Koopman, N
Dept Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology
University of Stellenbosch

Let the plight of the voiceless be heard. Prophetic speaking about poverty today.

ABSTRACT

This article investigates prophetic speaking as the way in which the plight of the poor, marginalised and voiceless people of society is articulated so that this voice functions as norm for economic policies and measures. By using James Gustafson's four varieties of moral discourse the twofold prophetic task of the church, namely the task of envisioning and indictment, is suggested as the way in which the voice of the voiceless be heard and the process of the restoration of their dignity be served. The relationship of the prophetic discourse to the narrative, technical and policy discourses is described. This analyses offers helpful insights for prophetic speaking in the context of a democracy. The use of prophetic speaking in theological literature, confessional documents and in the Bible is also outlined. Lastly it is portrayed how various Christian practices awake, inform and sustain the prophetic speaking of churches in such a way that all Christians are formed to speak out prophetically in a variety of ways.

INTRODUCTION

In one of his regular articles for the South African Sunday newspaper, *Rapport*, renowned South African scholar and opinion maker, Jakes Gerwel, in May 2003 posed a challenge that cannot be ignored. In this article he wrote with appreciation about the macro-economic policy of the post-apartheid South African government. He mentioned that, as director-general in the office of president Nelson Mandela, he was part of the cabinet who formulated this new policy. Amidst the positive aspects of this policy and the public discourse about it and about economic affairs in general, he misses voices that speak clearly and explicitly about the plight of poor people. With this statement Gerwel could not mean that there is not talk about the poor. On the contrary, the macro-economic policy called Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), aims to free people from poverty and to ensure a life of dignity for all. I think what Gerwel is missing in discourses on economic growth and perhaps also in official economic policies, is a more explicit and especially a more critical articulation of the needs, struggles, experiences, despair and hopes of poor people. I think he rightfully reckons that no lasting solutions to poverty can be found if the voice of the poor is marginalised in policies and discourses that strive to serve their needs. In this article I endeavour to describe this critical articulation and presentation of the plight of poor people in terms of the prophetic task of South African churches.

By building on James Gustafson's (1988a;1988b) famous four varieties of moral discourse I (1) describe the vision formation and indictment dimensions of prophetic speaking about poverty and (2) demonstrate that prophetic speaking about poverty cannot be isolated from other ways or modes of speaking about poverty. After describing how the prophetic mode impacts on other

modes of moral discourse, on the one hand, and how these modes influence the prophetic discourse, on the other hand, I (3) demonstrate how the visionary and indictment dimensions of prophetic speaking cannot only ensure that the voice of the voiceless be heard, but that their situation of dehumanisation and despair be radically transformed. Lastly I describe how Christian practices can strengthen and sustain this twofold prophetic task of the church (4).

1. FOUR WAYS OF SPEAKING ABOUT MORALITY

Gustafson identifies four modes or varieties of moral discourse, namely the prophetic, narrative, technical and policy discourses. The cursory description of his distinctions in this and the next section is based on various publications of Gustafson and uses of it by other authors.[1]

a. According to Gustafson (1988a:269;1988b:7-17) prophetic speaking has two dimensions. It firstly refers to the task of formulating a vision of the good life. What people are supposed to aim at and strive towards is portrayed in almost slogan like utopian language. In the second instance prophetic speaking has the task of indictment. The evil has to be unmasked. The root of the evil is exposed in confrontative, vivid and clear language. Applied to poverty this discourse spells out the vision of a society that is free from poverty, suffering and despair. It also strongly criticises the immense suffering and poverty of our day and exposes the causes of the situation of people who have too much at the expense of those who have too little or nothing.

The Kairos Document that was formulated in 1985 during the high tide of apartheid by various Christians is an example of a document of prophetic speech. This document distinguished between three types of theology, namely state theology that legitimised the apartheid state, church theology that, although it opposed apartheid could not impact efficiently on it and could not pave the way for the transformation of society, and thirdly prophetic theology that could read the signs of the times and consequently be able to critically expose the wrongs in society and clearly portray the features of an alternative society. In later sections of this paper we return to the prophetic discourse.

b. The second discourse that Gustafson (1988a:269;1988b:19-27) refers to is the narrative discourse. The focus is on people, their identity, the communities that they belong to, the narratives that form them, and the significant others, role models and moral heroes that inspire them. Talking about poverty in this mode would entail that questions like the following be addressed. What type of people are Christians? Are we people who would allow some in our midst to have too much and others too little? Are we a community where people are alienated and where they do not experience that there are others who are in solidarity with their plights? What do our formative narratives, that is the narratives of God's dealings with and in Israel, Jesus Christ and the church of all ages tell us about who we are and what we should do in the face of poverty in the world? What can we learn from and what inspiration can we get from role models, that is people who embody a life of hope, compassion, care, protest, justice and sacrifice in the face of poverty?

