle the theme only within an existential situation of oppression. Thus says Yahweh, "Do what is right and just. Rescue the victim from the hand of his oppressor" (Jer 22:3).

Reflecting from an African perspective, Christians in Africa must engage themselves in social justice actions. The African social fabrics bear a grim mark of betrayal. The experience of betrayal elicits the temperament of the people. According to the opinion of Amil Cabral, Africa suffers from the "*cancer of betrayal*." This makes the words of the German Jesuit, Alfred Delp, who was condemned to death by Hitler, relevant: "*Bread is important, freedom is more important, but the most important of all is unbroken fidelity and faith adoration.*"² The crucial challenge from the African perspective is our fidelity to the African heritage. We, who live in the African church today, for fear of missing bread, sacrifice the process of enculturation. We forget that it is for fidelity to his Father and African people, that Jesus Christ took our flesh—the Body, the church whose members are Africans—and for that, Jesus is truly African like us except sin. Have we adequately transformed the church in Africa into being truly Catholic and African?

Jeremiah was very patriotic. He did not want his people to suffer God's punishment. He thus faced a dilemma: it was difficult for him to announce punishment to them, but keeping silence would mean certainty of punishment. Patriotism is costly. One suffers either from foreigners or from one's own people. Jeremiah suffered most from his own people who did not want to hear the message of doom. Kings, priests, false prophets, and the population in general all turned a deaf ear to Jeremiah's warning and even physically harassed him.

It cannot be overemphasized that today Africa needs true leaders, both in civil society and in the church, who fully identify themselves with their people. This kind of leadership has not featured prominently in the recent history of Africa. The person Jeremiah, his genuine patriotism and his unswerving dedication to his mission, should be an inspiration and a challenge for us in Africa. God bless Africa. †

¹ Assmann Hugo, *Carter y la logica del Imperialismo*, vol. 2 (San Jose: Educa, 1978).

² Alfred Delp, *Facing Death* (1944), 163; emphasis added.