

"The earth will be filled with the glory of God": Christian scholarship confronting injustice and suffering.

The presidential inaugural address of Dr. Doug Blomberg, delivered at the convocation ceremonies of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, May 8, 2015.

We live in a world filled with incredibly rich and wonderful blessings, which we accept with thankfulness from the hand of God and the hands that helped in their coming to fruition. Yet it is also a world of vast suffering, frequently inexplicable, but often attributable to the evil from which we never cease. Our lives are a continual search for a way towards the light, and away from the darkness. This search is fundamentally spiritual, not always in identifiably religious forms. Our commitment at ICS is to search out the spiritual roots of the good we foster and the evil we permit, knowingly or inadvertently.

There was a remarkable observation a few centuries ago by someone termed a “constructive revolutionary”. It is all the more remarkable, because many would not expect this from him.

You cannot imagine a more certain rule.... All the blessings we enjoy are divine deposits that we have received on this condition: that we distribute them to others.¹

The author is John Calvin. We are not to assume that the blessings he has in mind are out-of-this-world. They are in fact as down to earth as supervising the building of a sewer in Geneva. Calvin’s is a world-affirming faith, in which the prayer for God’s Kingdom to come, God’s will to be done on earth, is concrete and historically grounded, as the Judeo-Christian scriptures are throughout. Biblically-formed, reforming scholarship seeks to contribute to the coming of this Commonwealth.

The hymn we have just sung, based on verses from Psalm 57, has the refrain, “Above the heavens”. This is not intended to suggest an absent God, reigning in distant glory. Rather, it signals God’s glory encompassing all creaturely reality – mountains and rivers, plants, animals, humans made in

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion [1559]* Book III, Ch. 7, Sec. 5

the image of God, their social relationships and cultural accomplishments, thus serving the purpose for which humans were created: to tend, keep, care for, fill and fulfil the world.

The Hebrew word here translated as “glory” may also be “soul”, or simply, “me” (Ps 36:5). Glory signifies what is at the heart of our humanness, the “weight” of our selves. God’s glory is humans glorified, being all they are meant to be as image-bearers. This glory is to be among the nations. It is the kings of the earth marching into a renewed creation, the New Jerusalem, bringing with them all that has been unfolded from the beginning. “May the whole earth be filled with God’s glory,” the sometimes wise Solomon writes (Ps 72:19.) As Habakkuk later prophesied, “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”

I had not always realised this significance of “the glory of God”, not explicitly. So I was somewhat taken aback by N. T. Wright’s claim that God’s purpose is the glorification of God’s children. How foreign this was to much I had heard in sermons. Yet how close it was to the unarticulated yearning of my heart. I came to understand that this had been said in so many other ways informing the vision of ICS, though not with such a striking, startling focus. Yet this is what Paul says to the Romans (8:17): We are co-heirs of God with Christ! How glorious is this? Echoing Romans 8:30, Wright says that to *glorify* is “to set our Creator’s children in glorious authority over the world.” It is thus that the earth will be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.

Filling the earth with good things. Being fruitful. This is our creational-cultural mandate. The whole world flourishing. God’s purpose fulfilled. Being called according to God’s purpose means taking up the purpose for which we were created – to serve God in serving God’s world, by unfolding the riches with which God has entrusted us, earthen vessels. Wright (p. 91) says: “That is the hope. When God redeems the whole creation, redeemed humans will play the key role, resuming the wise, healing sovereignty over the whole world for which God made them in the first place.”

Yes, there is need for healing, and need for wisdom. There are broken relationships everywhere and at all levels, from one-on-one partnerships to multi-national corporations, and everything in between. There is suffering, often arising from injustice, nearly everywhere we look. Christian scholarship serving God’s purpose envisions all creation flourishing to the glory of God, the healing song of the gospel sung everywhere. This is a sublime hope. Suffering is a constant in our fallen

world. But hope so often comes in the face of suffering. And hope does not disappoint us. The groans of suffering are like those of a mother in childbirth, heralding all things working together for good.

