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### Just Worship - Reflections Out of Latin America on Isaiah 58

Calvin Symposium on Worship

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## **Just worship – reflections out of Latin America on Isaiah 58**

Night has fallen, but not the sound. It pierces the darkness with unmistakable persistence, hour after hour, disregarding city ordinances and disgruntled neighbors. No; it is not the din of a nightclub or a bar. It is the daily prayer and praise vigil of a Central American church. The sound of their worship issues forth through loud speakers, rings up into the two-story homes of the nearby gated-community, and echoes down into the gulley's tin roofed shacks. Theirs are songs of triumph and celebration because God –their God—is all-powerful, victorious over illness and deprivation. Clear proof of God's bountiful blessing –they believe- - are their swelling numbers and the growing prosperity of their pastor. God surely is on their side since a local TV channel broadcasts their services and even the president attends on occasion.

Once the service is over, a few dozen people speed off on expressways to guarded communities, while some walk down into the gulley, and buses shuttle hundreds to hot, crowded neighborhoods, avoiding potholes and gangs. Next day, each to his or her own. Hundreds of children, women, and men into the scorching sun, to eek out a living at market stalls and street stands, into factories for minimum wage or into posh homes as domestic workers for yet less pay. A few join the thousands of Central Americans who daily set off on the life-threatening path across the US

border in search of sustenance for their families. Meanwhile, a few ease into cushy chairs in air-conditioned offices, and a couple others jet off across the world to some VIP Christian conference. When evening falls, they will gather again, and worship will resume, hour after hour.

“Cry aloud, do not hold back!” exhorts Isaiah, the prophet. Do not remain impassive or indifferent. “Declare to my people their rebellion”, sounds the voice of God. Rebellion? Why does God judge their actions as such when “they seek God daily... they delight to draw near to God?” Is that not good? Fasting and public demonstrations of repentance, daily church attendance, growing membership, offerings, and songs of worship... What more could God want? What ever is there to lament?

But lament God does and lament *we* must. We must cry out. We must denounce. We must confess. We must not hold back. We must engage. Because today over one billion people are living --and dying-- in absolute poverty, and children are particularly vulnerable. Some 25,000 die every day from hunger and preventable disease, an outrageous fact that receives much less media and political attention than terrorism. Imagine! Fill a mega-church sanctuary five times a day with children and kill them all. Do the same tomorrow. And the next day. Week after

week. Month after month. 25,000 children die every day from hunger and preventable diseases. Some are in the gully, just below the growing church. And they die from *preventable* diseases, not things we can do nothing about.

Preventable... things we *can* and *should* do something about!

Lament God does and lament *we* must. We must denounce. We must not hold back. Because the worship services continue, hour after hour, unaffected by those 25,000 deaths! We must cry out. We must confess. We must engage. Because songs and liturgies, church business, mission projects, radio programs, pious words and religious influence that do not grow out of and engender justice are no more than hollow sounds, lifeless motions, God-less religion and a disfigured caricature of worship. How dare I assert this so categorically? Because this theme cuts across the entire recorded Word of God, the revelation of God's nature and purposes. From Eden, to the covenantal law, through the prophets, to Christ and the church, true worship is not a matter of right rituals but of right relationships. True worshipers are those who set right that which sin has made wrong. In words of the prophet Isaiah to God's chosen people, the Israelites:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
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 them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Doing justice is not a human, ideologically inspired, social or political program. It is not a reduced social gospel. Justice is a passion that grows out of the very heart of God. God reveals God's self as *the Lord, who acts with steadfast love, justice and righteousness on earth, for in those things God delights* (Jer 9.23-24). God loves justice which, in God's dictionary, is defined as redemptive restoration of all things that are wrong. Justice sets things right; it vindicates the victims of natural disaster and human oppression: widows, orphans, foreigners with no chance to earn a living, even criminals in need of a second chance --and those 25,000 children who *could* live tomorrow.

As the visible face and tangible force of love, justice brings wholeness of life because it sets things right between people and God, people and other people, people and creation—as it was in the beginning. The fruit of justice is *shalom*, peace, the flourishing of life, and the realization of God's good purposes. Injustice and oppression, poverty, hunger, and homelessness, none of these are God's intent. God, the loving-community, is pained when God's image in the women and men God so lovingly created is effaced by any of these humanly inflicted evils. God, the reconciler, suffers when abuse of power, unequal opportunity, greed or

indifference mar the relationships between God's children. God, the creator, hurts when the diversity and sustainability of the garden God planted is shattered by human plunder.

