

Behold, I make all things new

The Sermon by the Most Revd Renato Mag-Gay Abibico, Prime Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, at the opening of the Council of Churches of East Asia Full Assembly, October 2015

Good evening brothers and sisters in Christ!

First, as the host Province of the Council of the Church in East Asia and with our ecumenical partner, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, I welcome you all to this 2015 CCEA Full Assembly. I pray that our coming together for worship, fellowship and business will further strengthen the bond that unite us as a Council.

I do not pretend to be unaware of the hassles and difficulties that some of you may have experienced in coming to this assembly but I simply hope that you would take solace and comfort in the love and joy that we have in welcoming you to this great and wonderful city of Manila. May you enjoy your brief stay in this wonderful city which shall be your home away from home in the next six days.

May I also commend the Executive Committee of CCEA and the preparations committee that planned and coordinated the different activities of this full assembly which I know had been very taxing. In wisdom, they have selected to present to us a significant theme and serious issues that shall form the focus of our reflections and discussions in this assembly.

It is worth hearing what God is telling us as a Church in this region amidst the issues of human suffering brought about by poverty, migration and human trafficking. These are life and death issues that the Church cannot afford to ignore if indeed it is a sacrament of hope and change in the world. And so we thank The Rev. Tom Maddela who prepared our opening and closing liturgy in this full assembly because they are not only inspiring but truly incarnate us into the sufferings, failures, longings and aspirations of humanity and the world.

I have no intention to deal with statistics but my little research in the internet reveals the following: The world's total population is more than 7.3 billion. Half of the total world's population – more than 3 billion people live less than US\$ 2.50 a day. More than 1.3 billion in extreme poverty live less than US\$ 1.25 a day. 805 million people worldwide do not have enough food to eat.

More than 750 million people lack access to clean drinking water which is the cause for diarrhea that kills about 842,000 people every year globally or approximately 2,300 people a day.

These are only figures but they are high definitions of the magnitude of a suffering humanity in the world today from the pangs of poverty. They are empirical evidences that poverty is indeed a reality in the world today that reduces into mockery the world's avowed claim of success in the field of science, development, politics and economics.

Poverty is a scourge to humanity. It is never a situation that calls for rejoicing and celebration. Instead, it is construed as a curse on those it holds captives. Its embodiment is nothing but hunger, misery, hopelessness.

In a theological perspective, it is a scandal to the divine purpose of abundant life for all, given the fact that creation is all about abundance. In the mind of God, hunger is foreign. No one should be deprived and marginalized from sharing and enjoying the bounty of creation.

And so poverty aside from being a scandal to God's divine purpose in creation is also construed as a historical failure of the Divine purpose of creating a world of abundance. But poverty is not only about physical suffering. It also carries with it an uglier truth that assails human dignity where the poor are reduced to powerlessness that they cannot make decisions for themselves.

The rich and powerful decide their fate and destiny. They are being marginalized, exploited and oppressed thus making poverty also a justice issue. It is from this sense of powerlessness that the poor have become vulnerable to the call of any opportunity for livelihood or greener pasture in foreign land without counting the cost because they simply have no other option.

And so it is also very important that we deal about migration and human trafficking in this assembly because aside from other causes they are the by-products of poverty. And that the untold stories of suffering, exploitation and indignities borne by migrants and victims of human trafficking are unimaginable.

Just very recently we are shocked by the news of the suffering of those thousands of Bangladeshi Rohingya who were abandoned at sea by their traffickers or the same fate of suffering by those thousands of Syrian migrants who sought asylum in Germany. These people were trying to escape poverty and suffering from their homelands.

Poverty however did not emanate from a vacuum, neither is it the result of indolence as the most convenient claim of some people, especially the rich. It is not even the will of a generous God but is the result of an unjust social construct created and orchestrated by human beings as actors.

In short, the problem of poverty cannot be dissociated from its economic and political circumstances –such as production, management, consumption and distribution of goods where human beings can exercise control.

Therefore it is very important that economics while it is a secular activity should be made sacred by being baptized or informed with the values of the Kingdom because any human activity that is devoid of moral inspiration, even how good it is, can still lead to perdition.

The common good should always be the ultimate criterion in the production, consumption, management and distribution of goods. Justice finds a home in this kind of economy while it breathes hope for the world because that no one is marginalized. But alas, the present world's economics remain to be the workshop of human greed and selfishness where profit is the ultimate measure of success. And so poverty is here to stay with us.

The reality of poverty in the world is a historical proof that we human beings are under the judgement of the same God who has entrusted to us the responsibility of being stewards of His creation. God speaks to us audibly in the cries of those who suffer the burden of an unjust social order, or theologically speaking, a world that is defiled by sin.

