

JUBILEE VISION

An Ecumenical Imperative in a Divided World

(Theological Reflections from a Southern Perspective)

It is commonly accepted in our present day world that the time of nation states has passed. Political and economic power has virtually been transferred from individual sovereign nations to the global arena where, as expressed in the title of David Korton's 1995 publication, *Corporations Rule the World*. Korton, in his incisive analysis of our contemporary dilemma, claims that modern societies are engaged in "cowboy" economics in what has become a "spaceship" world. His description of these metaphors is instructive. He writes:

The cowboys of earlier frontier societies, such as the great American West, Lived in a world of sparsely populated expanses blessed with seemingly Inexhaustible material resources. Except for the presence of indigenous Peoples who felt that they had rights to the land, everything was free for the taking, to be used and discarded at will for the earth to absorb and restless winds to scatter. The opportunities for those willing to work seemed limitless, and everyone who presumed that the gain of one must be the loss of another was rightly dismissed as shortsighted and lacking in vision. Let every person compete in the search of his or her fortune with the expectation that the gains of each will in the end be the gain of the community as well.

On the other hand, he continues:

Astronauts live on spaceships hurtling through space with a human crew and a precious and limited supply of resources. Everything must be maintained in balance, recycled; nothing can be wasted. The measure of well-being is not how fast the crew is able to consume its limited stores, but rather how effective the crew members are in maintaining their physical and mental health, their shared resource stocks, and the life support system on which they all depend. What is thrown away is forever inaccessible. What is accumulated without recycling fouls the whole. No one would think of engaging in nonessential consumption unless the basic needs of all were met and there was ample provision for the future.

It certainly takes no stretch of the imagination for us to identify the two worlds that are being represented here. I will not begin to list the numerous tragic consequences that befall our societies of the "South" or "Third" or Two-thirds" world, as they are variously described, from those in the so called developed nations and the privileged few in our own societies living like "cowboys" in a "spaceship" world. With those consequences we are all too familiar. Suffice it to say here that, whatever our situation, we cannot but see ourselves as inserted in this social reality. It is for us as persons committed to the cause of justice and peace to search for a path that is saner and more in keeping with our identity as persons created in the image and likeness of God. It is for us precisely as Christians, called to be a community of faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ, to truly engage in a discipleship of equals in that one household, that ecumene, of God.

It seems to me then, that the challenge of the present moment is precisely the ecumenical imperative to live an alternative vision as the Jubilee call to affirm life in all its aspects, in all its diversity and at the same time pursue that unity that patterns us after the very image of the Trinity, that centres us in the very heart of God. We are all familiar with the Biblical depiction of Jubilee in *Leviticus 25*, *Isaiah 61* and *Luke 4* as a *time of emancipation, of restoring just relationships, of new beginnings*. As explained further in *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*:

The Jubilee is a recognition that, left to its normal and uninterrupted course, power becomes more and more concentrated in a few hands, that without intervention every society slides into injustice. As the Hebrew reminds us, the powerful build house upon house, appropriate field after field (Isa. 5:8). The weak and poor are vulnerable, marginalized, excluded. Restoration requires us to turn against this course of history (Mic. 7; Neh. 5). The wholeness of people, and of a people, requires the intervention, the periodic breaking down of the ordinary course of events. (p. 259)

Hence, given the present reality of Globalization and its mostly negative effects on countries such as ours, as the report continues:

It is now even more necessary than before to call for a fundamental reshaping of the economic system and to affirm God's gift of life that is threatened in so many ways. Affirming God's gift of life to all creation in the midst of the pain, suffering and destruction caused by economic globalisation, it is imperative to discern a life-centred vision. (p 259)

However, I would venture to emphasise here that this life-centred vision must encompass the totality of life, including beyond economic concerns, the social, cultural, political and religious and aimed toward the full development of persons and the upbuilding of just and sustainable societies. This life-centred vision will thus provoke us to take a prophetic stance against the unequal economic structures that continue to oppress and relegate to the violent conditions of dehumanising poverty a vast number of peoples while a privileged few enjoy unwarranted wealth.

It will help us to realize that social well-being cannot be sacrificed on the altar of structural adjustment and debt payments. It will open us to appreciate the various forms and symbols of life present in various cultural heritages. It is a vision that will prod us to ensure that the power vested in political leaders is used for the servicing of persons and the development of countries and not as a means to garner personal wealth and glory. It is a vision that will lead us to see more clearly our interconnectedness with the earth and all of God's creation and to learn to respect and use our available resources as "astronauts in a spaceship".

Finally, it is a vision that will necessarily take us beyond narrow denominational concerns to foster more inclusive relationships and to engage in a concrete partnership in service of all God's peoples. Indeed, it is a vision that will carry us even beyond the confines of Christianity to acknowledge the life-affirming and life-sustaining action of God that is operative in those who are not Christians, but live by the power of an all-embracing, compassionate God, however revealed, however

recognized. In this pluralistic post-modern world, we cannot but open ourselves to affirm this life wherever it exists and acclaim with the wise:

*For your great power is always at your service,
and who can sustain the might of your arm?
The whole world, for you, can no more than tip a balance,
like a drop of morning dew falling on the ground.
Yet you are merciful to all, because you are almighty,
You overlook people's sins, so that they can repent.*

Sr Theresa Lowe-Ching