

THE CROSS AS GOSPEL: SPEAKING OF PROVIDENCE IN A TIME OF PESSIMISM

C. McCoy Franklin
First Presbyterian Church, Auburn, Alabama

There is a mood of pessimism abroad throughout the land. We have always had our doomsayers and chronic worriers to warn us of trouble on the horizon, but they have usually been few in number and weak in influence. Americans are generally an optimistic people. But a new mood of pessimism is sweeping the country.

Not only are Americans worried over energy shortages, rising prices, and a deteriorating quality of life, but the feeling is strong that the future holds only a worsening of the situation. A scientist like William Pollard looks at the industrialized economies which have been built up over the past 200 years on the foundation of unlimited raw materials and unlimited energy and says bluntly, "The joy ride is over!" No one describes our prospects more forcefully or analyzes them more frightfully than does Robert Heilbroner in *AN INQUIRY INTO THE HUMAN PROSPECT*.⁽¹⁾ The prospect he sees is another dark age characterized by overcrowding, hunger and poverty, authoritarian governments, and a rigidly oppressive culture--in short, the very opposite of what we have valued. Jacques Ellul, looking more to the present than to the future, says that, in spite of scientific breakthroughs, we have never felt so closed-in, so confined, or so impotent as we do today.⁽²⁾

Millions of folks who have never heard of Pollard, Heilbroner, or Ellul have caught their mood. Dr. Gerald L. Klerman, the nation's highest ranking mental health officer, says that melancholy or depression has become our greatest social disease.⁽³⁾ For the first time in the history of public opinion polling, more than half of the American public believes that the next five years will be worse than the last five years. Some economists see this pessimism reflected in the vascillating stock market and in the soaring price of gold. Anyone who is trying to preach in 1980 must be prepared to recognize and to reckon with this mood of pessimism.

The themes of Lent offer special opportunities and resources for the preacher in a time such as ours. Lent is a special time to focus on the Cross. The mood of Good Friday was not optimism but pessimism, not victory but defeat, not hope but dread and despair. And yet it was precisely in the midst of pessimism, defeat and despair that the work and purpose of God was most clearly shown. The Cross speaks a special word to all who have lost hope, because it takes seriously all those factors which lead a person to despair.

Reinhold Niebuhr, after a Good Friday service in the Detroit working class church he served in the 1920's, reflected in his diary on how his experience of life had helped him to see the cross as a symbol of ultimate reality: "It is because the cross of Christ symbolizes something in the very heart of reality, something in universal experience, that it has its central place in history." He goes on to reflect upon how life is tragic, and the power of the cross lies in its ability to show how tragedy can be redemptive.⁽⁴⁾

The Cross proclaims that God is most actively and surely present in the

painful, humiliating, destructive experiences of life. Elie Wiesel gives a moving testimony to God's presence in destructive situations with an anecdote from his experience at Auschwitz:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the throes of death of the youth lasted for half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the men call again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice in myself answer, "Where is God? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows."(5)

That is what the Cross demonstrates and proclaims. Therefore the Cross speaks a special word of good news to those whose hope is gone because the Cross proclaims that God is present and working precisely in those hope-robbing situations.

Likewise, those whose hope is at low ebb have a special insight into the Cross. Those who have never known pain or defeat, never experienced forsakenness, never lost hope can have little appreciation for and little understanding of the Cross. A time of pessimism may be the very best time for understanding the Cross of Jesus and therefore may be the best time for perceiving where and how God is at work in the world.

Langdon Gilkey suggests as much in his book REAPING THE WHIRLWIND: A CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY which contains a comprehensive treatment of the Christian doctrine of providence. Gilkey suggests that whether a person views providence positively or negatively depends, to a great extent, upon the mood of the time in which the person lives. In optimistic times, when we are impressed by the vast potential of human knowledge and ability, any talk of God's power and God's purpose seems to cast a constraint on human freedom and a limitation on human possibilities and therefore seems repressive. However in pessimistic times, when we are impressed by the strong forces of destruction, the "principalities and powers," the oppressive systems working against us, then the affirmation that God is at work and that God has a purpose for human life comes as an offer of liberation and as a basis for hope.(6) If Gilkey is correct, this Lenten Season is an opportune time for the preacher to speak of God's providential activity in the world. The Cross of Jesus provides a clear demonstration of that work.