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1 These publications are titled *An Analysis of Church and Society Social Ethical Writings* 1988a; *Varieties of moral discourse: prophetic, narrative, ethical and policy* 1988b. In an article titled *Moral Discourse About Medicine: A Variety of Forms*, he applies these discourses to medical issues. Bernard Brady's application of these four discourses to the challenge of social justice is also illuminating (*The moral bond of community. Justice and discourse in Christian morality* 1998). Also see my articles *Freedom of religion and the prophetic role of the church* 2002; *Some remarks about public theology today* 2003.

South African author Hennie Aucamp (1989) enhances a clearer understanding of poverty by means of his narratives about poverty. In the story titled *Kastyding* he contrasts the beautiful environment with the ugliness of poverty. "In Napels is die toerbussie vertraag deur 'n optog … Die armoedige buurt om hulle, vol gedronge lewe, het inderdaad gevloek teen die blou, serene baai. Die Bejaarde Reisiger het die Here gedank vir glas wat hom afsonder van die stank en lawaai wat armoede is."[2] The portrayals of Aucamp is just one example of the type of stories that can be told in order to lend a voice to the misery and suffering of millions. Stories indeed do have the ability to open perspectives that statistics and technical analysis alone cannot do. Besides the stories of misery, stories of success in dealing with poverty should also be heard. They indeed inspire and are small beacons of hope. The stories of people who show compassion, for instance, should be heard. In this regard not only the compassionate Mother Theresa's are role models, but also those normal people in our local churches and communities who do work of compassion out of the public eye.

c. Gustafson's (1988a:269;1988b:31-44) third discourse is the technical discourse. Scientific analyses of a situation are made. Meta-ethical and philosophical questions are asked. Positions are supported by means of arguments that pass the test of coherence, logic and consistency. With regard to poverty questions on the various manifestations, consequences and causes of poverty as well as ways of combating it can be asked. Thorough, sober analyses are made with regard to persons, institutions and economic, political and social systems.

The commentary of the South African Bishops Conference and the South African Council of Churches on NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development), is a good example of a document that does thorough analysis on the strengths and weaknesses of this market orientated policy of the African Union for addressing poverty on our continent. This document titled *Unblurring the vision*, poses, on the basis of thorough technical analyses twelve major questions to NEPAD (2002:16-22): are financial policies determined by international donors and creditors alone, or mainly by civil society processes (2002:1617;20); are Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that serve as condition for debt relief effective (2002:17;21); what is the impact of an African "debtors' cartel" on the quest for debt repudiation (17;21); can market fundamentalist economic policies bring liberation from poverty (17;21); what are the effects of privatisation on the availability of jobs and the costs of social services (2002:18;23); will the benefits of economic growth led by private capital investment "trickle down" to the poor at adequate pace (2002:18;23); will NEPAD put Africa on the global political and economic agenda (2002:18;23); can NEPAD stem the tide of Afro-pessimism (2002:18;23); how will the closer cooperation with organisations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund impact on national and parliamentary transparency and democracy (2002:18;23); what is the impact of NEPAD on the termination of war and the development of greater solidarity amongst the peoples of Africa (2002:19;24); will NEPAD enhance popular participation in global policy debates (2002:19;24); will NEPAD strengthen the "growing call for the beneficiaries of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid to take steps to repair the social, political, economic, environmental, and cultural damage that has been inflicted on Africa" (2002:19; also 24). These questions demonstrate that South African churches do not engage with this economic and political policy document without technical analysis of the relevant issues.

2 African theologian, John Mbiti's work on how African prayers and proverbs deal with poverty is also a good example of talking about poverty in the narrative discourse.

