

# TANGAZA COLLEGE

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THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

## **PROPHETIC COMMITMENT TO THE WORD OF GOD**

*A Challenge to the Ministry of the Church in Zambia Today*

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## Student's Declaration

I hereby declare that the material used herein has not been submitted for Academic Credit to any other Institution. All sources have been cited in full.

AM

AUGUSTINE MULENGA

## Dedication

To my late dad who insisted that I should go to school, and to my family (Bana Mulenga, Bana Mwansa, Bana Wiza, Mr. Martin, Faith, Edgar, Mwaka, Angela, Mwansa, Wiza and Chiti) in Luanshya, Zambia.

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## INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by and marvelled at the courage of Israel's classical prophets. This admiration lies especially in their ability to articulate the situation 'as it is' and 'as it can be'. For instance, when self-satisfied leaders oppressed the poor, prophetic voices named the brokenness of the covenanted community, and when every aspect of Israel's life was subject to painful experience, prophetic voices imaged a new life for a people whose spirits were broken and crushed.

Although they differ vastly from one another, Israel's classical prophets show a strong conviction that their vocation together with their mission originates from the Holy One of Israel. In this connection and according to the Old Testament, their messages are often prefaced by the formula: 'Thus says the Lord' or concluded by the phrase: 'It is the Lord who speaks'. Properly speaking, it was the word of God that moved Israel's great prophets into an open confrontation with their audience, denouncing sin and proposing a new future.

This essay explores the commitment of Israel's great prophets to the word of God so as to highlight the challenges which this commitment poses to the ministry of the church in Zambia\* today. We do not intend to undertake a painstaking study on each one of the classical prophets *vis-à-vis* the word of God, but to select some specific elements, especially from the prophets Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah of Jerusalem, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah, which can help us arrive at a better understanding of what prophetic commitment entails.

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\* Zambia is situated in the southern region of the sub-Sahara Africa, where it lies as a landlocked country.

The first two chapters investigate the implications of the commitment of Israel's great prophets: chapter one presents the call of the prophets as starting point of the prophetic commitment, and chapter two surveys the twofold dimension of the prophetic mission. The third chapter elaborates the challenge that the great prophets pose to the ministry of the church in Zambia, especially in the situation where the majority of the people have apparently no strength to think about the future because they have nothing to feed on today.

Within the vision of faith, we hold that authentic Christian praxis that leads to social transformation through the works of justice and love emanates from a closer analysis of human reality in the light of the word of God. With a view to shed the light of God's word upon the human reality in Zambia today, our approach in this paper seeks and draws from the Bible the nourishment that is capable to inspire the local church in her task of sustaining God's people in their struggles and in their hopes for a better life. As far as possible, we shall develop our theme in a chronological manner.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE CALL OF THE PROPHETS

#### Introduction

In the lives of the prophets, the certainty of being called by God to carry out God's mission was an impelling force and at the same time a source of confidence and fortitude. The prophets' legitimacy and authority were in fact established by their vocational experience. In the Old Testament we have a number of call accounts or at least short notices of how the divine call came to the prophets. In their present form these call accounts may have been influenced by the prophets' experience subsequent to their call, as these were given some years later in ministry. Nonetheless each call account is to be understood here as a reflection of the call experience itself.

The present chapter will discuss how Israel's prophets were called and were prepared to bring the word of God to the people. We shall begin with a reflection on the prophets as individuals called from all walks of life. Thereafter we shall consider the prophets as transformed individuals and how the word of God became central in their lives.

#### **i) Prophets as Individuals Called from All Walks of Life**

Unlike the kings and the priests, the great prophets of Israel did not receive their office through membership in the royal house of David or in the sacred tribe of Levi. Their function was not hereditary. They lacked both the status and emoluments of noble blood. Neither did any public ceremony ratify and validate their office. Their credentials lay in their conviction that God called them personally to announce His will to the people. In other words, the word of God was the *sacred oil*, so to say, which set the prophets apart. God called His prophets from every social stratum: from the level of the herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees like

Amos, from the farmer class like Hosea, from the priestly class like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and even from the royal household to which Isaiah was probably related. Thus, the word of God was the only means by which the prophets were wrenched from their familiar milieu so that they could go and reveal God's message to the people. Amos, Jeremiah and Ezekiel give a much more vivid picture of how God's messengers abandoned the lifestyles they led prior to their call.

For example, when Amaziah, the chief priest, attempted to prevent Amos from preaching at Bethel by urging him to flee to his homeland,

O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there [Amos 7:12],<sup>1</sup>

Amos's reply gives a brief description of how he became a prophet. He said:

I am no prophet nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" [7:14-15].

Thus Amos felt himself called by God to abandon his occupation in his village of Tekoa in Judah, the southern kingdom, and go to work as a prophet in Israel, the northern kingdom. The words used by Amos in his reply to Amaziah, '*I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son,*' presents a certain difficulty which has occasioned much debate among the Old Testament scholars. The translation given here gives the impression that Amos declined to be designated as a prophet. There are, however, scholars who translate these words using past tense: 'I was no prophet nor a prophet's son', namely, when the Lord charged him with the message, Amos was not a prophet. This translation is grammatically possible. Nevertheless, the true meaning must be

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<sup>1</sup> The New Revised Standard Version Bible (New York: American Bible Society, 1989). All scriptural citations shall be taken from this version.

concluded from the context. The reply of Amos has a real point only if it expresses what he is or is not at that moment and not what he was or was not before he was called. It then appears that Amos is contradicting himself. He is a prophet and has a prophet's mission, but he denies being a prophet. Quite clearly the explanation here is provided by the Hebrew word for a prophet, *nabi*. Here the word *nabi* is taken in two senses. Amos is a prophet but not in the sense which Amaziah uses it, referring to the fact that Amos had for some time attached himself to the sanctuary prophets, the seers, at Bethel. Amos was not a *ben-nabi*, a prophet's son, that is, he was not a member of an association of the temple prophets or professional prophet, who earned their living through prophesying. He makes it clear that he professionally worked as a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees. Thus he claims to be a divine messenger of an altogether new type. Evidently Amos' confrontation with Amaziah depicts him as a lay person, an amateur, who suddenly found himself prophesying in the principle temple-city of the northern kingdom. He became a prophet by a special commission from God.<sup>2</sup>

Being the son of Hilkiah who was among the priests in Anathoth [Jer 1:1], and according to the custom of the time, Jeremiah was destined for priesthood. But the Lord intervened. Jeremiah reports:

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" [Jer 1:4-5].

Jeremiah is usually described as a reluctant prophet who felt compelled against his own will to follow the arduous and thankless task.<sup>3</sup> At some point in his prophetic career, Jeremiah looked back to what happened when he was called and said that he was enticed and overpowered by

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<sup>2</sup> James M. Ward, *The Prophets* (Nashville: Partheonon Press, 1982), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

God [Jer 20:7]. Both words, 'entice' and 'overpower', express God's coercive power and Jeremiah's ability to resist. However God's name was pronounced over Jeremiah, and so God took possession of him and gave him a new task:

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" [Jer 1: 9-10].

It is worthwhile to note here that Jeremiah's call experience gives a clear description of what prophetic mission entails: being wrenched from a familiar lifestyle in order to bring the word of God in a way that 'plucks up and pulls down', 'builds and plants'.

Ezekiel is clearly identified as a priest, but he never combined his priestly functions and prophetic mission into a single ministry. He was called to work as a prophet in the Babylonian exile where there was no Jewish temple [Ezek 1:1-3].

At this juncture one can easily see that prophetic endowment was not limited to any special official position or place. Neither was it a monopoly of special functionaries. It rather followed the law of the Spirit which blows wherever it wills. God called His prophets from every category of society so that they could go to the very centre of public places and yell His word at the top of their voices. Thus the prophets of the Holy One of Israel were not 'professionals' and could neither be bribed nor silenced. Upon hearing the divine call, a new power came within them and transformed their personalities so that they could commit themselves totally to the word of God.

## **ii) Prophets as Transformed Persons**

It is notable in the Old Testament that when the word of God came to them, the prophets were transformed and energised so that they could do what they never thought of and

announce what they always feared. For example, Isaiah of Jerusalem had his guiltiness and sin blotted out so that he could go and proclaim his people's moral blindness and hardness of heart [Isa 6:7,10]. Jeremiah was made into a 'fortified city', an 'iron pillar', a 'bronze wall' so that no one could prevail against him [Jer 1:18]. He was no longer allowed to sit in the company of merry-makers nor rejoice with them. Under God's hand, he sat alone so that the word of God could become his new source of happiness and power [Jer 15:16]. Ezekiel's face and forehead were hardened against those who could not listen to the words he was told to speak [Ezek 3:8]. To prepare him for his mission, Deutero-Isaiah's mouth was made like a sharp sword, and he was made as a polished arrow [Isa 49: 1-2]. Trito-Isaiah, too, had the spirit of the Lord God come upon him, because he was sent to bring the good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners [Isa 61:1].

