

RISING INEQUALITY IN KENYA

CAN CHURCHES WORKING TOGETHER MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

G. WAKURAYA WANJOHI*

*One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. **Martin Luther King Jr.***

Kenya is among the most unequal societies in the world and the gap between the rich and the poor in our country is increasing, not diminishing. Kenya ranks 103 in the list of inequality out of the 169 countries from which data are available; this means that it is the 66th most unequal country in the world.¹ The UNDP Human development index, on which these statistics are based, also reveals that Kenya's rating has gone down compared to last year. As far as specific income distribution is concerned,

an estimated 38 per cent of the wealth remains in the hands of 10 per cent of the population, leaving 90 per cent of the citizens to share out the rest. The landscape gets even more skewed when viewed from the bottom end of the pyramid where the poorest 10 per cent of the population control only 1.8 per cent of the national wealth.²

As concerned Christians, the first question we should ask is: Are the Kenyan churches and its members making any difference in these grim statistics? After all, we know that the churches and many individual Christians engage in many acts of charity and are also involved in not a few development efforts. Yet the structures that favor the rich hardly change. We must therefore ask the further question: What are the underlying causes for the rich/poor divide in Kenya?

As I see it, the following are among some of the underlying reasons for the situation in which we find ourselves:

1. Lack of concern and therefore of interest in this subject by those of us who are able to eat three square meals a day;
2. Ignorance about the misuse of capital;
3. The gap between faith and practice;
4. Misinterpretation of Scripture;
5. The fact that the church does not speak with one voice about this question.

1. LACK OF CONCERN AND THEREFORE OF INTEREST IN THIS SUBJECT BY CHRISTIANS

Though there are exceptions, let us be honest: apart from what we read in the newspapers or see on TV, we know little about how the poor live: most of us rarely set feet in the slums, in spite of the fact that nearly half of Nairobi's population resides there. Yet, not a few of us originally come from families that were far from rich. Have we forgotten those circumstances? Do we ever delve into the living conditions of the watchman at our gate and the domestic worker who washes our clothes or prepares our dinner? Are the wages we pay to our workers any different from the average, an average which barely keeps this class of people from starvation? Unless we ourselves are affected by them, do we concern ourselves with the social policies set by our government and which make sure that the poor stay where they are? In a recent book on the subject, this is what a researcher had to say:

There is a conspiracy of silence about the issues that affect the poor and thus act against the poor. The poor and other vulnerable people are so unimportant that, despite their large numbers, they remain invisible except in summarized statistics.... The poor are, in effect, crowded out of the policy table and left to endure the consequences of pro-rich policies.³

2, IGNORANCE ABOUT THE MISUSE OF CAPITAL

The problem of the growing gap between the rich and the poor is not limited to Kenya or to Africa. It is a phenomenon that is present in many countries. For instance, in recent research about income distribution in the U.S done by economists at the University of California at Berkeley, together with others, it was revealed that “the richest 1 percent of the population received almost a fifth of the national households’ income in 2012, thus breaking the previous record set in 1928.”⁴

Worldwide the figures are equally distressing: the wealth of the 300 richest people in the world is equal to that of 3 billion of the poorest! An organization named ‘The Rules’ calls this “one of the greatest failures of modern civilization. We know this concentration of wealth is getting worse and we know why: because the rules of the system are rigged by and for elite interests, rather than for the greatest good of all.”⁵

It all has to do with the so-called free market of global capitalism which in reality is anything but free. The consequences of the ‘free’ reign of the market economy were spelled out by another group of researchers in these words: “...when the entire world increasingly subjects itself to the tyranny and volatility of financial markets, which we have left entirely to their own devices, then we have literally endorsed insanity and

relinquished freedom. Such markets are driven by little more than greed and speculation.”⁶

As Christians we should be aware that capital can be used for both good and bad ends. In Kenya, it has often been used to favor the already rich and to punish the poor. One just has to think of the inequity in the supply of water: people in slums who do not have a connection to the city water supply pay much higher prices for this commodity than those who **have** access to this service. Such examples can be multiplied. Even if some development plans ostensibly favor the poor (we remember the Constituency Development Fund put in place by the previous government) corruption frequently negates the outcome of such plans. We are aware that corruption in Kenya is the dragon that is almost impossible to slay. As reported recently by Transparency International, Kenya loses 30 percent of its budget to corruption!⁷

3, THE GAP BETWEEN FAITH AND PRACTICE

What does it really mean to be followers of our Lord? If our main concern as Christians is to be disciples of Jesus, why is the lifestyle of many church members at such great variance with **his** way of life? Why do Christians not stand out by their simple lifestyle and their concern about the poor and marginalized? Some years ago I happened to see a car parked somewhere in Nairobi with this slogan at the back: “Jesus is Lord.” It was one of the latest models of Mercedes! I asked myself whether the owner of this car was really aware of the challenge of Christ’s lordship in our lives.