In his famous book, *Prophesy deliverance! An Afro-American revolutionary Christianity*, African-American theologian, Cornel West, illustrates that prophetic speaking cannot be done adequately without thorough technical analysis. His thinking is very helpful for South Africans. He emphasises that it is more difficult to engage in discussions about the ideal society than to criticise, oppose and negate current society. "Black theologians all agree that black liberation has something to do with ameliorating the socio-economic conditions of black people. But it is not clear what this amelioration amounts to. There is little discussions in their writings about what the liberating society will be like. The notion and the process of liberation are often mentioned, but, surprisingly, one is hard put to find a sketch of what liberation would actually mean in the everyday lives of black people, what power they would possess, and what resources they would have access to" (2002:111 – first edition 1982). To address the issue of poverty and of economic injustice prophetically, we need to develop a thorough understanding of the internal dynamics of the society from which people must be liberated. "Without this clear-cut social theory about what is, it is difficult to say anything significant about what can be. The possibility of liberation is found only in within the depths of the actuality of oppression. Without an adequate social theory, this possibility is precluded" (2002:112).[3] As South African theologians we can intensely identify with West's proposals. During the struggle years we were quite clear on the evils that we oppose – racism, classism, sexism, economic injustice, the gap between rich and poor, etc. Now that we are challenged to participate in the reconstruction of South African society we have become more quiet and less engaged. West's appeal for thorough social and economic analysis encourage us to revalue the task of technical analysis that so many South African theologians were engaged in during the struggle years, especially under the influence of Latin American liberation theologians.

d. The policy discourse, according to Gustafson (1988a:269; 1988b:45-53), involves dialogue with decision makers and people in positions of responsibility. Attempts are made to influence their decisions and policies. In the process the public opinion on an issue is also influenced. The importance of this discourse for addressing poverty almost speaks for itself. In our country there is growing meetings between church leaders and government on poverty and developmental issues. The public policy liaison offices of various church bodies and denominations increasingly strive to influence the lawmaking process on poverty related issues.[4] There is indeed more work to be done with regard to influencing the public opinion and public policy on the uprooting of poverty. Philip Wogaman (2000:264-272), an American theologian who ministers for several years to politicians in Washington, amongst others Bill Clinton, suggests various ways in which public

3 In his identification of the lack of an adequate social theory in black theological approaches West spells out the questions that such a social theory should be addressing. "An undisputable claim of black theology is America's unfair treatment of black people. What is less apparent is the way in which black theologians understand the internal dynamics of liberal capitalist America, how it functions, why it operates the way it does, who possess substantive power, and where it is headed. As noted earlier, black theologians do not utilise a social theory that relates the oppression of black people to the overall makeup of America's system of production, foreign policy, political arrangement, and cultural practices" (2002:113). West does not suggest that black theologians do not engage in the technical discourse. He is of opinion that they do so insufficiently. They analyse racial injustices without engaging in analyses of the national and international economies, culture and power relations in these spheres.

4 Various church bodies and denominations have opened public policy liaison offices at parliament, e g the South African Council of Churches, the South African Catholic Bishops Conference, the Dutch Reformed Church and the His People Ministries.

policy can be influenced. This can occur through influencing the public ethos and opinion that underlies public decision making, educating the church's membership on particular issues, influencing decisions in a more direct way such as lobbying and presentations at portfolio committees of parliament, supporting particular candidates for office and even forming Christian democratic parties in extraordinary circumstances, civil disobedience when it is warranted and participation in revolution in truly extreme circumstances. The appeal of North American black theologian, Gayraud Wilmore (1999:237), for participation in the policy discourse should be heeded. Wilmore pleads that the theological, cultural and political implications of Black Theology be made matters of public discourse. The aim should not be to be exclusive academic guilds, but intellectual think-tanks for religious activists. The focus on Biblical revelation and personal ethics should be paralleled with the doing of theology in the public arena (1999:238).[5]

2. PROPHETIC SPEAKING IS INFORMED AND INFORMS

Abovementioned four discourses influence one another. On the basis of Gustafson's argument that these four discourses complement one another (1988b:53), we henceforth describe the reciprocal influence of the prophetic and other discourses.

a. The prophetic discourse is influenced by the narrative discourse. The narratives that we hear or not hear, that we are exposed to or are not exposed to, influence our visions and imaginations on the one hand. On the other hand, exposure to these narratives help us to identify the evils that should be responded to with criticism and indictment. What I plead for, therefore, is that we are exposed to poverty, that we experience the smell of poverty, that we hear the noise of poverty, as Aucamp formulates it. I plead that we here the stories of poverty, suffering and despair. However, we should not only be exposed to the stories of despair, but also of hope, patience and courage and of small victories. Where we pay attention to these stories at the margins of society, we are able to set appropriate agendas and priorities for prophetic speaking.