From the foregoing one can note that God took possession of those he called to be prophets in such a way that their entire life underwent some radical transformation. However this does not denote a manipulation of their individuality and personal freedom.<sup>4</sup> The call narratives show clearly that it was not without resistance that the prophets accepted the divine commission. There was a struggle between God and the prophets. But God, of course, emerged a winner, and the prophets' acceptance of the commission came out so strongly that they were even ready to suffer and die for sake of the word of God.

Without watering down the differences that lie beneath the call narratives of the individual prophets, scholars have identified in them a distinctive pattern which consists of four elements, namely: *Religious experience, Commissioning, Reluctance, and Divine assurance*. This pattern is evident especially in the call narratives of Moses [Exodus 3],

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<sup>4</sup> Johannes Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p. 197.

Gideon [Judges 6], Isaiah [Isa 6:1-13], Jeremiah [Jer 1:4-19] and Ezekiel [Ezek 1-3:27]. An effort to take a closer look at each one of these four elements will help us arrive at a better understanding of how the word of God transformed God's messengers without overriding their identity, and thereby prepared them for their mission. In order to illustrate how the pattern unfolds we shall limit ourselves to Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

### *a) Religious Experience*

In the theophany at Horeb, God appeared to Moses, the prophet *par excellence*, in the mighty spectacle of the flaming bush that does not burn up. From within that bush Moses heard himself being called. The account highlights both the transcendence and holiness of God. Moses is treading on holy ground and so is told to remove his sandals and adore [Exod 3:1-5]. Isaiah's vision of God was dominated by God's holiness and sovereignty, and that made him overwhelmed by a sense of unworthiness and uncleanness. Yet while Isaiah experiences God as unapproachable, the seraphim declares that the glory of the Holy One fills the whole earth [Isa 6:1-5]. Jeremiah's religious experience is more of a personal and intimate dialogue between God and the prophet. Despite his vision of a branch of flowing almond and a cauldron which turns away from the north, the word dominates Jeremiah's vision [see Jer 1:4-19]. Ezekiel's experience was deeply ecstatic. He saw a rather traumatic vision and remained overwhelmed emotionally for seven days [see Ezek 1:4-28; 3:15-16].

Evidently, religious experience is detached from human initiative. It is a divine prerogative. God is the one who takes the initiative. He is the one who overwhelms and summons His prophet whose part is to respond to the divine initiative which culminates in his commissioning.

### ***b) Commissioning of the Prophet***

In the call accounts a person summoned to prophetic mission is normally given a specific task. Moses was told to go and lead Israel out of its slavery in Egypt [Exod 3:11]. Isaiah was to make dull the mind of the people [Isa 6:10]. Jeremiah was appointed to be a prophet to the nations [Jer 1:5], and Ezekiel was to keep the faith of the exiles burning [Ezek 1:1].

Since God's initiative is decisive, the term 'volunteering' does not seem to fit into the vocabulary of the call narratives of the prophets. As we have indicated above, those called to prophetic mission are often taken from their ordinary lives. To summon them to a prophetic mission, God interrupts their daily routine. As such it should not surprise us when we note that although Isaiah of Jerusalem appears to be a person who volunteered to be a prophet, there are no examples of volunteers among the classical prophets. At his calling Isaiah heard the voice of God saying: "Whom shall I send?" And he promptly answered: "Here am I, send me!" [Isa 6:8]. But we should not forget that Isaiah had been 'set up', for he was overwhelmed by the presence of God and the recognition of his unworthiness and sinfulness. Indeed his experience of forgiveness, purification and relief would have roused a feeling of gratitude and willingness to enable him overcome his reluctance.

### ***c) Reluctance to Accept the Mission***

The prophets' response to God's commission is, before anything else, characterised by reluctance. When confronted with the supernatural, human beings are naturally overwhelmed by their own inadequacy and frailty. Moses balked at the divine commission acknowledging his own frailty, ignorance and lack of eloquence [Exod 3:11,13]. Isaiah recognised his sinfulness and that of his people [Isa 6:5]. Jeremiah, too, looked for a way out. He hesitated,

resisted and even objected to the divine commission. Actually Jeremiah gives two down-to-earth reasons why he could not accept the mission:

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” [Jer 1:6].

Firstly, like Moses, Jeremiah claims that he does not know how to speak. Since prophetic mission involves the spoken word, verbal talent is absolutely necessary. And here Jeremiah denies having such a talent. Secondly, he says that he is only a boy. In ancient Hebrew, the word for ‘boy’ or ‘young man’ is *na’ar*, and this refers to an unmarried male who is not yet ready to undertake the responsibilities of an adult.<sup>5</sup> In a culture where elders spoke and young people listened, Jeremiah was admitting that he had neither the talent nor the right to speak out.

If it is a characteristic of human nature to resist the divine commissioning by giving excuses, it is likewise characteristic of the divine nature not to accept such excuses by assuring the person singled out for the mission.

#### ***d) Divine Assurance***

Reluctance or hesitance to respond to the divine commission is provoked mainly by fear. Fear tends to paralyse and magnify the difficulties that underlie the new task. So it is no accident to note that a theme that runs through the call narratives is the command not to be afraid. By and large, one of the most frequent ways of reassuring those called for prophetic mission is the promise of the divine presence. For example, God promises His presence to Moses and Jeremiah [see Exod 3:12; Jer 1:8,19].

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<sup>5</sup> A. L. Timothy, “Jeremiah’s Vocation”, *The Bible Today*, 33(3), 1995, p. 148.

In the world of the Old Testament, the assurance of the divine presence was highly valued. God's constant presence was understood as providing protection, eloquence and strength. In case of Jeremiah, God promised specifically that: "I am with you to deliver you" [Jer 1:8]. Thus for any person summoned to prophetic mission, the assurance of divine accompaniment was absolutely necessary, because no human person can accomplish such a task on his or her own. From this it follows that divine assurance guarantees that in the task that lies ahead of the prophet, human inadequacy will be overcome and the divine mission will succeed.

Most often divine reassurance is accompanied by some sign, something that a human person can see, touch and hear. For example, Moses' staff was endowed with the power to work wonders [Exod 4:2-9,17]; Isaiah's lips were purified by a burning coal [Isa 6:6-7]; Jeremiah's mouth was touched by God's hand [Jer 1:9], and Ezekiel was given God's word in a more tangible form. He was given a scroll to eat [Ezek 3:1-3].

Today we are able to look at the call reports of the prophets largely because most of the prophets referred to what happened at the time they were called. The primary purpose of these stories is to assure the readers or listeners of the divine origin of the prophets' message. While the call narratives may be founded on a genuine, intense, and personal experience of the prophets, they serve a more public function. They legitimate the prophetic message before all the people. In fact, it is observable that despite major differences, the unity of the prophetic message was provided by the certainty that God called His prophets to a vocation that required a certain way of living. Their new life was born from an experience of communication with God by means of which God's will was disclosed to them in an unambiguous way. Undoubtedly the calling to which the prophets abandoned themselves had nothing to do with

overriding their individuality or personal freedom.<sup>6</sup> As it were, a person who encounters the divine cannot remain the same. In a way, to anyone of the prophets of the Holy One of Israel must be applied what was said of Saul:

... you will be turned into a different person [I Sam 10:6].

### **iii) The Centrality of the Word of God in the Career of the Prophets**

Before shifting our attention to the discussion of prophetic mission itself, let us first have a brief look at how the word of God which transformed personalities remained central in the career of the prophets. Evidently, following their call, the prophets were never outside the process of ministering the word of God. They were not cool, detached, objective observers. Instead, they were interior facilitators of the word which came to them. This section begins with a reflection on the power of the word of God, and proceeds with the consideration of prophetic call as the call to bear the word of God and to intercede for the people.

#### ***a) The Power Inherent in the Word of God***

Biblical scholars have pointed out that the Hebrew understanding of the term 'word', *dabar*, is more than a verbal expression of thought or an instrument of intellectual communication. For the Hebrews, the term *dabar* reveals and communicates not only the mind of the speaker but also his or her entire personality. In fact, their real focus of fascination with the word consisted in the identity of the speaker. In case of God, His word is said to have the creative power that calls being into existence. The very first chapter of the Book of Genesis portrays a clear picture of the power inherent in God's word:

Then GOD said, "Let there be..., and there was..." [see Gen 1:3-31].