There is one passage of Scripture, perhaps more than any other, that focuses our vision of God's glory. It is the Newer Testament passage read earlier (Col 1:15-20). And if there is one saying that is emblematic of our tradition, it is Abraham Kuyper's: "There is not one thumb's breadth, of which the Lord does not say, 'It is mine'."

We are all educators, in many ways and many different relationships. We teach others, by our words and deeds, as friends, family, colleagues, even casual acquaintances. In this way, we love or fail to love our neighbours. Some of us are professional educators; and some of us focus theoretically on education as a practice. I wish to speak with that focus now, not as a theologian, but as teacher. This is apt, as ICS is, after all, an educational institution.

My inaugural address ten years ago as Senior Member in Philosophy of Education included a paragraph on the Parable of the Talents. God speaks to us, through creation, Christ and Scripture, in our common humanity, and also specifically in our varied vocations. Back then, something that should long have been obvious struck me. The talents given to the servants were not talents as we know them. They were coins to be used in service of their master. They are not the same as *abilities*. They were opportunities offered: what educational psychologists call "environmental affordances". It is a "talented environment" that gives children in schools – not only children, but all of us; not only in schools, but everywhere – what is needed to unfold creation as we simultaneously unfold our abilities. One can't be a pianist without a piano, nor without a model to emulate, and most often, a teacher to guide. One cannot learn one's native tongue, without growing up with language users. This is education, nurture, initiation into richly developed creational-cultural traditions.

A few years later, however, I learnt something further. The parable of the talents is followed immediately by another – an apocalyptic parable, the last Jesus told before he was crucified. We should not ignore the significance of this canonical placing. What he teaches here is key to the teachings he commands his disciples to promulgate at the end of the same gospel. This parable we know as that of the Sheep and the Goats. It is a prime example of wisdom teaching, for it says we

hear the voice of God in the voices of God’s creatures, human image-bearers and all else. But the parable says this voice is to be heard most pointedly in the voices of the underprivileged and oppressed. We serve Jesus in serving them – the widows, orphans, poor, and aliens, the ubiquitous focus of Israel’s calling to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God. We should never forget we are heirs of Israel.

Of all the parables, it is that of the Talents to which Christian educators most frequently appeal, to justify the laudable aim of helping students develop their gifts. However, there are two significant ways in which it is misunderstood. First, the unwise servant is rebuked not because he has little ability, but because he does not use the ability he has to seize the opportunity offered.

That those suffering and oppressed are the “talents” presented to us is a shocking juxtaposition. But this is the second point of educational relevance, for instead of placing the nurture of individual abilities at the centre, it leads us to ask what our curriculum and pedagogy would look like if we placed the task of bringing healing to a broken world at the centre and made the restoration of justice, the in-breaking of dynamic shalom, its impetus. Should not our goal be people who live in service of the flourishing of others, at the same time living in service of their Creator-Redeemer? Who can say they love God, whom they cannot see, if they do not love their neighbour, sometimes standing right in front of them? Is not the whole law summed up in the commandment to do just this? Is not the pursuit of justice – relationships reconciled so all is right among them – a paramount goal of wise living?² Is not this the promise of the Prince of Peace?

For all of us, in our calling to care, nurture, educate, the question is how to create talented environments affording students opportunities to use their abilities to address a suffering world. How do we construct spaces for learning in which, as Parker Palmer aptly states, “the community of truth may be practiced”?³ In what practices do we invite students to engage, in what narratives do we ask them to live? How do we evoke in them a hunger and thirst for justice – “righteousness” is nowadays too bland for this beatitude – and also help them be satisfied?

² Proverbs 1:1-3.

³ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 90.