The prophetic discourse also impacts on the narrative discourse. One of the strongest criticisms against the narrative approaches in ethics is that they do not speak normatively but only descriptively. Prophetic speaking enriches the narrative speaking by bringing this normative aspect to the fore. Thereby any suggestion of moral relativism and even moral nihilism are countered.

b.The prophetic discourse is informed by the technical discourse. In the previous section we already referred to West's arguments in favour of involvement in the technical discourse. The North American Reformed theologian, Allen Verhey (2002:320), also reckons that prophetic speaking is enhanced by the technical discourse. The gifts and skills of managers and economists, and their realistic analyses and specialised knowledge that allow plausible predictions of the consequences of actions and policies enrich the prophetic task. He pleads for a relationship of mutuality and complementarity between the prophetic and technical discourses. "… lest those who style themselves prophets in this economic world put at risk its little (but real) accomplishments by an indiscriminate criticism of the real choices, and lest the managers risk amnesia" (2002:321).

It is, however, also important to note that the prophetic discourse enriches the technical discourse. In the above quote Verhey suggests that the technical discourse can suffer from amnesia

5 In the same vein Stackhouse (2000:16-18) portrays the task of persuasion and activism as one of the three crucial tasks of ethics and theology in the public sphere.

if the participants in that discourse are not reminded of the vision of a good society. Important, indispensable facts might not be taken into consideration if the prophetic voices are quiet. In this regard North American feminist theologian, Sallie McFague (2001:181-202), states that it is the task of prophetic discourse to continuously spell out the vision of a good society and also of the type of people we are supposed to be and the types of lives we are supposed to live and to cooperate with economists and other technical experts in working out programmes and plans that help to embody that vision.

c. The prophetic discourse is informed by the policy discourse. Being aware of what is happening in the public debate, what issues are dominant, what the stance of the public debate and opinion is, all influence the agenda and priorities of the prophetic speaking of the church. Only a church who pay attention and who hears and sees what is going on around us is able to live responsible – also with regard to its prophetic calling. Against this background Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1963:67) reminds us that the first question that responsible people ask is the question: what is happening, what is going on around us, what is God doing, and what is the fitting response to what is happening and to what God is doing in the world around us?

The prophetic discourse influences the policy discourse. In fact, there is agreement that it is exactly in the sphere of public opinion formation and public policy formulation that the prophetic voices of churches should be heard. Verhey (2002:317-318) demonstrates this point by referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. The compassion that the Samaritan showed to the one victim would have prompted him to more programmatic and policy issues should there be more victims that he had bandages for and more victims than his donkey could bear.

This brief and cursory investigation of the relationship between the prophetic and the other three discourses makes clear that prophetic speaking cannot be done adequately if it is done in isolation from the other discourses.

3. VISION AND INDICTMENT

a. One dimension of prophetic speaking is the proclamation of a vision of an alternative to the society of poverty, despair and brokenness.

Sallie McFague, speaks in confessional language about this vision of a good society. She portrays the good society in Trinitarian terms. The transcendent awesome God is also our intimate friend. “And for each and everyone of us God wishes nothing but our flourishing” (2001:18). In Jesus Christ, especially in his resurrection, we have the hope that the love of God for the dispossessed and oppressed will not die, but live again for us and in us (2001:20). The Spirit works in us so that we can live for the flourishing of others. Through the process of deification we serve the flourishing of all life, human life and the life of the whole ecosystem.[6] The deification that the Spirit works in us entails that we are freed from self-centredness. We recognise that we are grounded in God and we focus on our neighbours. As people who are God’s beloved we understand abundant life as living from and toward God. We know the good life is life lived in

6 McFague (2001:162-162,167) describes nature as part of the poor, the so-called new poor, as part of those who suffer due to gender race, sexual orientation, physical and mental challenges. God the creator and redeemer cares not only for the one percent of creation that humans constitute, but also for the natural world that needs to be loved as having intrinsic worth, and hence be treated with justice and care just like humans.

God's ordering of reality. It is to live in empathy for others, it is to know them and feel with them (2001:20-23). "... life in the Spirit is becoming like God, conforming our wills to God's will, doing God's work in the world. The empty self can now become full of God; detachment from the distorted goods (money, power, fame) allows for attachment to genuine goods (God, other people, the natural world)" (2001:22).