In the same vein, the psalmist also declares:

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<sup>6</sup> Lindblom, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. For he spoke, and it came to be he commanded, and it stood firm [Psa 33:6,9].

Perhaps there is no more beautiful statement in the Bible about the power of God's word than this:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it [Isa 55: 10-11].

The perception of the power of the word can be noticed even outside Israel. For instance in Akkadian hymns we find passages where the word of a particular deity is praised for its effective and creative power.<sup>7</sup> African traditional society also has recognised, from the time immemorial, the power of the word, especially that which is uttered by an elder. Properly speaking, for the Hebrews, the word of God is more than a message or a doctrine about God. It is God revealing Himself as much by doing as by saying. From this it follows that no sooner had the word of God been pronounced over the prophets than the prophets found themselves engaged in a mission they never thought of. At this juncture one can conclude that identifying the prophets as personalities called to bring forth the word of God is tantamount to recognising the release of God's power into human life through them, and hence the revelation of something about the personality of God Himself.

#### ***b) Prophets as Bearers of the Word of God***

The prophets' patent authority lay in their conviction that God directly counted on them to announce something that God had spoken, the word of God. Hence their utterances

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

were often prefaced by the formula: 'Thus says the Lord' or concluded by the phrase: 'It is the Lord who speaks'. Although the use of this oracular formula can be traced in the early prophets, it is not in a strict sense an invention of the Hebrew prophets. Similar formulae are present in the oracular terminology of Mesopotamia and Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Israel's great prophets used oracular formulae to underscore their claim of being authoritative messengers of God, bringing forth a divine proclamation. Accordingly when the prophet speaks, it is not he who speaks; God speaks through him. Isaiah exhorted heaven and earth to listen because God had spoken [Isa 1:2]; Jeremiah sought indefatigably to convey God's word but it only brought him reproach and derision [Jer 20:8], and Ezekiel was commanded to speak God's words to the people whether they listened or refused to listen [Ezek 2:7]. Indeed God is the one who charges His prophets with His words. When Jeremiah was called to be a prophet, God said:

... for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you [Jer 1: 7].

To Ezekiel He said,

Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them [Ezek 3:4].

Since their words were identified as divine words filled with sanctity, the prophets were regarded as being just. Nonetheless their ability to pronounce unfavourable messages to their own people made them to be feared so much so that their popularity ratings were rarely high.<sup>9</sup> Their menacing words were felt as a real affliction, a catastrophe. For instance, after hearing Amos's terrible oracles against Israel, Amaziah reported to Jeroboam, the king:

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 91.

Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land cannot endure all his words [Amos 7: 10].

Furthermore, doing violence to the prophets, obstructing them or defying their message was seen to be dangerous. For example, when Amaziah tried to prevent Amos from prophesying at Bethel, the message of doom against the people took the form of a personal oracle of doom against Amaziah [see Amos 7:17]; and when Hananiah, the false prophet, turned Jeremiah's prophecy into its reverse, he was struck down by a disastrous oracle [see Jer 28:16].

Just as an oracle of judgement was regarded as creating misfortune, an oracle of peace was regarded as creating good fortune. That was what led the people to yearn for favourable oracles, especially when the going was tough. This was exactly what king Zedekiah was looking for when he turned to Jeremiah for consultation [see Jer 37:17]. In any case, whether or not the message was favourable, the prophets had to bring it home. Amos felt so compelled and coerced by God that he could not help but prophesy:

The lion has roared, who will not fear? The LORD GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? [Amos 3:8].

Jeremiah, too, was scorched by the word:

If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot [Jer 20:9].

### ***c) Prophets as Intercessors***

As it were, the prophets were not merely called to be channels through which the word of God was to be communicated. They were themselves members of the people of God, and the word of God was addressed as much to others as to the prophets themselves. Their needs and aspirations were radically similar to those of their community. Perhaps this is the reason

why intercession with God is expressly said to be a duty incumbent on the prophets. In the vision of the locusts Amos prayed:

O LORD GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!  
[Amos 7:2-3].

Isaiah also felt the same compassion when he said:

Look away from me, let me weep bitter tears; do not try to comfort me for  
the destruction of my beloved people [Isa. 22:4].

Among the prophets, Jeremiah stands out as a supreme intercessor. In no other prophets do we find so many and such expressions of compassion for the people as:

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken  
hold of me (Jer 8:21 ).

O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so  
that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people I [Jer 9: 1 ].

Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease, for  
the virgin daughter-my people--is struck down with a crushing blow, with a  
very grievous wound [Jer 14:17].

Thus besides being God's spokespersons, the prophets stood as representatives of their people before God. Their compassion and dedication to the welfare of their people manifested their sense of solidarity with them such that Jeremiah even associated himself with their sinfulness:

We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD, the iniquity of our ancestors, for  
we have sinned against you [Jer 14:20].

## Conclusion

In spite of the great differences among them, the prophets have a great deal of common matter that links them. They were set apart for the mission by a unique call which transformed their lives so that they could go and confront their people about the manner of living. The

prophets themselves believed that their vocation confronted them with a large range of tasks and duties. As we shall see in the next chapter, they were not called to retire in isolation but to go to the very centre of public places and proclaim the word of God. They were called to abandon the religion which the majority recognised as valid. Among their own people, they appeared as a questioning memory which disclosed the spirit of the Exodus and the God of the covenant. One of the most prominent ways the prophets used to explain the credibility of their mission was to refer to what happened to them when God called them to be His messengers. This is exactly what we have referred to as the call or vocational experience of the prophets.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MISSION OF THE PROPHETS

#### Introduction

In its totality, the Bible ascribes only one intention to God: to save humankind. God is presented as the originator and the sole protagonist in His mission to save. As such there can be no better way one can talk about the mission of the prophets than that of participating in the divine mission itself. As a work that belongs to God, prophetic mission implies that God makes use of human instruments to impart His love and His justice to His people. In this connection, true prophetic mission brings to realisation what Jeremiah was sent to do: 'to pluck up and to pull down', 'to build up and to plant' [Jer 1:10], that is, to identify the brokenness of the covenanted community and to bring renewed hope to those with the tendency to believe that nothing can be done to improve matters.

The present chapter will discuss the mission of the prophets as a commitment to the divine word. Our basic interest is to highlight the challenges posed by such a commitment in order to have a better grasp of the task that lies ahead of the ministry of the church in Zambia today. We shall begin with a reflection on prophetic knowledge of God's design for Israel and proceed with the discussion on the twofold mode of prophetic mission which Walter Bruggemann refers to as criticising and energising.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 13-14.

## i) Prophetic Knowledge of God's Design for Israel

### a) *Conception of the Call of Israel*

In the eyes of the prophets, Israel was not simply the kingdom founded by Saul and later extinguished by the catastrophe of the exile, in part by Assyrian invasion and wholly by Babylonian conquest. The prophets never doubted that Israel was brought into being by God. It was God who brought forth their enslaved ancestors from Egypt and gave them the land. Nothing could be more explicit than the words of Amos:

I brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness to possess the land of the Amorites [Amos 2: 10].

In the same way, Hosea calls to attention a tender picture of God's adoption of his people:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son [Hos 11:1].

Evidently, for classical prophets the history of Israel did not begin through human initiative, but in an inexplicable turn which they confessed to be the work of God, the work that stands outside expectation, prediction and the horizon of human control. The convergence of holy resolve (God) and human courage (Moses and Aaron) confronted Pharaoh who seemed to have had all the power on his side, and led the people of God in a 'long march to freedom'.<sup>11</sup> Through the Exodus from Egypt, a new people with no clear historical antecedents was formed. It was out of the promissory word of God that Israel appeared as a *novum* in the history of the world. Martin Buber has said of the Exodus event that it is a miracle marked by 'abiding astonishment'.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly, the Exodus event has always stood in opposition to modernity's reduction of history to power. It continues to deny the closed definitions of what

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Word of God and History", *Interpretation*, 48(3), 1994, p. 242.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), p. 76.

is impossible, definitions that are coercively imposed by the powerful. Following the Exodus event the people of God were also freed for covenantal relations and obedience to the Torah, which stood before them as a charter for human equity, justice and dignity.

