

Buy, J¹

A sermon delivered at the opening of the Barmen/Belhar Consultation at Belhar, 18 October 2004

TEXT: JOB 42:8-9

One of the profound experiences of those who attended the 24th General Council Meeting of the WARC in Accra Ghana in July August this year, was a visit to the slave dungeons near the city. These formed part of a series of castles or forts built on the West African Coast that served as slave trading posts. Central to these castles were the churches attached to them that served as places of worship. However, while God was being worshiped on the upper floors, slaves were suffering and dying in the dungeons underneath. Those who survived incarceration in the dungeons were then taken to the 'door of no return' from where they were transported by ship to foreign shores. Many more died at sea while the remainder would suffer the hardship of slavery in new lands.

Doug Chial spoke of the experience of visiting these dungeons in the following way: "Pilgrims may be struck with horror in tasting the dungeon air, peering through the 'door of no return' by which countless Africans passed from dungeon to ship, and hearing the stories of life and death in the midst of unimaginable squalor recounted by the castle guides. But, perhaps most difficult to wrestle with will be the two castle chapels located directly over the dungeons in which African brothers and sisters were held. The smell of death and cries of terror mingled with the prayers of slave-trading Christians."

Reactions among those who visited the dungeons also differed. Rev. Prince Dibeela, principal of the Kgologano College in Botswana wrote: "A wave of anger and hatred gripped my soul. As the guide explained how our ancestors had been brutalized and forced through the little hole into the sea, I hated white folks. I hated them for what they did there, and for what they continue to do to black people." He found himself amazed that, for once, he was not in control of his emotions. Dr Roderick Hewitt of Jamaica, who is moderator of the Council for World Mission, experienced a sense of awe: "As the tour guide shared the story, the castle walls became my 'wailing wall'," he wrote. "The scent of the place made me shiver. I was standing on holy ground. My mind went to another level, of 'seeing and hearing' my ancestors. In the dungeon of no return, I heard their wailing, and I could take no more." For Wieske de Jong, a theology student from Kampen in the Netherlands, the shock came from a different perspective. She explains: "I knew I was on holy ground as I saw the Dutch inscription on the wall at the entrance of the castle. It wasn't the message as such that struck me most. It was the fact that it was written in my language. Not long ago, people speaking my language decided not to recognize other people as being human and then abused them in a way I still cannot quite imagine. I belong to a small part of the world. Where Europe once profited from slavery, now I profit from globalisation."

Upon reflection, many participants were able to transform their initial emotions into future commitments. Dr Hewitt, for instance, wrote: "El Mina is a dark epiphany that graphically records

1 Rev. James Buy is the moderator of the General Synod of the URSCA and minister of the URSCA congregation Wynberg.

what life is like when human beings lose all sense of seeing others as sacred beings. Slavery was the African Holocaust. However, the experience does not motivate me to engage in vengeance, because there can be no future for humanity without repentance and forgiveness.”

At El Mina castle there was a Dutch Reformed Church chapel on the upper floor. Above one of the doors we read an inscription from Psalm 91: “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord: My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.” The one question that continuously confronted those who visited this place was: How could it be? How could people become so blind in their faith and how could their faith become so divorced from the reality surrounding them? Some of us who visited the dungeons in the belly of the castle of El Mina could not but declare that we are standing on holy ground.

This Barmen/Belhar Conference starts at Belhar. And we too are called to remember the historic moment of the adoption of this confession in this church on 24th September 1986. It is not merely a historical memory. We meet here surrounded by a corporate memory of inscriptions speaking of the will of God in the context of the theological justification, founding and implementation of the policy of apartheid. We gather in memory of people of faith seeking to speak of a God whose face, hands and feet, whose heart and mind they could not recognize or find in the life experiences of black people in this country in the same way as one could not find in the upper chambers at El Mina. We meet in this place, not only in memory of a confession of who God was at that moment of truth in SA, but also as community of faith commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration, a declaration of faith that sought to speak the truth of God in the face of Nazism.

Against this backdrop I would like us to reflect on Job 42:8-9. In reading Job we are challenged in our understanding of and what we can say about the figure the text calls Job. Shall we speak of his patience in the spirit of the contemporary idiom? Should we rather engage on the nature of suffering on account of his life experiences? Do we need to find some theological explanation for a God who allowed Satan to put Job to the test in the manner described in the text? Are we finally to accept that we our efforts to understand the truth about God in light of our experiences and those of others in our world and time are doomed to failure?

The search of orthodoxy, for right belief or praise and kerugma, for right proclamation seems to present hermeneutic key in understanding the Book of Job and becomes its nexus. I say ‘seems’ because at the same time we do so at a peril of being contradicted by voices declaring otherwise. Be that as it may, the challenge the text poses to us does not disappear.

The Book of Job is one of the oldest biblical texts. Some judge its date of origin to be about the same as that of Genesis, namely the 6th century BC, during the exile. It is a text that seeks, in the same way as the polemical confession creation in Genesis, to relate a nation’s life experience of oppression, violence, depravation, poverty, marginalising, disease and death. It relates these life experiences within a framework concerned with the will of God, with just punishment and with personal or national responsibility for ill’s experience. Whoever find themselves in this dilemma are confronted with their experience and relationship with God. The text reflects the intensity of making sense of whom God is, what God ordains, how God establishes and maintains relationships, of fellowship and community within humanity and creation. It raises the question of the basis on which humanity can continue to trust God.