Documents of churches like the Belhar Confession 1986 and statements of individual Christians, like the famous "I have a dream" speech of Martin Luther King junior, as well as various Biblical passages can also be investigated for their visionary speaking.[7]

The prophetic vision of flourishing and hope, love and empathy, attachment and solidarity is to be clearly and continuously articulated in a world of poverty and despair, hopelessness and isolation.

b. With regard to the indictment dimension of prophetic speaking South Africans in the context of a young democracy can learn from black theologians in the USA who operate in a more established democracy. These theologians are of opinion that despite the existence of an old democracy, the abolishment of slavery in the 19th century and the successes of the civil rights movement in the 1960's, many people in the USA still suffer, not only under racism, but also under poverty. These theologians clearly unmask the causes and symptoms of poverty. In 1999 the North American black theologian, James Cone, wrote an article titled *Looking back, going forward*, in a book of critical essays to celebrate the thirtieth birthday of his famous book on black theology. In this article Cone pleads that the indictment dimension of prophetic speaking not be abandoned. This can so easily happen amongst black theologians for the sake of being accepted by the white establishment (1999:255, 257). In passionate language Cone motivates why the task of critical speaking cannot be abandoned so many years later. "The anger I felt while writing Black Theology and Black Power was fuelled by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Thirty years later as I prepared the Aims of Religion address on the anniversary date of King's death, I am still just as angry, because America, when viewed from the perspective of the black poor, is no closer to King's dream of a just society than when he was killed . While the black middle class has made considerable economic progress, the underclass, despite America's robust economy, is worse off in 1998 than in 1968. While the statistics are well-known, they still fail to shock or outrage most Americans. One-third of young black males are involved in the criminal justice system. One-half of black babies are born in poverty, and their life expectancy in the urban ghetto is lower than that of Bangladesh" (1999:252).[8]

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7 The Confession of Belhar 1986 that was adopted by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church speaks about the vision of the alternative society in theological language. In article three it clearly confesses the type of life that God intends for his people, namely justice to the oppressed, bread for the hungry, liberation for the captives, sight for the blind, support for the despair, protection for the stranger and help for the orphan and widow. Various passages in both the Old and New Testaments sketches a vision of life that flourishes. Not only the explicit visionary texts in the prophets and the book of Revelations fulfil this function, but all other genres in the Bible, e g narratives (of Ruth and the prodigal son), songs (of Hannah and Mary), proverbs (various examples) and prayers (of Habakkuk and the Our Father) can be investigated for this vision.

8 Besides the indictment discourse of these theologians, various ecclesial statements and Biblical passages could also be investigated for the indictment discourse. Besides its portrayal of the vision of the good life, the Belhar Confession 1986 for instance, also calls upon churches to criticise the wrongs in currenty society. The church is to witness and struggle against any form of injustice. As disciples of Jesus Christ they witness to the mighty and privileged who serve only their own interests and who treats

In our young democracy where we have achieved political liberation but not economic liberation the picture that Cone sketches looks familiar. His passionate appeal for critical prophetic speaking in order to address poverty and economic injustice deserves our serious attention.[9]

c. Until now it has become clear that there is room for prophetic speaking about poverty if it occurs in cooperation with other forms of speaking (sections 1 and 2). In this section the theological support for prophetic speaking also became clear. This analysis therefore paves the way for prophetic speaking about poverty by churches. In order to strengthen and sustain this twofold prophetic task of the church and in order to ensure that the church in all its forms[10] engage in this task, participation in the practices of the church is crucial. In the next section of this paper, therefore, these resources for the awakening and sustaining of prophetic speaking will be investigated.

4. PRACTICES, VISION AND INDICTMENT

Various Christian practices awaken and sustain the twofold prophetic task of the church. I concur with Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass' definition of a practice. "By 'Christian practices' we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world" (2002:18). Practices refer to cooperative and meaningful human endeavours in which certain beliefs, virtues and skills are entwined with certain behaviours, relationships and symbols ((2002:19-21).

A practice, according to Dykstra and Bass, is not only any socially meaningful action such as keeping records for the shelter for the homeless or welcoming visitors to a worship service or sharing a family meal. Neither does it refer to the ascetical and spiritual disciplines and exercises that people participate in to grow spiritually. Dykstra and Bass recognises that their understanding of practice is informed by Alisdair MacIntyre's definition of this concept. They, however, differ from MacIntyre therein that unlike MacIntyre they do not think that practices are normed internally only. They interpret practices theologically, i e they argue that practices are also normed through their responsive relationships to God (2002:21 note 8).