I long ago embraced Paulo Freire's practice of a problem-posing pedagogy. (People properly pull my leg for my proclivity for alliteration, perhaps particularly for the letter "p".) I did so in response to two biblical touchstones, "creation" and "antithesis". God's world is still good, so loved and sustained by him that he gave his only Son, for the whole world. But God gave his Son because the world is not as it is meant to be, riven as it is by obeisance to idols in the hearts of each of us. This may seem starkly put, but can anything be starker than the words of Jesus in his mountain-top sermon: "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Mt 7:24). Have we been to the mountain-top? Have we seen the glory of the coming of the Lord on the streets of Selma?

Ordinary life is lived in complex, concrete contexts, not in disciplinary compartments, at one remove from the fullness of everyday life. Scholarship should be accountable to life lived, not presuming to call it to account. The commitment to be so accountable is potentially the genius of the reformational tradition. The challenge is to be in touch with life, including its suffering. Suffering is at the heart of the gospel – Jesus' suffering for us, that we might be redeemed from suffering. This means being in the world, in its agonies. It means "completing what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24). Another hard saying indeed, but resonating strongly with the equally hard saying that "whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (Jn 14:12-13). Thus will the glory of the Lord be over all the earth.

Much of the world's suffering stems from how we as think, believe, feel, and shape our cultural life and structure our societies. Last century, on many counts the most horrendous in history – except for all the others – may be characterised as the Age of Ideology. I do not need to list these as abstract worldviews nor even as concrete cataclysms. Nor do I have to argue that intellectual notions are separable from material conditions. I *am*, not because I think: I am an incredibly complex organism interdependent with all there is. If I am an Afro-American, an indigenous Canadian or an Australian Aboriginal, my die is cast before I am even born: incarceration, suicide, homicide, domestic violence, substance abuse, will much more likely be my lot than if I were born Anglo-European in one of these three immensely privileged countries. These facts are not accidents,

but outcomes entailed by centuries-old convictions about what it means to be human and who really counts fully as such. Philosophy, theology, worldview may be abstract and esoteric conversations, or they may indeed help us combat suffering by going to its intellectual, spiritual and other roots, exposing, combating and, if needs be, eradicating these. Ideology critique is idolatry critique, for ideology places trust in systems and values that claim hegemony, and promise a salvation of sorts. We are called to live sacrificially, not conformed to oppressive systems of thought but transformed by the renewal of our minds. This is true worship.

There are many ways in which our minds need to be transformed. I will close by addressing just one. If God's purpose is the glorification of God's image bearers, the earth and the fullness thereof, all everywhere reconciled one to the other, then massive economic inequality needs to be battled strenuously. Calvin said as much. If the Cold War is over, capitalism has won the day, and history is at an end, how is it that inequality continues to increase exponentially? By all indices of wellness, the most wealthy societies are the most unequal and the most ill. Unparalleled prosperity belongs to fewer and fewer, and penury is the plight of a swelling majority. *Why* are there the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the enslaved, the alien? Not only, but in no small part, because "Greedy people are proud and restless.... They have made their families rich with what they took by violence" (Hab 2:5, 9.) This is not to challenge the value of free enterprise, entrepreneurship or the legitimacy of private ownership. We are to use the abilities God has gifted. There are, however, massive problems with *unbridled* capitalism, just as there are with an unconstrained state, an imperialistic church, even an all-consuming family. Hence, Calvin argued for the separation of church and state, Kuyper for educational institutions free of control by state or church – "each sovereign in its own sphere", he said, for authority is mutually limited, God alone the sovereign of all.

God is glorified when God's purposes are fulfilled: this is humankind's glory, God's commonwealth covenant with us for creation. We retreat from the promise that we will do greater things, when we do not respect the covenant integral to God's plan. As a scholarly community, we have a particular calling in working out God's purposes. But he calls us to serve in humility. There is intellectual greed – hubris too easily coveted by scholars. Let us be on always be on our guard.

Our hope and prayer is that the earth will be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea. A renewed earth, in which there will no more be tears of sorrow, only tears of joy. May we all play the part in this God offered.

I read the words of Mary, mother of Jesus (Lk 1: 51-54), as preamble to our next hymn:

God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich empty away.