

ASSEMBLY HEARS KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
ON JESUS AS LIBERATOR, UNIFIER

Nairobi (EPS) - "We should be encouraged rather than discouraged by the diversity of answers to the question 'Who is this Jesus?'", said Dr. Robert McAfee Brown, a professor of theology from California, in the major theological address of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches here.

Dr. Brown was speaking on the theme, "Who is this Jesus Christ who frees and unites?" He based his address on the question Jesus asked of his disciples in Matthew 16: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?", and continued, "Clearly this Jesus cannot be confined by any formula, theological or otherwise. He breaks out of all the little boxes in which we try and imprison him."

Dr. Brown went on to say that Christians have an obligation to listen before they proclaim, to know what is being said by the Jew, the Hindu, the Marxist, the humanist, and to believe that "we can learn from them, rather than assuming that they must learn exclusively from us".

But Jesus Christ also addresses us, asking: "Who do you say that I am?" In answering this question we are forced to examine who we are.

Illustrating from his own experience, the noted Presbyterian (Reformed) theologian described himself as "white", "male", "a member of the relatively affluent class", and "a citizen of the USA", symbolizing (though not personally embodying) the oppressions of racism, sexism, classism and imperialism. He then drew attention most graphically to one other form of imperialism, that of language. Symbolically he switched to Spanish so that non-Spanish speakers would have a chance to see what it is like for Latin Americans at most ecumenical gatherings.

Each day at Nairobi participants will be confronting Jesus' question and meeting others striving to answer it. Dr. Brown invited his hearers to listen particularly to those answers that initially threaten them most.

"If your present answer focuses on Jesus the personal Saviour", he said, "then be willing to confront Jesus the Liberator whose social message threatens all the human securities you take for granted. If Jesus the Revolutionary is the one who now gives you hope, then hear also the Jesus who reminds you that evil is embodied not only in the oppressive social structures but also in every human heart."

Speaking of Jesus the Liberator, Dr. Brown said he frees us "from the false securities by which we try to make our lives secure" and "for the possibility of seeing the world through eyes other than our own".

"For our time", he said, "to see the world through eyes other than our own has simply got to mean seeing it through the eyes of the poor and dispossessed." Noting that the cry of the hungry is overwhelming, the cry of the politically and economically exploited is overwhelming, he said: "For this time and this place, the claim of Jesus to bring freedom, and the cry of oppressed peoples for freedom converge and cannot be separated."

Quoting the Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, Dr. Brown urged reaching out to the non-person - the one the world ignores, uses, crushes and then discards, whose cry not only for food but for meaning in life is simply not heard.

(more)

Jesus frees us to struggle with and on behalf of those "others" who are poor and dispossessed.

"I can be freed to struggle for a world in which my own standard of living will have to be significantly lowered, as we work for a more equitable distribution of the world's resources through a restructuring of our political and economic systems."

He drew applause with the statement that he as a US citizen could be freed to struggle for a world "in which napalm is no longer an instrument of diplomatic pressure".

But Jesus also divides, Dr. Brown said. Commitment to him divides Christians from the majority of the human family who make no such commitment including Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Marxists and humanists. In addition to sociological divisions, Jesus' sermon at Nazareth pointed another type of division. "The good news he brings to one group is (initially at least) bad news to another group. If Jesus' liberating message is good news to the poor, it means that the rich stand to lose something. If slaves are freed, slave owners feel threatened."

Noting that the Latin American liberation theologians use the story of the Exodus as a framework for proclaiming liberation today, Dr. Brown continued: "If it is good news to South Americans that God promises to free them from the modern Pharaohs, it can only be bad news to North Americans to discover that according to the Exodus scenario many of us are serving in Pharaoh's court and that Pharaoh is finally doomed."

Later in the question period Dr. Brown agreed that the situation of division was a provisional one and should not be overemphasized. But he was concerned, he said, "that we do not move so quickly to Jesus as Unifier that we ignore our divisions".

Turning to Jesus as Unifier, Dr. Brown outlined the task ahead. "We have to demonstrate that we have been sufficiently liberated to go beyond our divisions and begin to embody the unity to which Jesus the Unifier calls us." There is only one way to do that, he said, and that involves confession and repentance before God and to one another.

"This will involve reaching out our hands to one another at risk, officially and unofficially, individually and corporately, hoping to be heard and accepted, but willing if necessary to endure rebuff patiently, believing that sooner or later the healing power of the risen Christ will be able to reach out across the awesome divisions by which we are presently scarred.

"By making such steps toward one another we could begin to incarnate a little more fully the unity we so easily talk about", he said.

A new affirmation for Nairobi 1975 might be the following: "We intend to struggle together" - not only with one another assembled here but also on behalf of all God's children not here assembled, especially the non-persons, the "very least" of the sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ. At the suggestion of a questioner, Brown amended this statement to "struggle together in love".

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