Dykstra and Bass' description of hospitality as a practice helps to clarify their understanding of practices. Providing a homeless man at a shelter with a bed is not in itself a practice, but is one feature thereof. Other constituent features of the practice of hospitality is the Biblical stories that

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others unfairly and injustly. In the same vein, the various genres in the Bible offers criticism of injustices and wrongs in society. The above-mentioned views of Cone and Verhey rest in this original Biblical critique of society.

9 Allen Verhey describes the indictment character of prophetic speaking in clear language. "... voices raised in memory of Jesus and in hope, crying out that this is not the way it is supposed to be. Prophets protest injustice; they beat against oppression with their words. Prophets spot – and condemn – the idolatry that stands behind anxiety and greed (Col.3:5). They irritate, embarrass, and denounce the smug and complacent. They uncover corruption, whether at the scales of the marketplace or at the scales of justice.They unveil the foolishness masquerading as wisdom. But they save their harshest words for those who name God's name without caring about justice, without providing for the poor" (2002:320-321).

10 South African theologian Dirkie Smit identifies six forms of the church, namely the worship service, local congregation, denomination, ecumenical church, individual Christians in their normal daily roles and individual Christians in their involvement in organs of civil society and volunteer organisations (1996:120-121).

shape the way in which hosts view their guests; the specific habits, virtues, knowledge and other capacities of spirit and mind that the hosts bring to the situation; the liturgical words and gestures that manifest God's hospitality to humankind and our obligations to each other; and the normal day to day domestic hosting that prepares family members to break bread with strangers in less familiar surroundings as well (2002:19).

It is clear that practices develop over time in the context of a community with God and each other. They combine various crucial facets of our lives, thinking and acting, being, believing and doing.

Various congregational practices can be utilised to develop, sustain and embody the vision of a society where all life flourish. Bass and her colleagues identify twelve different practices, namely honouring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God (2002:19). In our book, *Die ligtheid van die lig*, Robert Vosloo and I described four practices, namely hospitality, Sabbath, baptism and holy community (2002:95-119).

By way of example I illustrate how the practices of Sabbath and prayer keep the dream of a society free from poverty alive and how it simultaneously paves the way for critical engagement with current societies.

The Sabbath law in the two versions of the Decalogue gives two motivations for keeping the Sabbath. Exodus20 states that the Sabbath be kept to remind us of the fact that God created the world in six days and that He rested on the seventh day. For human beings who, according to the creation narrative in Genesis 1, was created on the sixth day, this means that the seventh day, the first day that the sun rises for us, we do not go out to work and care for ourselves. No, we rest, because God cares. The Sabbath teaches us that we are ones who are being cared for. Even if we have to work hard and under difficult circumstances, we enjoy it. We do not carry it out in an anxious way, but in the knowledge that we are being looked after by the living God. We do not commodify our time, i e striving hard to fill every moment of our day with anxious hard work and performance in order to be valued highly by others, but we recognise that the God who gives time to us, is caring for us. Upholding the practice of Sabbath, awakens the vision of a humanity that cares for each other and other forms of life because they know that they are being cared for. Simultaneously the commodifying of both time and of humans who are viewed as mere producers and consumers is severely criticised.

Deuteronomy 5 grounds Sabbath keeping in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Sabbath therefore reminds us that we are not created to be slaves, but to be free flourishing beings. The practice of Sabbath keeping has redemptive implications for so many people entrapped in poverty. It has liberating consequences for those who work under dehumanising circumstances. Sabbath keeping keeps the vision alive of what it means to be human, and of the restoration of dignity to humans and to all forms of life. In fact, not only humans are included in the celebration of Sabbath, but also the nonhuman part of creation (cf Exodus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 5:14).

The practice of prayer also strengthens the vision of a society free from poverty and despair. The kingdom of God that we pray for in the Our Father, for instance, refers to that type of life where God's reign is fully actualised and where all of life flourish to the fullest. We often say that needs teach us about prayer, but we should turn this famous saying around to prayer teaches us about need. Prayer, on the one hand, helps us to see God's vision of a new society and on the other hand it helps us to realise how the society we are living in differs from this new society, how much need there is in current society. And this prompts us to work for an alternative society. This work for a new society involves prayers of intercession, of protest against the broken state of affairs and of appeal to the Holy Spirit to make the new society of abundant life that God brings and for which

Jesus died a reality. This act of prayer encourages us to be involved in other acts that stand in service of the coming of this new society.