The poor prophecy to the Church, they evangelize the Church. This is the challenge to the Church today that is of immense difficulty and cost but which cannot be avoided because the sins of this modern world that make life fragile and vulnerable to many people are grim faces of human rejection of God and rebellion against His will.

Can the Church hear God's voice in a world that seeks light, cleansing and salvation? Can it prove its honest and authentic behaviour and worth? Is our ministry confined only to the traditional way of mission such as church planting, church maintenance, liturgy, administration of sacraments, building finances and others when in fact we can do something more concrete to share in the building of a just and humane communities.

Just as Jesus did not spend most of his ministry inside the synagogue but outside in the world where there is human brokenness and hopelessness so that he can touch people's lives with God's love, so must the church be in the world but not defiled by the world, so that it may become an oasis of spirituality of engagement rather than escapism.

In the words of Pope Francis, "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been in the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."

Archbishop Justin Welby in reacting positively to the UN's Global Goals for Sustainable Development that seeks to tackle poverty, injustice and climate change also says, "our response today and the years to come, must seek to emulate the sacrificial pattern of the love and servant leadership that is demonstrated perfectly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The powerful are called to serve, the rich to give, and the vulnerable to be cherished, so that they may flourish and stand strong."

He further says, "my prayer today is that all of us would have the courage to, live our lives for the common good to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly in the pursuit of a world free of poverty and in justice." That, coming from a very respectable church leader in the Anglican Church makes me proud to be an Anglican.

If ever Karl Marx accuses religion as an "opium of the people" it is because it can become anaesthetic that numbs peoples' awareness of their situation." It makes tolerable the intolerable. It weakens the necessity of finding solutions to a problem, a cure to a wound and steals from the imagination that there must be an alternative to present conditions, while it drains from the heart the courage to struggle for change." (Alistair Kee, Edinburgh).

The Church is lost in the same mediocrity as an instrument of the Kingdom if it regards itself as a self-contained community that is isolated and unmindful of the burning issues outside of its door. Instead of being an instrument of God's Kingdom, it might become an instrument of Babylon; instead of being a Prophet in the world, it might become a false prophet.

And this is what Jesus told the false prophets, "you hypocrites! You give to God one tenth of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practice without neglecting the others" (Matt. 23:23).

The late Dr. William Scott also says that, "false prophets are interested in treasure that must be insured against moth, rust and thieves. Acting as investment broker for a Banker God, they promise dividends to followers who deposit tithes with them in Jesus's name. They preach wealth as a sign of God's approval, no matter how ill-gotten, and poverty as the wages of sin. False prophets are not interested in justice or righteousness: they do not criticize its lack in high places.... They do not defend the oppressed against their oppressors."

When Martial Law was declared in 1972 by the late President Ferdinand E. Marcos, the entire Filipino nation was in fear because the democratic institutions that served as sanctuaries to human rights have been completely dismantled. Hence, the more than two decades of martial law in this country has brought about various kinds of human rights violations while it paved unbridled corruption in government.

Jose Lacaba describes those years as "Days of Disquiet, Nights of Rage." But hope was kept alive by the prophetic voice of the Church, individuals and organizations, who dared the sword of martial law in the name of truth. It fanned the embers of courage among the Filipino people to do something to change and re-write their history.

The EDSA revolution in 1986 is a testament that people when inspired by the God of truth can re-write their history. And the good news is that the Church never abandoned the Filipino people at those darkest times of their history but marched with them hand in hand in their movement to freedom and democracy.

I am sure that Anglicans all over the world are aware and conversant of the five marks of mission: “To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom; To teach, baptize and nurture new believers; to respond to human needs by loving service; to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation and to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”

We shall note that the last three marks of mission are directed towards the social, economic and political implications and demands of the Gospel. To be honest, many of us are more at home with the first two marks of mission because commitment to the demands of the last three are hardly affordable because of the risk involved as the artisans of violence, corruption, injustice and others would not give in to change in silver platter.

But these are the acid test to our sense of discipleship as partners with God in his re-creative and redemptive work in the world so that the world can have a chance for a new and fresh beginning.

Our theme in this assembly offers to humanity a fresh wind of hope. God said, “behold, I make all things new” to assure us of his passion of renewing and transforming all creation that was defiled by sin to a new heaven and new earth.

This means that the world will be completely made new to embody the totality of our longings and aspirations; the dawning of a new history where righteousness and justice shall reign and where God shall dwell with His people. And He shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

We all know that God can easily make all things new in just an instant with the snap of His fingers but I have the strong feeling that He won't do that. Rather, He wants us to be partners with Him in making all things new even when it means the hard way.

Thank you and may God bless our full assembly.

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