

*Being the Church in a Time of Empire: A First World Perspective*

by Jeanne Choy Tate

Second Isaiah takes place in a time of great empires. Israel has been taken captive by the Babylonian Empire and is living in exile far from her homeland. Her dreams of a glorious monarchy and nationalistic might, of splendid temples and a politically powerful priesthood, have been shattered. Indeed, here in exile, Yahweh's power seems weak in comparison with the gods of empire. Israel is in despair, no longer certain of her identity as God's chosen. The next generation of Israel's children are in danger of being seduced away from their heritage of faith by a glittering pluralism of cultures and religions and the material prosperity promised by empire. Yet Israel longs to once again experience a vibrant faith, to touch and handle those "things unseen" which satisfy more deeply than the empty promises of empire.

I suggest that Second Isaiah prophesied in a time not unlike our own. There are similarities between Israel in exile in the Babylonian Empire and American Christians who today live in a nation much of the world experiences as empire. For the experience of exile is not limited to geography and many American Christians also live in exile unable to identify with the nation's values of consumer capitalism and militaristic might. In the midst of great religious and cultural pluralism, of secular power and tremendous materialism, we too often seem uncertain about our identity as a people of faith. We too fear our children will be seduced away from the faith by the glittering promises of empire.

When a people's identity as a faith community differs from the dominant culture, compromise is constant temptation and assimilation a constant threat. Rather than speak the truth to power, the Western church has too often failed to realize that Christian values are counter-cultural to those of empire. For, where empire declares human initiative to be the primary force behind its core values of success and progress, Christianity witnesses to justice and holiness at the core of life (Brueggemann, 1997: 30). Where empire thrives on an ideology of scarcity, Christianity is grounded in a theology of abundance where God's love and creation's bounty are freely given to all. Where empire justifies the individual self as its primary focus, in Christian understanding, servanthood to neighbor and stranger are central.

First World people are, for the most part, uncomfortable with being characterized as Empire. Perhaps that is because—when you reside in the belly of the Empire Beast—it is difficult to discern its contours. It takes perspective from those outside the empire beast—perspective from the Third World and from Third World communities residing within the First World—for empire to be revealed. Part of the reason American Christians find it so difficult to see empire is because we have taken the separation of church and state so seriously we fail to see a relationship between faith and economics. Our faith has become spiritualized and individualized as if it were a private and personal possession unrelated to the political and economic systems that surround us. While we may be comfortable talking about serving the poor, we rarely talk about the economic systems that create the poor.

Perhaps we also fail to see the reality of empire because our Christianity has become too identified with the myth of America as a Christian nation. We fail to realize that the American way of life is now centered more around consumer materialism than its original religious roots. Modern Western society is so secularized that the assumptions and assertions of the church no

longer receive automatic cultural acceptance and reinforcement. Quite the contrary—an identity grounded in faith is often ridiculed while the symbols of faith are treated dismissively by popular culture. This reality leads Brueggemann to say that Christians today are no longer enthroned in Jerusalem with institutes of power and privilege but, whether or not we recognize it, Christians live an exilic and marginalized life in the midst of Babylon (Brueggemann 1997: 115).

The cynicism and ennui of the modern age may well be signs of a deeper despair that comes from living under an ideology of empire. For something feels terribly wrong. While the empire we live in proclaims itself prosperous and successful, many of us walk around with a generalized sense of despair and hopelessness. Daily we measure ourselves by standards of beauty and success set by advertising and, inevitably, we find ourselves wanting. Our environment is polluted and our rights to natural resources increasingly privatized. Our homeless population grows and includes many families with children. Random violence, drugs, sexual diseases and gangs threaten to harm our children and adolescents. We have grown cynical about our political process, our economy, our quality of life.

Increasingly, our identities as Americans are defined, not by our strength of character, but by how much we produce and how much we consume. The right to happiness has become the right to consume while the goal of life is to make more money in order to consume more. Those who are not “productive”—children, the elderly, the unemployed and the ill—are marginal to the economy and therefore treated as expendable. Though democracy is based on the individual having the power to effect policy, now that transnational corporations are accorded the same rights granted individuals, Americans feel powerless to hold them accountable. When the welfare of the market takes precedence over the welfare of the people, the market may be free but our lives feel controlled by invisible, anonymous others.

Christians today have lost the ability to envision alternatives to an identity other than a nationalistic one grounded in consumer capitalism and militaristic patriotism. Like Israel, until we can envision alternatives, we too will remain in despair, captive to the thrall of empire. Isaiah therefore speaks to us as well when he calls the faith community to a new and distinct identity—not as servant to nation or empire—but as servant to God’s intended purpose for all creation and for all nations.

The model Isaiah proclaims is no easy ‘Christ against culture’ model where the faith community lives in withdrawal and isolation from the surrounding culture. For Isaiah introduces a daring universalism into Israel’s consciousness that calls for her to be “a light to the nations.” Thus, while maintaining its distinctive identity, the faith community must participate fully in the life of the dominant culture if it is to speak the truth to empire and bear witness that there are alternatives to life under its control. Such a counter-cultural identity will not be easy for empire is hostile to alternatives beyond its control and is threatened by minority identities whether those of faith communities or ethnic groups. Empire today is also uncomfortable with the language of faith, liturgy, and sacrament with its promise and hope of life beyond the power of empire. It is hostile to faith in “things unseen,” preferring instead to portray life as a fixed reality where there is no possibility God’s liberating power can break through its control to bring change and renewal.

How in the midst of pluralism is the faith community to maintain its distinctive identity as an alternative to empire? Isaiah answers this question by calling Israel to acts of resistance. He calls Israel to “re”-member the history of God’s faithfulness and to interpret scripture as a living witness to God’s liberating power within their current exilic situation. Worship too is an act of resistance for, unless the church has been co-opted into sanctioning empire, in the act of worship, the community of faith enters a world beyond the control of empire to re-enact the drama of an alternative, God-filled reality that ridicules the power of empire to enslave.

So it is that, through acts of theological and liturgical resistance, Isaiah calls the faith community to change its consciousness and live out its distinctive identity. The good news of God’s faithfulness and liberating power is indeed a true alternative to empire. This good news is not limited to the community of faith but is an alternative intended for all people everywhere who are enslaved to empire and who live lives of hopelessness and despair under its spell.