This action to embody what we pray for is in line with the nature of a practice. We engage in a practice not only to achieve a good end, but because of the inherent good of the practice itself. This means that practices do not only awaken and sustain the twofold prophetic speaking. In a sense it already constitutes prophetic speaking as this brief analysis of Sabbath and prayer has demonstrated.[11]

The argument outlined above is that Christian practices give birth to, let grow and sustain the prophetic task of Christians with respect to both visionary speaking and critical engagement. Moreover it helps to create a culture where prophetic speaking is not limited only to the declarations of church bodies or a few well articulated and courageous church leaders, but a culture where prophetic speaking is the task of all forms of the church, of all Christians in a variety of ways. The denominational and ecumenical church will be prophets by speaking out publicly in the media and in meetings with policy makers. Individual Christians fulfil their prophetic responsibility in their normal daily roles, in family life, work and neighbourhood where they keep the vision of an alternative society alive and where they reject consumerism and injustices, abuses and malpractices and policies that feed poverty. Individual Christians act as prophets where they participate in initiatives of civil society to oppose injustices and advocate the cause of a better life for all. The local congregation portray an alternative hopeful vision in their witness of sharing and caring. Worship services, sermons, prayers, celebration of sacraments and of the Sabbath are prophetic in that they, on the one hand, portray an alternative world where all life flourish and, on the other hand, criticise the current world where people die of hunger, and the rich get richer and the poor poorer, and where millions experience dehumanising living conditions.

5. CONCLUSION

These practices awaken and sustain the vision that we have to proclaim continuously and the criticism we have to voice faithfully and courageously. Practices help us to be faithful prophets, people who let the voice of the voiceless, poor and oppressed be heard and who thereby serve the restoration of their dignity as well as the dignity of the nonhuman part of creation.

And will not the stones start to cry out if the prophetic voice of Christians remain quiet in a world where poverty dehumanises millions of people everyday. In this broken world any hint in the direction that there is no room for prophetic speaking in a democratic context is totally unacceptable.[12] Doubting the prophetic task of the church is to take hope away from people and therefore to worsen their entrapment. Silence about their suffering is taking solidarity away from those who are already marginalised and alienated from well-being.

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11 This inherent good of the practice of prayer that we already experience is articulated by Hendrikus Berkhof (1979:514): gratitude for the works of God; worship of the being of God; celebration of God's love; confession of guilt in the realisation of who we are and what we do; faith, forgiveness and strength; mourning and protest about brokenness in the world; deliverance from troubles; discernment; harmony with and surrender to God's will for the world.

12 Dutch scholar, Gerrit de Kruijf (1994:236-241), argues that the church does not have a commission to speak prophetically in a democracy. Prophetic speaking in the Old Testament, according to him, took place in the context of a theocracy and in the New Testament within the community of faith. According to Sunday 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism prophetic speaking refers to the calling to confess the name of Christ. For Amesius and Voetius prophetic speaking entailed witnessing about the exemplary

Participants in the Christian practices are formed to be prophets who proclaim the vision of alternative possibilities, who courageously criticise persons, institutions, systems and policies that cause this dehumanisation, and who carry out this task in appropriate manner. Through this task of envisioning and indictment that is informed by narratives of despair and hope, and that is enriched by policy formulations and technical analyses, and that is sustained by Christian practices, faithful prophets discover that they indeed help that the plight of the voiceless be heard.

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character of Christ's holy life. According to him there is room for the church as institution to formulate public witnesses, on the basis of the *ultima ratio*, which means a situation has developed where obedience to God is in conflict with obedience to the state. He cites the Barmen Declaration as an example of such a witness. This *ultimate ratio* cannot, however, become the normal *ratio*. Such an institutionalising of the prophetic task is, according to him, in opposition to the understanding of and functioning of this office in the Biblical and church-historical traditions. De Kruijf attributes the endeavours to institutionalise the prophetic task of the church to the need to resist the privatisation of faith and to restore the public authority of the church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of the many questions that one can pose to De Kruijf is what the social implications with regard to poverty are of proclaiming the name and holiness of Christ. Moreover, does the persistence of poverty and dehumanising of people not in itself constitute an *ultima ratio*, a situation that cries out for a renewed and continued public confession of truth by all Christians, for the clearest prophetic witness?

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