Although the affirmation that Israel was the people of God brought forth from slavery in Egypt remains dominant in the prophets, a further tradition identified the call of Israel with the call of Abraham [see Gen 12:1-3; Deut 26:4-9; Isa 51:1-2]. However, we can still maintain that the Patriarchal tradition has been geared to the normative Exodus tradition so much so that the latter becomes the fulfilment of the former.<sup>13</sup>

What provoked the prophets' increasing wonder and praise was their awareness of personal and moral bond which God established between Israel and Himself. This kind of relationship is described by the term 'covenant', and what it implied was much deeper and more personal than any mere legal contract or commercial bargain.<sup>14</sup> Out of His sovereign freedom, God established a covenant with Israel based on election and redemption. The doctrine of the covenant brought about an indissoluble bond of relationship between God and Israel:

I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your GOD, and you shall be my people [Lev 26:11-12].

Although the covenant was unconditional, individual participation in it required faithfulness and loyalty. One of the most illuminating relationships with which it is associated is that of human friendship. Both Hosea and Jeremiah portray the covenant in terms of a love relationship, for example, between father and child [Jer 3:4; Hos 11: 1], or between husband

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<sup>13</sup> Eric W. Heaton, The Old Testament Prophets (England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1961), p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

and wife [Jer 3:20; Hos 2:19]. In the Old Testament the synonym for 'human friendship' is constituted in the word 'peace' which is so often used to describe complete 'wholesomeness', 'perfect personal harmony'. In this manner, when Jeremiah announced that God had taken away His peace from His people, His steadfast love and mercy [Jer 16:5], he was in effect saying that the covenant had been broken; friendship with God had been brought to an end.

Jeremiah's parallel use of the term 'peace' and 'steadfast love' introduces us to one of the most profound concepts of Hebrew religion, the concept expressed in the word *hesed*. Like the word 'peace' it is closely connected with the loyalty of friendship. *Hesed* is used to describe God's faithfulness to His covenant and it is equally used to describe Israel's personal response to the covenant. Thus *hesed* reflects a strong relational aspect as well as the importance of a prior commitment which is usually on the part of God towards the people. The expected reciprocity and mutuality on Israel's part demands service and faithfulness. Israel was therefore expected to prioritise her values in view of *hesed*. She was called to live in faithfulness to God and to uphold godly relationships among members of the covenant community.

Hosea too understood steadfast love (*hesed*) as something that God desires, an attitude toward fellow human beings which reflects God's love for Israel:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of GOD rather than burnt offerings [Hos 6:6].

Here the word *hesed* is virtually equivalent to what Hosea calls 'knowledge of God'. At first sight, the introduction of the phrase 'knowledge of God' appears as an unexpected association of ideas. But nothing is more natural for an Old Testament writer. In ancient Israel knowledge was not merely an academic matter of detached intellectual understanding. It meant 'personal

intercourse', the experience of that which is known in a way that affects the knower.<sup>15</sup> To know God was equivalent to recognising his works and accepting his personal demands. When we appreciate that the term 'knowledge' in Hebrew thought connotes personal concern, we can as well observe that the experience of being known by God has a place in the prophets' presentation of their own intimate vocation.

Amos and Hosea sum up the covenant relationship between God and Israel in term of God's knowledge and personal concern for his people:

You only have I known of all the families of the earth [Amos 3:2].

Yet I have been the LORD your GOD ever since the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no saviour [Hos 13:4].

Thus the covenant between God and Israel involved the arrangement in which Israel was not allowed to follow other gods but the God of the covenant. In her faithfulness to her status as God's people, Israel was assured the experience of God's blessings and protection. Despite some murmuring here and there, Israel succeeded in her vocation during the honeymoon in the desert immediately after the Exodus [see Exod 35:22].

### *b) The Sin of God's People*

The new and untempered faith of the people of God was exposed to formidable temptations upon their establishment in the promised land, Palestine. A religion born in the desert proved entirely strange to the pagan culture of the agricultural society of Canaan. The settlement, of the covenant community led to far-reaching changes in their cultural and social conditions. Though the main features of the tribal organisation survived for a long time, they were gradually being replaced by new social forms. The descendants of nomads became

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

farmers and artisans. The chief bond of society was no longer a blood relationship, but the fact of living together in settled communities. Trade with neighbouring nations opened the door for foreign influence, including idolatry. In time the monarchical system gave rise to a large staff of public functionaries. These new officials, became keen rivals of the old needs of the community, and finally made the authority of the latter ineffective. To maintain the power of the monarch, a military organisation was created, a royal court was set up and taxation was done according to a more organised system. With the break-up and the dissolution of collective solidarity, individual interests became evident. The right to hold private property was both recognised and practised.<sup>16</sup> Sooner or later a fatal class distinction between those who were able to enjoy luxury and plenty and those who had to toil for the barest necessities was laid. The poor and defenseless were often taken advantage of, oppressed and even fleeced by the wealthy. The judges were bribed to pronounce unjust judgments in favour of those who had power and influence. Evidently, the people of God forgot and wandered away from their God of the covenant; they lost the fervour of their Exodus experience.

It was from this background that God raised up prophets from Israel's own children who, deeply steeped in the covenant traditions, named the brokenness of the covenanted community.<sup>17</sup> They recognised Israel's infidelity in all aspects of her life: religious, political, social, and personal. They summoned the people back to their spirit of the Exodus. Often as lone voices, they indicted Israel for her sinfulness. To describe what we may name as the sin of God's people, the prophets used many words such as, wickedness, rebellion, guilt and defection. All these words strike one overriding theme: the people's failure to respond to the

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<sup>16</sup> Lindblom, *op. cit.*, pp. 346-347.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), p. 100.

God of the covenant and the consequent break-down of a relationships with Him and within the community.

### *c) Confrontation of the People*

It is crystal clear that the prophets confronted their contemporaries--leaders, kings, priests and the entire community--in particular circumstances of particular times and places. In times of complacency, during the eighth and seventh centuries BC, when self-satisfied leaders oppressed the poor and used them for their own ends, prophetic voices indicted the leadership and called the community to remake their covenanted relationship with God and within community. In the despondency of the exile, around sixth century BC, when every aspect of Israel's life and calling was the subject of painful questioning and skeptical examination, the voices of the prophets imaged a new life and a restored vision to a desperate people. Beyond doubt, the content of prophetic speech varied according to the situations in which the people found themselves. At times the variety of prophetic speech appeared even as self contradictory. For instance, in the eighth century BC, in the northern kingdom of Israel, God instructed Hosea to take to himself "a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry" [Hos 1:2]. In the seventh century, BC, in the city of Jerusalem, God commanded Jeremiah with these words: "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place" [Jer 16:2]. Certainly, the prophetic message was not communicated as an absolute declaration equally valid for all the people in all times and all places, but as the message that demanded to be appreciated in its own character and right. The prophets' ability to confront their audience for their failure to live up to the demands of the covenant describes the twofold mode of their mission: 'to pluck up and to pull down', 'to build and to plant'.

## ii) The Mission ‘to Pluck Up and to Pull Down’

In the light of the Fundamental idea of the special relationship between God and Israel, it is evident that upon entering the world of Canaan, Israel fell away. The people broke the covenant with their God. The new customs which the people adopted stood at variance with the implications of *hesed*, with the divine purpose and with ethical ideals which Israel had pledged to live. As such the bottom line of prophetic commitment was to confront Israel with the challenge of the Living God at work in history, and to recall her to the old themes and old truths, to the memory of the Exodus and to the early days when the Lord was her God. They pointed out how far Israel had wandered from her historical mission and spoke against her sinfulness. Evidently, the prophets preached nothing radical or revolutionary. They were simply inheritors of an ancient faith. Their impact seems revolutionary largely because their faith was set aflame in the unprecedented intensity of their religious experience. They were filled with the power to purge all that stood in the way of personal communion with the God who unsettles every *status quo* that offends His holiness and mocks His justice. Fully aware of the magnificent contribution of the other great prophets in the mission to name the brokenness of the covenanted community, we shall limit our discussion to the figures of Amos, Hosea and Micah.

### a) *Amos, the Herald of Judgment*

The particular situation against which Amos prophesied was characterised by prosperity and peace, mixed with an injustice which perpetrated the sufferings of the poor and the powerless. Amos’s mission was confined to the northern kingdom, Israel, which was then under the rule of Jeroboam II (783-741 BC). The contemporaries of Amos had arrogantly nationalised God and taken Him over as one of their assets. In many ways, religious practices

of the northern kingdom were akin to the ancient tribal religion of the Semitic world which was based on the idea that each territory of the people had its own special god. The Israelites looked at their God as a national convenience just like any of the other gods of the heathens. Furthermore, most of God's people were even convinced that God was intimately concerned with their interests. And for this reason they eagerly and confidently looked forward to the 'Day of the Lord', the day when God would restore all the fortunes of His people.