Most of us admire the late Rev. Martin Luther King. But this is what he said about the connection between religion and poverty: “Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.”

Who are the people that are most admired in our society? Is it those who stand up for the poor or those with the latest model car and with a luxurious lifestyle? If it were the former, why would we continually elect those MPs to represent us whose main concern is the fat salary they will earn? I am always amazed at the display of wealth that is vaunted in our churches during most weddings: it often seems that families are trying to outdo each other in the number of attendants in the bridal party and in the luxuriousness of their attire. (A TV station has latched onto these displays of wealth by sponsoring a popular bridal show program on Sundays where one can admire those with millions to spare for these extravagances.) My question is: can we not set an

example and do what I have seen in some churches? Here they set a particular Sunday aside when couples can get married during a church service.

Corruption is one way of stealing from the poor. Yet, a researcher at Daystar University discovered that a high percentage of Christians engage in this vice; in fact, they are more likely to practice corruption than Muslims.⁸

4. MISINTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Many Christians justify their wealth on the basis of scripture. It is true that in the Old Testament riches were considered a blessing of the Lord. But this blessing was not to be abused to the detriment of the poor. One has only to read the prophet Amos to become aware of the strong condemnations against those Jews who had no concern for the poor. He thundered against the rich who “crushed the needy” and sold “the poor for a pair of sandals.”

As far as the New Testament is concerned, no one who has made a thorough study of it can fail to see that our Lord had a special love for the poor: he himself was poor. “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” he said to someone who wished to follow him. But how often do we hear this teaching stressed in our churches?

Some years ago I heard a homily on the rich young ruler. However, the preacher came to an amazing conclusion. According to him the rich man did not go away sad but came back because “Jesus loved him.” Was he trying to blunt the edge of this saying of Jesus: “How hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven?” Meister Eckhart, a mystic who lived in the Middle Ages, had this to say about riches: “A rich person is not someone who has acquired a lot of wealth; it is someone who has given a lot of wealth away.”

5. THE CHURCH DOES NOT SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE ABOUT THIS QUESTION

When we use the word ‘church’ what do we mean: the priest, the pastor, the hierarchy or the individual members? It is all of these, of course, but often when we mention the word ‘church’ we use it as the way we do the word ‘government’ as in “the government should ...”

Here I mean the church as a totality: all of those, whether they are clergymen and women or lay people who claim to be followers of Jesus. Indeed, it is here that we feel the pain of our dividedness as Christians. One of the objectives of the Nairobi Ecumenical Group is that we should have a “common concern about the many social and ethical problems facing Kenya society: we will be more effective if we work

together on the solution of these problems.” But whenever there is a national crisis, what do we find? The Catholic bishops issue ‘a pastoral letter,’ the Anglican bishop calls a ‘press conference,’ the Presbyterians do the same. Other churches keep quiet: they do not wish to ‘get involved in politics.’ What is the result? Our voice as Christians is muffled!

CONCLUSION

It is clear from what we have seen that there are quite a number of obstacles that prevent us as church, and as individual members of our various churches to show the compassion of Christ to the poor and marginalized in society.

So what can we do? Obviously we must pray! We must pray that the Spirit of our Lord will show us the way towards greater unity in this and in other social questions. On the practical side, we should not be afraid to engage with politics. Politics is no different from setting up a business: both can be used for selfish ends or for the good of our neighbor and the glory of God! We should also **together** do more serious research and disseminate the information based on this research among our church members. In addition we should emphasize dialogue among ourselves as Christians. Yes, there are obstacles on the way to greater unity but they are not insurmountable. If we can dialogue with people of other faiths, surely we can dialogue among ourselves.

I conclude with these words of Pope Francis: “On political, economic and social matters there is no dogma to indicate practical solutions, but rather to favor dialogue, listening, patience, respect for others, sincerity and also willingness to revise one’s opinion.”⁹

NOTES

*This talk was given on the 26th of October 2013 at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Nairobi during a ‘Round Table’ organized by the Nairobi Ecumenical Group.

1. <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Corporate+News/Kenya+ranked+among+most+unequal+societies/-/539550/1047230/-/item/1/-/u092grz/-/index.html> accessed 13-09-13.
2. Ibid.
3. Emmanuel Manyasa. In: *Exploring the future of mission in Africa*, Nairobi: MIAS Books, 2012, p. 19.
4. <http://rt.com/usa/us-income-inequality-record-breaking-692/> . Accessed 21/09/2013.
5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWSxzjyMNpU> . Accessed 28/09/2013.
6. Hope in troubled times: a new vision for confronting global crises. Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, David Van Heemst, Grand Rapids. MI, Baker Academic, 2007. 254 p. Foreword by Desmond Tutu.
7. Accessed 7/10/2013.
8. http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/m/story.php?articleID=2000088017&story_title=Study:%20Catholics%20more. Accessed 7/10/2013.

9. Pope Francis made these remarks during the 50th anniversary celebration of the encyclical “Pacem in Terris.” Rome: October 2-4, 2013.