



Jeremiah, by Selma Hurwitz, Potomac, Maryland, Had-Ba-Kah (metalized thread), 1979.

Prayer and Poverty

Isaiah 58:1-10

INTRODUCTION

The God who has created us invites us into a direct relationship with himself through prayer. This is one of the most exciting things about the spiritual life. Talking about God becomes less important to us than talking to God. Thinking about God begins to take place more and more in the presence of God. As Martin Buber has put it in his widely read book on this subject, we enter into an "I-Thou" relationship with God which changes our life forever.

There are times, however, when our hunger for God is not satisfied by our prayers. We cry out to God and try in every way known to us to be present to him. But our "hunger" continues and our restlessness increases. Why doesn't God make himself known to us and offer us the peace of his presence as he has promised? Sometimes this condition continues even when we attend worship frequently and work very hard at the "disciplines" of prayer and meditation. At such times we may be tempted to give up prayer altogether or we may direct our frustration at God, as the psalmists and prophets did. "How long, O Lord? How long?"

If we will listen to these Old Testament prophets, however, we may hear an unexpected and disturbing answer. Only those who show compassion and justice for the poor can expect to experience the life-giving presence of God in prayer and worship. All of the major Old Testament prophets agree—

Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. All of them emphasize the direct connection between inward piety and concern for the poor. Their references to this subject are so numerous that this constitutes one of the dominant themes of their teaching, a theme later reflected in the ministry of Jesus. It is clear from all this that those who wish to experience the fulness of God's life-giving presence will listen to what the prophets are telling us about the connection between prayer and poverty.

COMMENTARY

There were many factors in the life of the people of Israel which prepared the way for the ministry of the prophets. (1) Nearly every political administration was corrupt. (2) Economic injustice was mounting, with the poor growing increasingly destitute. (3) Foreign intervention was a constant threat, but the leaders put their faith in military arms and alliances rather than in God. (4) Individual immorality was a serious problem. (5) Religious syncretism was the most crucial issue, as threats to pure "Yahweh worship" arose everywhere in the land. In all these ways the Hebrews had wandered far from the covenant faith of the Mosaic period when they felt that God had chosen them to be "his people."

Against this background there arose a succession of spiritually gifted prophets, probably the greatest men Israel ever produced apart from Moses himself. The word for prophet in Hebrew (*nabi*) means one who communicates the divine will or one who speaks for God. We use the word very loosely today, usually thinking of the "predicting" element in prophecy. It is true the prophets often spoke about future events, but this was not their major function. They were not so much "fore-tellers" as "forthtellers"—speaking forth on behalf of God. They protested against dishonesty, injustice, idolatry, and religious syncretism and tried to call the people back to the Mosaic tradition. In the time of Jesus, people said, "A great prophet has risen among us!" In our time there is an urgent

need for their insights into God's purpose for our human life.

All of the major prophets were deeply concerned about the plight of the poor. Amos, for example, protested about the way in which the rich were "selling the needy for a pair of shoes" and "trampling the head of the poor into the dust of the earth." (Amos 2:6-7. See also 5:21-24 and 8:4-10) Micah protested against the rich who were violent and dishonest in their dealing with the poor. "They covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance." (Micah 2:1-5 and 6:9-13) One of the most striking passages occurs in the Book of Ezekiel when the prophet is talking about the city of Sodom. Most of us think of sexual immorality as the reason for the city's destruction, but Ezekiel gives another reason: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49. See also 34:1-6) When Jesus cleansed the temple of the dishonest money changers he quoted words from Jeremiah about the house of God becoming a den of robbers. This same passage contains an important message about the poor: "For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever." (Jeremiah 7:1-11)

When Jesus preached in his home village of Nazareth he used as his text a passage from the second part of Isaiah which talks about preaching good news to the poor and setting at liberty those who are oppressed. (Isaiah 61:1-4 and Luke 4:16-30) In the same part of Isaiah there is another passage which is especially helpful because of the way it connects worship with concern for the poor. From ancient times Israel celebrated in worship the great historical events in which God had revealed himself. Isaiah 58 is set in the midst of one of these celebrations. The people have gathered to worship God with prayer

and fasting. They are grateful for the way in which he has made himself known and they desire now to experience his healing and empowering presence. "They delight to draw near to God." (vs. 2) But they are disappointed. They do not feel God's presence with them in their worship experience. They are faithful in their religious practices, they seek God every day, they are eager to know how to enter into relationship with him. But they are disappointed because they do not feel God's presence with them. "Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and thou takest no knowledge of it?" (vs. 3)

God's answer, spoken through the prophet, provides deep insight into the nature of our relationship with him:

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

(vss. 6-7)

It is important to remember that these words were spoken in response to questions raised about worship, prayer, and fasting. The answer that is given is that the thing which makes these spiritual disciplines most effective is concern for others, especially the poor and the oppressed. This concern has the effect of releasing God's power and love:

"Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am."

(vss. 8-9)

The message is clear. In worship and prayer, God's life-giving presence is fully experienced only by those who show compassion and justice for the poor.

There are two other dimensions to the Old Testament message which help us understand this vital insight into the nature of our relationship with God. First, it is important to know that *God reveals himself in the Old Testament as one who is especially upon the side of the poor and oppressed.* "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." (Deut. 10:17-18) He is a "stronghold for the oppressed," and he does not forget the cry of the poor. (Ps. 9:9 and 12) "He saves the fatherless . . . and the needy from the hand of the mighty. So the poor have hope." (Job 5:15) "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers." (Jer. 20:13)

These and many other Old Testament passages show how God identifies with the poor. This means that when we are with the poor, comforting them and ministering to them, we find ourselves experiencing the presence of God in special ways. This is what Jesus was saying in the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31ff), and it is what Mother Teresa talks about when she is describing her work with the poor. In giving her life to "the poorest of the poor" she experiences Christ's presence in her own life.

Another helpful Old Testament insight is that *God offers his power and love to individuals through their participation in the community.* The Bible knows very little of "solitary religion." The promise given to Abraham was a promise for the whole people of God. (Exodus 3:8) The whole community receives the blessing in Canaan (Deut. 7:1-8:20) and the whole assembly will be blessed or cursed according to their righteousness. (Deut. 28) As far as material well-being is concerned, collective wealth rather than individual prosperity remains the ideal throughout the Old Testament. God does not want one

part of his people to be well-off while another part suffers. This is helpful to us in our contemporary situation because it keeps us from thinking of the poor as "outsiders." They are part of our community, part of our family, which means that their well-being is closely linked to our own. The deeper we live into experience of community, the greater our incentive for committing ourselves to the cause of the poor and oppressed.