With the appearance of Amos, the popular conviction that God would always remain in favour of Israel's affairs was turned upside down. Amos fought against that type of complacent self-assurance which appealed to the privileges of Israel's vocation and ignored her responsibilities. The people forgot that their God was the God of absolute righteousness. The large-scale amassing of property at the expense of the disadvantaged bore witness to how the covenant tradition of equality and friendship learned in the desert had been smashed. Amos's utterances and outbursts against Israel unveiled the moral corruption of the people's different classes which perpetuated the degradation of the poor and the helpless:

For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way [Amos 2:6-7].

Amos condemned the court system for discrimination against the powerless. He denounced the magistrates of Israel and Judah for taking unfair advantage of poor people. The judges, rather than upholding justice, chose to deliver false decisions. He listed three complaints against them:

For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins-- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate [Amos 5:12].

Having enumerated their perversion of justice, he simply called on them to “hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate” [v. 15], that is, to make right decisions in the courts.

Another group that earned Amos’s wrath were the merchants who abandoned honesty and cheated their customers. In the following passage Amos imaged what the corrupt merchants were harbouring in their hearts against the needy and the poor:

When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat [Amos 8:5-6].

The flamboyant rich women who revelled in an irresponsible lavish life style which contributed toward the suffering of the poor did not escape Amos’s harsh and scathing word.

He said to them:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, “Bring something to drink” [Amos 4: 1].

The leadership in Jerusalem and Samaria also earned Amos’s ire for their notoriety in ease and arrogant pride:

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts! [6: 1 ].

At this point it is clear that the basic thrust of Amos’s mission was righteousness and social justice. He directed his denunciation against real persons, the judges, the merchants, the rich women and the leadership. The cry for fair treatment of the disadvantaged constituted the hallmark of most of his sermons. Moreover, Amos assured the Israelites with withering irony that the ‘Day of the Lord’ would indeed come, as they had said, but not with the expected

result. It would be the 'Day of the Lord' when the Lord would take action in a way truly characteristic of His nature.<sup>18</sup> Because of the absence of moral righteousness, the 'Day of the Lord' would bring judgment upon Israel. As such an invitation of such day was tantamount to an invitation of disaster [cf. Amos 5:18].

Israel's privileged intimacy with God made the people's moral corruption all the more intolerable. Without radical reformation, the 'Day of the Lord' would coincide with the dispersion of the chosen people into exile. For Amos the covenant between God and Israel was not to be understood as an indissoluble and stable relationship assured for all time by the deliverance from Egypt. It endowed Israel with no immunity whatsoever against judgment. Israel's vocation was conditioned upon moral and spiritual fidelity to God. Unless in the life of the people justice rolled down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream [Amos 5:24], the covenant would be dissolved and Israel's privileged status would be nothing but an empty theory.

***b) Hosea, the Defender of a Religion Based on True Knowledge of God***

Hosea, a contemporary of Amos, went even further. Of all the great prophets, Hosea, a man from northern kingdom, sharply reacted against the Canaanite practices adopted by Israel. He identified Israel as a nation of rascals and murderers. Israel had totally forgotten about her faith and the loyal response to the demands of the covenant:

There was no faithfulness or loyalty or knowledge of GOD in the land. Instead there was swearing, lying, and murder. Stealing and adultery broke out, bloodshed followed upon bloodshed [Hos 4:1-2].

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<sup>18</sup> Heaton, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

Behind these accusations we can clearly notice a certain series of commandments, *You shall not swear in falsehood; you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery.* Most likely, Hosea measured the people against the individual phrases of a composition similar to the Decalogue. He noticed that the people had forgotten also the first commandment. They were treading the paths of primitive manticism and asking its 'tree and staff' for advice [see Hos 4:12]. The prophet strove above all for a return to the observance of the second commandment which had been broken by the introduction of many images of God which led the people to forget their love for Him. He particularly attacked the golden bull image in Bethel, which changed in popular belief from being a pedestal for the invisible God to a representation of God Himself [Hos 8:4-7; 13:2].

Hosea unveiled a deeper interpretation of God's law, which does not demand individual acts of obedience, but the obedience of the heart which expresses itself in every separate outward action. Alongside the prophet's demand for faithfulness, kindness and knowledge of God, appears the interpretation of the divine will, which demands a right attitude towards God. The idea of the 'knowledge of God' is particularly important, in that, it refers to recognition and a conscious relationship, which has a strong personal and intentional element. In this connection, Hosea blamed the priests who should have been the guardians of true knowledge of God, and who had especially failed in this duty [Hos 4:4-6]. The priests had allowed the very real exchange of the God of Israel with the Baals of Canaan to pass unnoticed. This loss of true knowledge of God became clear to Hosea in his theology of history. In the beginning, when Israel was led by her God in the wilderness, everything went well for the people. Apostasy began upon their entry into the land of Canaan:

Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved [Hos 9: 10].

The evils Hosea denounced such as magical practices, superstitious sacrifices, fertility symbols, etc., represented to him an ingratitude of his people so base that they deserved the name 'prostitute' [Hos 4:11]. God's people like the prophet's wife, Gomer, had abandoned the charitable devotion of her divine 'husband' for the sake of the sensual tyranny and Baal cults. Due to Israel's infidelity and loss of true knowledge of God, by the Lord's command, the prophet named his daughter *La-ruhama*, 'not pitied', to symbolize that God's mercy is at an end [Hos 1:6], and his son *Lo-ammi*, 'not-my-people', to symbolize that Israel was no longer a people of God [Hos 1:9].

### *c) Micah, the Champion of the Oppressed*

Micah carried out his mission focused on justice in the southern kingdom, Judah. He is aptly described as the defender of the poor, and he indeed stands out as the champion of the oppressed. His criticism was levelled against the rich who oppressed the poor, and against social injustice in Judah. He accused the rich of gradually monopolising the land and the homes of the poor by exacting pledges from them which they were unable to pay. Micah put forward a sharp description of what the rich did to the poor:

Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?--you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron [Mic 3: 1-3].

In contrast to the professional prophets who expounded the 'official theology' based on the doctrine of divine election and watered down the plight of the poor and the oppressed, Micah reasserted the uniqueness of his authority and vocation:

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin [Mic 3:8].

Certainly it was by a free and sovereign decision that God chose Israel from among the nations to be his 'firstborn child', the 'first fruits of His harvest' [Jer 2:3]. But Israel did not derive anything from her holy destiny. Instead she turned to a historical provision for which she thought to pay with a cult well equipped with abundance of sacrifices, whereas her politico-communal life was withdrawn from the divine leading.<sup>19</sup> In place of dwelling together in harmony, a self-seeking mentality rolled upon the people. Consequently, God's unfathomable love for them turned into a wrath that required judgement and rejection. Out of God's justice, prophetic speech took a critical posture over against God's own people by demystifying human suffering and articulating in a clear way that much of human pain was caused by the strong who regularly destroyed the weak. Fired by the word of God, the prophets weighed their society against the ideals of God's will and found it wanting. They were outraged by their compatriots for having forgotten the God of the covenant, for worshipping God only in name, and for having trampled His holy demands underfoot. They were scandalised by the widespread identification of the Living God with the popular cults of the heathens. They were bitterly scornful of the spectacle of punctilious ritualism going hand-in-hand with moral decadence and the callousness of human misery.

Most probably the prophets assumed that their words as God's own words could be immediately understood and accepted. As a result, when the people refused to listen, it seemed wholly enigmatic and paradoxical to the prophets. It was something irrational and mysterious, especially that their message was not a new one, and its content was comprehensible. Their ideas of Israel's election and God's moral demands were old ideas rooted in the Mosaic

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<sup>19</sup> Buber, *op. cit.*, 1949, p. 99.

inheritance. All the prophets did was to bring home these old truths in a concrete situation, calling sinners to repentance in the face of impending doom and encouraging those who turned to God with promises of future blessings. To the question concerning what they should offer in order to find favour with God, Micah's answer gives the impression that the people already knew what was required of them even though they persisted in evil ways:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your GOD? [Mic 6:8].

The bold and passionate utterances of the prophets earned them nothing more than hostility. They failed tragically to make any genuine impact on their contemporaries. They were generally known to be unpatriotic troublemakers, rebels. Certainly, the mission of the prophets was not smooth, and one would not be far from correct to describe their history as one of failures. Amos was expelled from Bethel [Amos 7:12-13]. Hosea encountered hostility [Hos 9:8]. Micah was commanded not to preach [Mic 2:6]. Isaiah was scoffed at [Isa 28:9]. Jeremiah was rejected even by his close relatives. He was imprisoned and an attempt was made on his life [Jer 12:6; 26:11]. In any case, the people's inability to listen to the word of God led to their chastisement through the captivities of 734 BC and 722 BC for Israel, and 597 BC and 586 BC for Judah. It was the experience of these captivities that led God's people to painful questioning and skeptical examination of their faith of the desert.