Israel had been chosen out of the nations in order that, by living as God's covenant people, worshiping only God by caring for one another and for the land God had granted them, they would make God's loving and good will known to all nations. Their rebellion had not only distanced them from God but had also rendered them incapable of carrying out their calling. Fasting and religious observances would not get them back on track. "Do you want to draw near to me, do you want me to hear your voice, do you want me to receive your worship, do you want to be my people among the nations?" asks God in the unambiguous words of the prophet. "Then awake from your indifference, from the stupor of your self-justifying religiosity, and see, feel and lament what I do. Make my life-giving purposes yours!" The call is clear.

Centuries later, Jesus made the same, unequivocal call through his example and his teaching. Jesus denounced and lamented ritual observances emptied of their life-enhancing intent. Indifferent to the prejudice and scorn he engendered, Jesus recruited simple fishermen and despised tax collectors. He touched lepers,

communed with women of questionable reputation, and fed thousands of hungry people weighed down by Roman and Temple taxation. Voices of the prophets of old echo through his teaching: true love and worship of God are seen in the attitude and treatment towards other people, especially the most vulnerable. Matthew 25.1-46 records Jesus' words. Inheriting the kingdom of God has nothing to do with the size of church buildings, choirs or budgets, the number of short-term mission tours, or the quota of favor garnered from people in power. Those who will inherit the kingdom of God are the women and men who have –often silently and with no great fan-fare-- fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, clothed the homeless, cared for the sick and visited the rejects of society. Those who have not kept their safe distance from the pain, the smell, the squalor of people in poverty and deprivation but have opened not only their wallets but their hearts and their homes. Those whose pride has been broken by Jesus' sacrifice and whose eyes have been open by God's Spirit to see Jesus down in gully, in the tin-roofed shack.

What was true for the ancient Israelites and the first century Jews is true for us today. The call is clear. If and when God's people seek God's kingdom and God's justice two things occur. First, the wedge that our callousness toward the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and the needy has carved between us and our God is bridged. Since our relationship with God is woven into our relationship with our

fellow human beings, the treatment we give especially the most vulnerable directly affects our standing with God. In Isaiah's words: If and when you do justice...

“Your healing shall spring up quickly;  
Your vindicator shall go before you  
The glory of your Lord shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
You shall cry for help and he will say. Here I am.  
If you remove the yoke from among you,  
The pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

God's blessing and favor flow in the direction of God's delights. God laments the death of those 25,00 children today and delights when one of their lives is spared; so when we engage in preventing the death of those kids, our communion with God is restored and our lives recover purpose and fullness.

Second, and intimately related to the first: in doing justice, God's people fulfill their vocation, their calling. They make God known in God's world.

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...  
Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

As the Israelites of old, God's people through the centuries are called to serve as a light to the nations, as a historically and socially visible expression of God's

expectations for all of humankind (Is 42.6). We are chosen in order to make known –by our ethical behavior as well as by our explicit proclamation—the mighty and creative acts of God (1 Peter 2.9-10).

The call is clear. The question for us today is: are we willing to live out our calling –even if, as in Jesus’ case, it may garner us criticism and suspicion, unjust treatment or death? Do we yearn not only to experience God’s love but also to make it known today? Do we want to be faithful worshipers, reflecting God’s deep desires in God’s world? Then we must confront the issue honestly: Do we lament the death of 25,000 girls and boys today as much as we regret the crash in the market, higher insurance premiums or the defeat of our favorite sports team? Do we lament the death of 25,000 girls and boys today even half as deeply as their Creator does? Are we pained by the plight of their unemployed parents, their single moms, their refugee relatives? Are we willing to ask tough questions and dig under propaganda and ‘official stories,’ and uncover the messy interests of the few that feed off the deprivation of the many? Are we ready to give up our idols of success and consumption, increase the percentage of our offering as our income increases, and practice modern forms of Jubilee re-distribution? Are we committed to pouring out not just our money but ourselves in order to prevent their death? Louder than the speakers blasting songs down into the gulley, with more lasting impact than the

hours-long church service, and clearer evidence of God's presence than the swelling numbers of evangelicals, living justly is the only worship worthy of our just God. Just worship.