

Will the Real Prophet Please Stand Up?

ROB PERRY, 2004

If there are poor in the world it is because you and I don't give enough. (Mother Teresa)

If you want to kiss the sky, you better learn how to kneel... (On your knees boy!) (U2, Mysterious Ways)

A few years ago, I preached a sermon that included both of the above quotations. Afterwards, a particularly pious friend informed me that it dishonors God to speak the words of a Roman Catholic from the pulpit. As for quoting a rock star? Let us just say he was not too impressed. As I recall, at the time of the discussion, I disagreed with his stance on Mother Teresa, but conceded to his argument about Bono. Choose your battles, I figured. I recall using the conversation to practice my patented counseling tactic: the-nod-and-smile.

Fast forward a couple of years later: I was home alone one night watching *The National* on CBC. Bono made an appearance. The broadcaster, Peter Mansbridge, was interviewing U2's lead singer.

For the interview, Bono wore his usual blue-tinted sunglasses and a loosely buttoned shirt with no tie. He had not dressed up and did not look particularly well kept. He looked, in fact, like a rock star. He also looked very disappointed and angry.

The interview took place right after the recent G-8 summit in Kananaskis, Western Canada. This annual meeting of the leaders of the richest nations in the world had come and gone with little of the political demonstration or fanfare of previous years. Another difference at that year's summit was that an agenda for African relief was tabled. This is an issue near to Bono's heart; as for the past number of years he has been a very visible advocate for Africa. Therefore, in the aftermath of this G-8, the interviewer was interested to gain Bono's perspective on the summit's success.

Bono had been hoping for great things. He was hoping

for radical debt relief for the poorest African nations. He was hoping for significant pledges of monetary assistance for a continent ravaged by poverty and AIDS. And he was disappointed. "*The scale of the response does not match the scale of the problem,*" he said. He was right.

In May 2002, Bono traveled to South Africa, as well as to Ghana, Uganda, and Ethiopia with then US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neil. Bono went representing the DATA agenda (**D**ebt, **A**ids, and **T**rade in Africa), the agency he founded. This unlikely pair went to share viewpoints, meet with African leaders and to come up with some kind of decisive plan. Statistics tell us that during the 10-day span of their tour, 55,000 Africans died from AIDS and 14,000 mothers gave HIV to their children in childbirth. During that same time, African nations spent \$400 million on debt repayment, and 50 million African children were not attending school because they could not afford it.

The reaction of the world's leaders at the G-8 seemed to Bono to be little more than lip service. You could see the disappointment in his face and hear it in his voice as he said: "*It's heart breaking really...the problem is, when it comes down to it, people are dying for the stupidest of reasons. Money. Since last year's G-8 in Genoa, 2.3 million Africans have died of AIDS... The message we are trying to get to the politicians is don't move in baby steps. Make a giant leap here.*"

As I watched Bono that night, I found myself nodding in agreement. Here was a man who not only fronts a band that sells millions of records, but has also had the ear of our Prime Minister, George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Thabo Mbeki. He has gained the respect of leaders in Russia, France, and all across Africa, and he uses this influence for the good of a continent, which is, he says, "*bursting into flames while we all stand around with watering cans.*"

Bono is passionate for his cause. He takes advantage of his celebrity, using it to challenge people on important

issues. He calls upon student activists. He calls upon government officials, and he calls upon the Church. He said:

You'll be hearing from the sleeping giant that is the Church. I mean, what is going on with the churches? It is incredible. I tell these evangelicals in the United States there are 2,300 verses of scripture about the poor. It's the central message outside of personal redemption, the idea of dealing with the poor. And I'm asking them, where are they? On a recent poll of evangelical churches, only six percent said they wanted to do something about AIDS. It is unbelievable, the leprosy of our time.

As I sat comfortably at home that night watching the news, I caught myself admiring this man and his cause. I thought of Sheila Cassidy's words from her book, "Good Friday People": "We place the Mother Teresas of our world safely on a pedestal where we can admire them, but not feel in any way obligated to emulate them."

I am not saying Bono is Mother Teresa. However, when he asked the question, "Where is the Church?" I struggled for an answer, because at that moment, the only answer I had was that, well, at that moment, the Church is sitting at home on his couch, eating Corn Pops, and watching *The National*. I am a Christian. Therefore, in one sense, I am the church. The challenge was personal, as well as corporate.

For me it was an especially potent indictment because I happen to agree with Bono when he emphasizes the importance that God places on the poor. In the end, it is really a question of purpose. What is the purpose of the Church? Why do we exist? Has the church in the West forsaken the poor? Have we laid down our mantle? Or, have we simply handed it to the rock star?

As Bono said, personal redemption *is* central to the message of the church. But perhaps we have too limited a view as to what this redemption entails. Is it true redemption if it is *only* personal? In my opinion, the evidence for the redeemed life is seen in how Christ's redemption brings about change in the way we interact with a suffering and unjust world. Does God's redemption occur only on a personal level, or does it go further than that? Proverbs 31:8-9 says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." According to the Bible, it is the believers'

responsibility to see beyond themselves, and become participants in the formation of a just and healed world. As former U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold said, "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."

Listening to Bono's indictment of the Church was also difficult for me because, as a member of The Salvation Army, I belong to a Christian movement that God raised up specifically for the poor and marginalized in the world. In the latter part of the 19th century The Salvation Army emerged as a prophetic movement, a reminder to society and to the rest of his Church not to forget to fight for the suffering ones: the homeless, the child laborers, the child prostitutes - *and the AIDS victims!*

The Salvation Army has a radical prophetic legacy. Nearly a century before the 1960s, staunch uniform-clad Salvationists would have put bellbottomed flower-child protestors to shame. In England alone, Salvationists fought for victims of social evils such as age of sexual consent, exploited labour, and abandoned children. In the name of Jesus, and in the name of compassion, Salvationists went to the streets, to the courts, and even to prison. We ministered to the criminal tribes in India. We struggled against licensed prostitution in Japan. We came alongside those who no one else would come alongside. We went where no one else would go, and called others to join us.

Our purpose was never clearer than in the final sermon delivered by The Salvation Army's founder. William Booth's now famous words resonate through the generations: "While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight; while children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do now, I'll fight; while there is one drunkard left, while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight - I'll fight to the very end."

The Salvation Army was once a prophetic movement calling the Church to the poor. And The Salvation Army is still effective on a micro level. Thousands of lives are helped around the world every day because of our movement. But we have to ask ourselves - are we still prophetic? And if the answer is "no", then who are the prophets now? After all, it was the rock star, not The Salvation Army who was on the news, visibly angry after an ineffectual G-8 summit.

I have trouble, in fact, remembering a time I have

seen any fellow Salvationists angry because of injustice or suffering. I have definitely seen angry Salvationists, but usually they are angry about other things. It seems we have joined the great fraternity of the Western Christian Church which, instead of being angered because of injustice, is angered because people want to change the style of music on Sundays. Yes, we get angry. But too often we are not angry about the things the rock star was angry about that night.

I got in trouble once for quoting Bono in a sermon. I am not going to apologize this time. I have read a lot about this guy recently. I like him and I respect him. I even admire him. He is unashamedly a rock star. He does not play at piety or pretend he is something he is not. He has the respect and ear of countless leaders around the world, and he uses his influence for the sake of the suffering. He talks about changing the world. At his concerts he encourages the listeners to do the same.

“Where is the Church?” It is a haunting question in the light of millions of poor and suffering people and it is a question that should haunt us. It should keep us from sleeping. It should challenge us. It should make us angry. Above all, it should stir us to action.

Wake up sleeping giant!