### **iii) The Mission 'to Build Up and to Plant'**

Despite everything that happened, prophetic commitment stood out as an act of relentless hope that refused to despair and to believe that the world is closed off in patterns of hopelessness, exploitation and oppression. It dared to assert in any and every circumstance the conviction known since the time of Moses and Aaron that there is a God who can and will

make all things new. Although they envisioned that God's own people would have to answer for their cynical, wilful disobedience and come to a suffering end, they dared to imagine a totally new beginning, whereby God Himself would reform His people and create, as there had been before, a people after God's own heart. They announced the unpredictable newness, and God's abiding tenderness and love for humanity. The prophets displayed their optimism of how the people are to return to the pilgrim road in the presence of God. To them it was clear that no matter how dark and chaotic the world might be, God is forever faithful.

As it were, prophetic speech refused to degenerate into a mere voicing of doom and despair, for it always moved from judgment to hope. Even though one of their strategies was to have recourse to the threat of punishment in order to bring the people back to their God, the prophets seemed to have questioned the efficacy of punishment.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, divine intention was not associated with taking pleasure in the imposition of a penalty, but in the bringing about of a perfect harmony with God and within the believing community [see Ezek 18:23]. It is from this background that the prophets spoke of the promises of newness at work in the people's history with God.<sup>21</sup>

Although the oracles of Amos, Hosea, and Micah are not without the themes of Israel's future blessings,<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah stand out more forcefully in this regard. We have every reason to admit here that certainly Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw the human heart so corrupt, rotten and beyond redemption that it was impossible for it to be faithful.

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<sup>20</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 187.

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, *op. cit.*, 1982, pp. 62-63.

<sup>22</sup> By way of example, the messages of Amos close with an eschatological oracle concerning the future restoration of the fortunes of the people [see Amos 9:11-15]. Most, if not all scholars have agreed that this is a later addition. In any case, we see it here as an essential component of prophetic speech. Hosea speaks of the divine love being stronger than divine wrath. God's relationship with Israel would be remade in a new way [see Hos 2:14-20]. Micah talks about the restoration of Israel and the coming blessings, refreshment and peace [see Mic 4:1-8].

However, it is amazing to note that despite such awareness they succeeded in envisioning a new possibility: salvation will come but only with God, and in His absolute future.

*a) Jeremiah's Vision of the New Covenant*

In midst of the people's shattering grief and despair, when the pivotal symbols of the national culture--the City of Jerusalem, the Monarchy and the Temple--were almost smashed down by the Bahylonians, it is incredible to think that Jeremiah uttered these words of revitalisation:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their GOD, and they shall be my people [Jer 31:31,33].

In a desperate situation, Jeremiah brought a vision of a newness that will come as a grace of God. The new covenant will be characterised by forgiveness of sins, greater respect of God, deeper knowledge of God, constant care of God, faithfulness, and interiorisation of religion. In view of the chronic apostasy of the people, and unlike the old covenant, the new one will continue because it will be written on the heart so as to represent a deeper relationship with God, the relationship that had hitherto been unrealised. Since it will come as a free gift, it is clear that the new covenant depends entirely on God who is prepared to deal even with the hardness of people's heart in order to bring them finally to Himself. Jeremiah's vitality comes precisely from his passionate conviction about the power of God to work a newness in the zero hours of loss and exile.<sup>23</sup> His concern for the restoration of the people are concentrated in chapters 29-33.

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voice in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 29.

### *b) Ezekiel's Perception of a Newness beyond Disaster*

In his mission to bring renewed hope to the exiles, Ezekiel surveyed Israel's history and looked beyond the imminent disaster to a new day when the nation would be restored. According to his seven-part scheme in Ezekiel 20, the present (fifth) period of exile [vv. 30-31] will be followed by a sixth, where God purges Israel's sin and brings the people 'into the bond of the covenant' [vv. 32-38]. The *ante-eventum* history of the nation climaxes in a seventh era, when the fortunes of the nation will be fully restored. Though Ezekiel has sketched out the main features of this new day in several oracles,<sup>24</sup> the theme of the nation's restoration plays a major part in his preaching.

To contrast those who used their power in exploitative ways, he enunciated the new rule in which the shepherd (the king) would genuinely take care for the sheep [Ezek 34:1-16]. On one hand, it is God Himself who is offered as the new shepherd [v. 11]. On the other hand, the hope is for a new David [v. 23], but either way, the ordering of social life will be humane and just [see v. 16]. The most familiar new possibility which Ezekiel offers is expressed in the metaphorical language of the 'dry bones' and the resurrection which explain the return of the exiles [see Ezek 37:1-14].

At one time the prophet appealed for serious righteousness and a redirected loyalty. Soon he came to realise that the evil was so massive as to be hopeless. He speaks no more of repentance because he knows that that is impossible. Instead he speaks of radical grace from the side of God which can be described in the category of awakening the dead. The new righteousness, the new heart and the new spirit are now to be given as God's free gifts:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh [Ezek 36:26].

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<sup>24</sup> See similar hopeful pronouncements in earlier judgement oracles: Ezek 6:8-10; 11:16-20; 16:60-63.

These replaces the old hard heart and the old failed breath. God will do for His people what they could not do by themselves. This is the good news of free gift. We must note here that for Ezekiel, God's gifts are not snivelling graciousness; they are for His glory (kabod):

It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came [Ezek 36:22].

### *c) Deutero-Isaiah's Vision of the Nearness of a New Future*

Deutero-Isaiah, who probably saw the people make their way out of the Babylonian exile, preached very forcefully on the advent of the mighty acts of God's grace towards His people. Like any other people trapped in a cultural disintegration, God's people were tempted to escape nostalgically in order to hide within the comforting memories of past glory. They showed an incurable tendency to waste their energy in expounding their tradition backwards to a remote and irrelevant past, rather than forward to grapple with the contemporary situation. The prophet challenged them to look forward to a new future:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert [Isa 43:18-19].

Deutero-Isaiah perceived the end of the exile as a manifestation of God's abiding tenderness and care. His commission was to declare that God would demonstrate in the near future the truth that Israel's bondage was over:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your GOD. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins [Isa 40:1-2].

It was not until many years later when the decimated people returned to their home land, after the Babylonian exile, that the great prophets attained recognition. The return from the exile bore witness to the fact that the new possibilities which the prophets announced could indeed be materialised. Finally the chastised people turned to the prophet's writings for proof, hope and guidance. Soon it dawned on them that their God was not a national convenience, like the gods of the heathens. Israel's God could intervene even in a land that was not their native Israel, for He raised up Cyrus, the Persian king, to emancipate them. It is in Deutero-Isaiah that we have the first statement about this development: *Israel's God has a universal power; He is the only God and has control over all that He has created* [see Isa 45:18-25]. The prophet Joel, who most probably belongs to the post-exilic period, even spoke of God as giving His spirit not only to Israel but to all humankind: yes to everyone, young people, men and women, slaves and non-slaves [see Joel 3:1-2].

## **Conclusion**

Regarding the manner of their mission and the word they spoke, Israel's prophets were unique. They stood out as extension of the word of God which can never be prevented from achieving its purpose. Their mission to criticise and energise arose basically from their perception of God's justice in the midst of their every day experience. Their contemporaries ignored the cry of the poor and the oppressed, the widow and the orphan. Instead they appealed to the privileges of their vocation which they thought to back up with a well-equipped cult. The peoples' inability to take heed of the prophetic call for conversion led them to their own ruin. However, God's judgement is not so much for the sake of punishment as for purification. Consequently He inspired the prophets to announce a new future for the people who were drowning in discouragement and uncertainty. Prophetic commitment to the word of

God underscored that God is not a god who makes human beings mere slaves or playthings, a god to be appeased by ritual. On the contrary, Israel's God is the One who manifests His holiness by being respectful toward and showing concern for the sanctity of each and every person, bettering their lives by exalting their dignity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CHALLENGE TO CHURCH'S MINISTRY TODAY

#### i) Jesus as the Embodiment of Old Testament Prophecy

As an activity of bearing witness to the struggle of the poor and the oppressed, prophecy is not limited to the Old Testament. Lying at the foundation of the Christian Church is the claim that Jesus Christ is the full embodiment of the prophetic tradition. In the New Testament, the Epistle to the Hebrews states clearly that,

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son [Heb 1:1-2].