I. FOUR FORMS OF PROVIDENCE

Gilkey focuses his study of providence, not on the Cross, but on Israel's perception of God's involvement in her history. The main elements of that involvement included (1) liberation from bondage in Egypt; (2) establishment of the basic structure and institutions of Israel's communal existence: the covenant, the federation of tribes, the monarchy, the priesthood, the Temple, etc.; (3) judgment against the perversion of these structures and institutions which rendered them no longer valid; and (4) promise of new possibilities for new structures. This cycle of liberation, establishment, judgment, and new possibilities is descriptive of God's work in the world. Says Gilkey: "This model provides, I believe, the interpretative symbolic framework in terms of which alone the creativity, the sin, the tragedy and the renewal of hope, characteristic of historical experience can be comprehended . . . concrete history as we experience it has a dialectical, tragic character analogous

to this biblical drama."(7)

This biblical model suggests to Gilkey four forms of God's work of providence; (1) the grounding of human freedom in the purpose and work of God, (2) the divine activity to preserve, sustain and continue the universe over time, (3) judgment against whatever has become distorted and destructive and (4) the vision of new possibilities within each situation. We have already affirmed that the Cross is the place where the involvement of God in the world is verified and demonstrated most clearly. Therefore these four forms of God's work of providence suggest four ways of speaking about the significance of the Cross.

(1) Providence as the grounding of freedom in the purpose and work of God.

God is at work in the world setting people free. The liberation of all people is one form of the work of divine providence. That is contrary to the commonly accepted perception of providence. Providence has often been perceived as a pre-determined plan, as an impersonal fate imposed upon human nature and human history. As such, providence has sometimes been perceived as the antagonist of freedom. Whether providence is perceived as deterministic or as liberating turns on the perception one has of freedom. What does it mean to be free? From what do we need to be liberated? Is freedom an end in itself? Is it enough to be freed from restrictions and restraints or is it necessary that one be freed for some purpose?

The biblical account of God's work of liberation consistently grounds human freedom in the purpose and work of God. To be truly free is to have the freedom to be the person God created us to be and to do the work God intended for us to do. The Children of Israel were set free from bondage in Egypt in order that they might be better able to serve God. "Let my people go that they may serve me," was the divine ultimatum.

Freedom is never an adequate goal in itself because freedom is easily corrupted. One person's or one nation's freedom is usually expanded at the expense of other people or nations. History has shown how easily the oppressed can become the oppressor. Dr. Gilkey points out, "It is in our use of freedom that we sin against our neighbor. The most fundamental problem of history is not only that some people oppress others--though that is a vast problem; it is that each of us in our use of our own freedom create suffering for others and for ourselves."(8)

The Cross is the focal point of God's work of liberation. It is the means by which freedom itself is set free from the corruption and distortion caused by Sin. It is the means by which we are freed from the fear of death, which is the end result of Sin, and therefore freed from the frantic and ultimately frustrating attempts to save ourselves and avoid death. The Cross is the means by which we are liberated from self and the need for self-justification and are set free to love God and neighbor.

The Cross shows us the example of a truly free man. The only person in that chain of events leading up to Good Friday who was really free was Jesus. Even as he hung helplessly and hopelessly nailed to a cross he remained free--free to choose how he would respond to his circumstances, free to be obedient unto death, free to forgive those who abused and ridiculed him, free to show concern for others in spite of his own pain, free to take upon himself the punishment and shame he did not deserve. Here, as no place else, we see the truly liberated man. Here, as no place else, we catch a vision of what God has set us free to be. Here, as no place else, we see the shape of the freedom for which God is working in the world.

(2) Providence as God's work to preserve and sustain the universe.

God is also working to preserve, sustain, and enrich human life. This is the creative and constitutive work of providence. God is at work "through the processes that shape and change the earth and the living things upon it."⁽⁹⁾ God is at work in social institutions as the source of their significance and power. Social institutions are instruments through which power is exercised in any society. God, who is the ultimate source of all power, not only upholds social institutions but permits them to exercise power. They are instruments of God's care and servants of God's will. God is not limited to intermittent, "supernatural" interventions into human life. God is at work constantly and consistently within the very institutions which shape history as the creator of their function and the source of their power.