The narrative of Job speaks of the rejection of any notion of subscribing guilt for the suffering. It rejects the notion of any divine justification for the grievous condition in which humanity finds itself and fundamentally questions the belief that God permits destructive life experiences as gratuitous means of satisfying faith requirements. So, when Job’s wife called on him to reject God he refuses. When his friends declare: one should look for some divine motive for calamities that befalls one and calls on Job to consider personal guilt as the cause of his suffering, Job rebels. In

fact, he does not respond these human engagements, but engages with God on the issue. He steadfastly holds that community gives sensibility to relationships; he steadfastly holds his life finds sensibility in his having been a champion of justice - in delivering the poor and wretched, helping the orphan and the widow, being eyes of the blind, feet of the lame, being a father to the needy (Job 29:7-17) – and in living with integrity (Job 31:6b). He argues that, surely, for God, as axis of community, calamity should befall the unrighteous (Job 31:3).

To engage on these matters, to hold counsel with God, cannot happen without knowledge (Job 38:2). The unique relationship, universally and in particular, between God, and His chosen people is expressed in the concept: “to know”. The knowledge of God signifies an intimate relationship with God. It embraces more than intellectual knowledge; it concerns the whole of human life. It is communion with God, it is the knowledge of the heart demanding love, demanding acts in accordance with God’s will, walking humbly with God, recognizing God as God and surrendering ones will to His reign (Vriezen).

God’s response to Job’s wrestling with the question as to why all of these things had happened to him (Job 38-41) signifies the centre, the core, of remaining in relationship with God. Chapters 38-41 guides Job to understand that the knowledge needed to rightly confess God is absolutely bound to God’s revelation. In the face of irresolvable paradoxes the believer gains insights in the precincts of the sanctuary that brings solution to the problems that oppress humanity. It is when standing before the face of Yahweh, in the presence of God, that the realisation dawns that the justice of God dictates life and enables communion. It is in this context that God declares: I am angry with Eliphaz, Bildad and Sophar. They have not spoken the truth about me as has my servant Job. The obvious point to assume is that God does not essentially contradict Job’s friends but relates to Job.

In the same sense Oosthuizen reminded us in his reflection on Psalm 50 at the 10th Anniversary of the Confession of Belhar, that, on the basis of Article 1 of the confession, we are called by God to account to the faith that is within us. The confession does not lend itself to become a confession of the guilt of others but rather is the test of humbly receiving the grace of the knowledge of God as manifested in communion with God and creation. The Confession of Belhar becomes the stuttering and wrestling discovery of who God is in the face of the faith community departing from its origin and ascribing to God the cause of what became the life of apartheid in the church and society.

Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* declares on the basis of the Psalms that the faith community comes before God in serious illness, in deep isolation from God and humanity, amidst threats and persecution, imprisonment and whatever conceivable peril without denying its reality or deceiving themselves with pious words about it. They allow it to stand as a severe ordeal of faith, indeed at times they no longer see beyond the suffering. In situations such as these the only appropriate responses are those concerned with full communion, with the God who is righteousness and love.

The words of the Barmen Declaration were first spoken in the time of Nazism and those of the Confession of Belhar in the time of Apartheid. Both speak in their affirmations and rejections of a faith community that Bonhoeffer describes in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* as “a community continually addressed by the Word of God - both in the historical Christ event and in the current working of the Spirit that gives it meaning” . Both contexts, that of Nazi Germany in 1934 and Apartheid South Africa in 1986, do not in any way predetermine the luxury of confessing in chorus in the absence of a broader consensus. Neither does it seek to represent a compendium of faith in the basic speaking of the truth about God. It does not gain credence in the multitudes that support it, nor loses its meaning in the face of its critics, for it does not primarily seek to convince the Eliphazes, Bildads and Sophars of this world to live with integrity, but rather seek to speak the truth

about God. As such, as Bonhoeffer remarked on this own German contest, "... the Christian life in the Church...[is]...an answer to the challenge of any secular mentality that stands against Christianity, either in the form of terror of an all-powerful state ideology or in the form of society's paralysing indifference which does not allow any decisive significance to be attached to the question about God and truth" (*ibid* 125-126).

One could also apply what Bonhoeffer said to theological justification of apartheid and the apartheid policy itself. If this is so, we cannot be distracted by any debates that want to relegate any confession that aims to speak to truth about God to an optional level dictated by the weaknesses of some. However, this does not in any way imply that we are not bound to the Reformed principle that being Reformed also means always reforming and standing to be corrected - not by whimsical notions of correct theological language, but only by the conviction of speaking the truth about God.

May God bless this consultation as over the next two days it seeks to reflect on the meaning of the Barmen Declaration and the Confession of Belhar. May God confront us in the faces and voices of all who seek to understand the truth contained in Barmen and Belhar - not only for the sake of history, but also for the sake of posterity. May we evermore find ourselves on holy ground, declaring and affirming in the words of these confessions, in the words of these beacons of hope and faith, that humanity will never again experience such conditions without knowing the truth about God.

Amen.