In line with the prophets of long ago, Jesus Christ identified himself with the plight of the poor, the oppressed and the afflicted, by proclaiming the coming of the reign of God.<sup>25</sup> He criticised the existing unjust social order not for the sake of criticising but for the sake of giving it new life. His preaching identified the coming of God's reign as the historical replacement of the unjust social order.

The prophetic ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, is especially underscored in Luke's gospel where the words of Trito-Isaiah [Isa 61:1-2] are put in Jesus' mouth right at the beginning of his ministry as his programmatic proclamation at the Nazareth synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour [Luke 4:18-19].

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine U. Nebechukwu, "The Prophetic Mission of the Church in the Context of Social and Political Oppression in Africa", *AFER*, 33(5), 1991, p. 271.

The choice of this text as well as the solemnity with which Jesus proclaims its fulfilment shows the importance of the text for the rest of Jesus' ministry. As is true of the whole New Testament tradition, the anointing of Jesus by the Spirit is ordained for a mission, the mission for which he has been specifically sent: to proclaim the Good News. This is now realised at Nazareth:

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing [Luke 4:21].

In Luke, the word "today" is a categorical and synthetic expression implying authority for the fulfilment of the divine design announced through the great prophets. It indicates the exceptionality and the uniqueness of the event which was being awaited for ages.<sup>26</sup>

The significance of this text in Jesus' ministry is further underlined when John the Baptist sends the messengers to ask Jesus if he is the one to come. In his reply, Jesus does not give a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Instead he paraphrases the same prophecy saying:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them [Luke 7:22].

Evidently, Luke's gospel connects the ministry of Jesus with the prophetic proclamation of the acceptable year of the Lord, the year that grants freedom and restoration of dignity to the poor and the oppressed.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, like that of Israel's great prophets, the ministry of Jesus is realised in his battling against the oppressive forces that threaten to destroy humanity and in his announcing of the advent of the reign of God.

According to the New Testament, the early Christian community saw in the person of Jesus Christ wonders worked and impossibilities enacted. Through his presence the hungry

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<sup>26</sup> Robert J. Karris, "The Gospel According to Luke", in: Brown, R. E., J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy, eds., The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), p. 690.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

were fed, the deaf heard, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed and the dead were raised to life. In the end, the church was persuaded, and she confessed that even death could not hold him [Acts 2:24]. It is precisely in this vein that one can talk about the ministry of Jesus as that which speaks and enacts the word of God in ways that 'pluck up and pull down', 'build up and plant'. Accordingly, the Christian Church cannot be rightly described without an association with the ministry of Jesus whose life is an utterance of the very word, will, purpose and intent of God.

## ii) Prophetic Vocation of the Church

### a) *Fundamental Charism*

It is well known that at the Second Vatican Council, the Church made a serious reflection on her own identity and referred repeatedly to biblical models. Among other things, she spoke of herself as a people of God participating in the threefold office of Jesus Christ--*the priestly, the prophetic and the royal*.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, through baptism, all members of the Church (lay-people, religious, priests and bishops) are called to share in the threefold office of Christ. Evidently, the Church's prophetic office is not her only charism, and those who have written about the need to recognise and reflect upon the other typical charisms--*the priestly and the royal servanthood*--are not mistaken. However, there is something rather fundamental about the prophetic in that it clearly points to the reality of the God of righteousness who describes us before we describe him:

Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 2.

thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? [Isa 58:2, 4, 6].

For the Church to live out this reality is for the Church to be committed to the deepening of her own co-operate imagination, to look for liturgies and personal discipline that will liberate her ability of seeing and responding to the God of righteousness. *Lumen Gentium* clearly states that, “The Holy People of God shares also in Christ’s prophetic office” [LG 12]. To live out her prophetic vocation, the Church requires to go back to the Old Testament prophets, the types of the Prophet Jesus who came to reveal the God of love, mercy and fullness of life.

As we have seen in the first chapter, the prophet’s reference to their intimate experience of God was for them like the fuel that kept their mission going. Therefore, if we maintain that the prophetic charism is fundamental to the nature of the Church, then the Church too must have an energising reference to an intimate experience of God as the starting point of her ministry.

### ***b) Experience of God***

The tradition of Christian spirituality speaks eloquently of the origin of an individual’s desire to follow Jesus Christ as a call from God. Christian living is explained in terms of a vocation that derives from being drawn by the Father and moved by the Spirit in order to share the life Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, God’s witness or spokesperson is required to have first hand experience so as to articulate God’s word in an unambiguous way. In our daily life, it is never disputed that witnesses cannot speak from hearsay, rather their words must emerge from their personal experience. Likewise, if a testimony is to be considered prophetic, it must go from hearsay knowledge to direct knowledge of God. Discernment and declaration of God’s will

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1994), no. 259.

demand an intimate and interpersonal relationship with God. The early Christian community realised this in the person of Jesus. John's First Epistle testifies:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life... [1 John 1:1].

As such therefore, like the great prophets, the followers of Christ are called to refresh daily their initiating experience of God by hearing God's call through passing days and years, like a refrain in a melody that one cannot forget. In other words, the prophetic vocation involves a constant awareness of being caught up by an encounter with God, an encounter that does not permit indifference in the midst of human pain and suffering but provokes the confrontation of all evils in the human community.

### *c) Role in Human Community*

Like the Old Testament prophets, the Church, though called to bear God's word, cannot be dissociated from the entire human community. In fact, her sincere membership in human society is what drives her to show forth her unwavering commitment to the welfare of every individual person. In this connection, the role to articulate what the human situation is and how it can be is proper to the Church's ministry. And this requires a transformation of life that leads to a critical posture and denunciation of any administration of social relations that crushes human reality in the interest of order, progress or profit. Naturally, the prophetic critical posture culminates in the imagination of the newness that originates from God's hand so that the world may receive and enact its proper life as God's creation.

At this juncture, let us now turn to the consideration of how the prophetic commitment to the word of God needs to be underscored, especially in the situation of human pain and suffering, in Zambia today.

### **iii) Prophetic Function in the Contemporary Situation**

At the outset, it is important to bear in mind that the religious world of the Old Testament is not our world, nor is our world the social world of the community of Exile and Restoration. However, while acknowledging the gulf between the Old Testament world and our world, it is clear that the God who spoke through the prophets as being compassionate to the oppressed and vindicator of the poor remains the Lord of the Christian heritage. In this section, our discussion begins with the consideration of infidelity to God's design as a motivation of the prophetic commitment. From there we shall reflect on how God's purpose has been watered down in Zambia today, and on the urgent need of the church's prophetic involvement.

#### ***a) Infidelity to God's Design as a Prophetic Motivation***

If the prophets made it clear that the covenanted people were to guard the Exodus experience as their foundational story and refrain from oppressing one another in order to remain loyal to God's design, the Church must likewise make it clear that God has created all things together for goodness, peace and harmony. The Church has the mission to clarify to the world that God has created human beings in His own image, and that this image as well as all that God has created must be guarded against all forces that threaten to disfigure and destroy them.<sup>30</sup>

Evidently, human beings have not always been faithful to God's purpose. Biblical religion interprets the story of the Fall and the Exilic experience as a manifestation of the loss of God's image by human beings themselves. This loss introduces confusion and chaos into the world. While the legend of Cain and Abel [Genesis 4] portrays devouring one another as a

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<sup>30</sup> John Ashworth, "Prophetic Spirituality", *African Christian Studies*, 13(1), 1997, p. 45.

consequence of the loss of God's image, the prophets point to infidelity and oppression of one another within the covenanted community. By and large, in the ancient world, the sending of a people into the Exile was perceived as a means by which the identity of a population was blotted out of history.<sup>31</sup> And this was indeed an enormous consequence of the people's infidelity to God's design.

Nevertheless, by His nature, God refuses to absolutise the chaotic experience of His people. For He always speaks of a new future where His purpose will be accomplished and His regime fully established. Again and again, God intervenes in the life of the people to testify to His own personal involvement with human beings. His promise of a new future that lived on the lips of the prophets warned against any reluctance to look forward. For the sake of announcing that there is a God who can and will make all things new, even in the face of the most closed-down present situation, the prophets were ready to put themselves in the front-line and even to pay for the consequences of their mission.

#### ***b) The Loss of God's Image in Zambia Today***

In our contemporary situation, the loss of God's image is vividly accentuated in the superfluous wealthy of the few at the expense of the majority who suffer abject poverty. Indeed it does not take an expert to explain how poor the life of the majority is in Zambia today. To a large measure, the tough life of the majority is the consequence of the weak economy of the country. In the last fifteen years, the nation's economy has increasingly become weaker and its effects are painfully tangible. The condition of the workers is characterised by grossly inadequate salaries and wages. Sky-rocketing prices and a constant devaluing currency are the talk of the day. The situation is bad. Survival is the only item that

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<sup>31</sup> Allen P. Ross, "Theology of Exile", In: Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., New International Dictionary of Old Testament & Exegesis, Vol. 4 (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1997), p. 596.

constitutes the agenda of the majority. Because of an expensive education system, inadequate medical facilities, hunger, etc., the poor have apparently no more strength to think about tomorrow. Their struggle to keep themselves breathing can only be done today. When one greets a common person, the usual response is: *Kulila buleca*. [This means that life cannot be better than having a day's struggle done]. The miserable condition of the majority of the Zambians is also seen, and even more clearly, in an ever-increasing number of *bakaponya* and *utuntemba*.<sup>32</sup> Worst of all, having given the impression of fighting for a better life for the citizens, government officials have despaired. They have openly declared that the situation is not going to change; the situation will deteriorate unless the enormous debt which the nation owes the Northern countries is forgiven.<sup>33</sup>

### *c) Urgent Need for Prophetic Involvement*

It is my hypothesis that as she comes face to face with human pain and suffering, the church in Zambia today has an urgent prophetic role to play. Just as the great prophets were moved by an encounter with the God of love and compassion in the midst human misery and called for the transformation of whole life, the church, too, moved by the same encounter must resound the same call in the poverty stricken nation. She has no reason to water down her prophetic vocation even if she is accused of playing politics. Rather than paying little or no attention to the situation of the hungry, the sick and the dying, the church has an urgent task to descend into the deep trenches of the arena of the struggle for human wholeness, the struggle to recover God's image. This task calls for analysis of the human situation in view of God's

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<sup>32</sup> *Bakaponya* is the description given especially to young men who, having failed to meet school expenses, find themselves on the streets, selling whatever they come across; *Utuntemba* refers to places, apart from public markets, where people have made tiny shelters from which they try to sell something.

<sup>33</sup> Business Review Reporter, "Eternal Debts Eat Away Comesa Earnings", *Times of Zambia*, December 11, 1998, p. 10.

will so as to be able to identify and oppose all that support poverty and oppression in our society.

Above all, the prophetic function of the church in Zambia today is to be realised in the sustaining of the vitality with which Jesus Christ proclaimed the liberation of the oppressed and the fulfilment of the Lord's year of favour. Jesus is indeed the one who brings to fulfilment the original goodness and right order of creation. He was sent to proclaim the breaking-in of the long awaited moment when God would rebuild the community of creation founded on integrity and righteousness.

As we have underlined in the previous chapter, criticism of social evils without imagining a positive alternative will degenerate into mere voicing of doom and despair, something that the great prophets and the Prophet Jesus would not do. Thus, for the church to carry out her prophetic function in a proper way, she must always strive to move beyond criticising to energising. In a way, the church is called to be always attentive and to listen to God who puts out His hand and touches her mouth, saying through Jeremiah:

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant [Jer 1:10].

In other words, prophetic commitment to the word of God involves the commitment to both denunciation of social evils and proclamation of renewal of life within the human society. The church's prophetic ministry is not only to be identified with the criticising mission, 'the mission to pluck up and to pull down', but also with the energising mission, 'the mission to build up and plant'.

It is worthwhile to mention here that the criticising mode of prophetic function identifies, defines and announces without prejudice the ways in which God's people are caught up in chaos. In this connection, the church has the mandate to reveal to everyone, in an

unambiguous tone, that the human reality is not a matter of good or bad luck. God's word has created all things together for goodness, peace and harmony. Like Amos, Hosea and Micah, she is called to uphold a critical posture against any erroneous way of looking at God which normally fabricates and sustains human pain and suffering. Over and above, like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutro-Isaiah she is called to be actively involved in saying no to sentimental attempts that make people develop a spirit of resignation in the face of human misery.

Definitely, the church has a substantial role to play in making everyone aware that the seed of a new and better future has already been sown in today's soil. Often, however, we ourselves are the sterile soil killing the seed. We are the darkness concealing the sparks of the future. In their Pastoral Letter written in March 1997, our bishops in Zambia have articulated that: *part of the country's enormous debt is admittedly due to our own poor planning, inefficient management, corruption and lack of commitment to the national welfare.* Certainly, to the degree that we have all been created together for goodness, peace and harmony, we must show forth our commitment to the struggle for the communion of God's people where there will no longer be poverty and oppression. And this struggle has to be expressed today and especially in the upholding of our commitment to 'small hopes', such as promoting education, caring for the sick, healing wounds and diseases, sharing our food with the hungry, clothing the naked, etc. For it is only by taking small steps from death to life, from indifference to love, that we shall be able to witness in a credible way to the great hope of history, the hope pertaining to the prelude of the great feast of liberation from all forms of enslavement.

From of old the great feast of liberation was known as the Lord's year of favour, the Good News to the poor, the slaves, the debtors and the oppressed. This was the Year of Jubilee, a time when debts were to be cancelled, when land was to be returned to its original owner, when slaves and prisoners were to be freed. It was a time of redistribution of wealth so

that everyone was put back on an equal footing [see Leviticus 25]. The Jubilee was indeed an acceptable year to all types of oppressed persons. It represented a hope for a different future that comes with the Messiah: a new generation of time in which the harmonious reign of God would be restored.<sup>34</sup>

Presently and as we approach the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the call for liberation from all forms of human enslavement is to constitute, to a great measure, the prophetic imagination of the church. In his Apostolic Letter, "The Third Millennium", John Paul II has clearly expressed that: *Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not cancelling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations.*<sup>35</sup>

As God's prophetic people, we need to speak-out in the world of today. We need to be fully involved in guarding the priority and sanctity of the human person. For our prophetic ministry to be fruitful, we need to regain our birth-right of moral force and the courage to confront the evils of our society, without fear of being persecuted. Undoubtedly, being involved in prophetic ministry means taking the risk of being hurt. Jesus himself gives us the supreme example. The treatment given to him, like to so many of his prophetic predecessors, was to be expected [see Luke 13:33]. For no disciple is greater than the master.

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<sup>34</sup> Jacob Kavunkal, "Jubilee the Framework of Evangelisation", *Vidyajyoti*, 52(4), 1988, p. 183.

<sup>35</sup> John Paul II, *The Third Millennium. Apostolic Letter. Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 51.

## CONCLUSION

None of us knows with certainty what the future holds, but as believers, we do know Him who holds the future. God reaches out to us, lifting us out of the mire of our discouragement that we might have the wisdom and vision to grasp His enduring purpose. In the midst of human suffering and pain, God raises up prophets, from within the human community, who confront their kinfolk with the challenge of the Living God. In other words, prophetic commitment to the word of God is born out of God's initiative and decision. God is the one who calls those He wills to bring forth His word that impinges upon human history as a concrete message in particular circumstances where the great design of God for the human enterprise comes down to particulars of hurt and healing, of despair and hope.

Through the prophetic word, God reveals Himself as lover of righteousness, intolerant of injustice and mightily at work in human history. He takes a critical posture against the greedy powerful and allies with the powerless. He reveals His great design for all His creation by intervening into the processes of history with a 'preferential option for the marginal'. Uttered by human lips in the matrix of human suffering and pain, His word turns out to be so compelling and powerful that it possesses the means of coercion that subverts the dehumanising *status quo*, so that humanity may receive its proper life as God's creation.

In Zambia today, the emergence of a permanent and ever-growing class of the poor as well as the diminished political vision for a better future portray nothing but an indication of the disappearance of what is humanness. Apparently, the destructive process in our nation refuses to be countered or subverted by great programs or strategies. Like the most difficult contexts in which the prophetic tradition has always surfaced with speech, today's human situation in Zambia is our 'most difficult context', and it requires to be countered by the

prophetic word, the unafraid voice that brings holiness back to history, and lets righteousness sound in the presence of injustice and oppression. Naturally, the prophetic voice owns suffering even in a climate of apathy; it voices hope in the midst of despair, and refuses brutality in the name of the coming rule of God.

Now is the time, when the prophetic voice of the church in Zambia should be heard, and loudly so. For us, called to faith and life in Jesus Christ, our theme is an issue of our vocation. In line with Israel's great prophets, our proper ministry consists in the disclosure of God's resolve that makes the renewal of life possible. Prophetic commitment to God's word requires listening to God--through on-going prayer and reflection, naming the destructive forces that threaten to destroy us, and providing a serious, positive alternative. Consequently, our challenge is not to provide a rhetorical addendum to our situation of human pain and suffering, but to counter it from the ground up.

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