When ancient Israel looked for assurance of God's providential care it instinctively looked to its social institutions--the monarchy, the priesthood, the Temple, the law. These were both the symbols and the instruments of God's presence, God's power and God's will for their life. The activity of God in and through these institutions was one important form of God's work in the world.

When we come to see how this form of providence is demonstrated by the Cross, the task becomes more difficult. The Cross, in fact, seems a blunt denial of providence, at least of this form of providence. The Cross shows how all the social institutions were allied against Jesus. The government, the religious establishment, the reform movement, the law, all worked together to reject and to crucify the Son of God. Instead of showing how God works through social institutions, the Cross demonstrates how institutions work against God. To argue that these institutions were instruments of God's will and activity is to pit God against Himself. Nevertheless, the one place succeeding generations of Christians have looked to see the presence and to learn the will of God is the Cross of Jesus.

The Cross seems to contradict providence because we assume that providence requires a particular type of power and a particular type of care. We think we know what power is and we try to impose that concept upon the crucifixion event. We think we already know how a powerful God and a caring God should act and we try to interpret the Cross from that perspective. The pieces never quite fit because we have the cart before the horse. There is no place where we get a clearer picture of God than at the Cross. Jurgen Moltmann has written:

When the crucified Jesus is called the "image of the invisible God," the meaning is that this is God and God is this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.⁽¹⁰⁾

The Cross as the unique revelation of God is also the standard by which power and care are defined and evaluated. In the powerlessness of Jesus on the Cross a new kind of power is demonstrated. It is not the power that pulls strings and forces compliance. It is, however, the power that creates love, that relieves guilt, that evokes faith. It is the power to comfort and the power to challenge commitment.

This is the manner in which God was at work in and through the social institutions that were united in opposition to God's Son. God was not absent from these actions. God did not preserve these institutions from corruption and distortion. Neither did God coerce or force them into a particular course of action.

But God was at work in spite of this apparent lack of power. God was at work within these institutions as the power to create, out of even their worst motives, their worst decisions, and their worst actions, a unique and powerful demonstration of love, grace, and truth. The Cross, far from proving that social institutions are devoid of God's influence and outside of God's sphere of action, demonstrates that, even at their worst, the ordinary institutions and processes of human society are channels through which God works his providential care.

(3) Providence as God's judgment against whatever has become distorted.

Judgment is sometimes called the "hidden" or "alien" work of God. It is the destruction of whatever has become destructive of human society. The Old Testament prophets frequently used the image of fire to describe this activity of God. In doing so, they made note not only of the destructive power of fire but also of the use of fire as a test--the refiner's fire--to distinguish gold and straw, to distinguish between truth and falsehood, to distinguish between God's standard and human distortions of God's intentions.

As in the case of the positive, sustaining work of providence, so in this negative work of judgment, God is not limited to intermittent, "supernatural" interventions into human life. The very movements of human history are instruments of God's judgment. The prophets saw the hand of God at work in the political and military events of the day. Isaiah could call Assyria the rod of God's anger against the sins of Judah. Jeremiah could see military defeat and political exile as God's judgment against Judah's distorted goals and values. Hosea could see that the result of Israel's sowing the wind would be the reaping of the whirlwind. All these obviously destructive events and movements were seen as events in and through which God was working to correct, cleanse, and refine the distorted and destructive elements of the national life.

The Cross of Jesus is likewise an event in which the judgment of God is clearly at work, though in an ironic or almost paradoxical manner. Jesus was the one placed on trial. Jesus was the one accused of blasphemy against God and treason against the state. Jesus was the one who bore the shame of the Cross. If the Cross demonstrates the judgment of God, Jesus seems to be the one against whom the judgment is rendered.

The full force of God's judgment can be seen only in the light of the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning. In this light it is clear that Jesus was not on trial at all. In this light it is clear that Pilate, Herod, the Sanhedrin, and the mob were the ones on trial. They are judged by the judgment they brought against Jesus. The fact that all the social institutions were allied in opposition to the Son of God is itself a devastating judgment against them. The crucifixion of Jesus is a clear demonstration of the vulnerability of all institutions, ideals, and persons to distortion and destructiveness. Even good people and good institutions can find themselves in opposition to God. The Cross as the focal point of God's work in the world is a powerful reminder that God is unrelenting in his work of correcting what is distorted, destroying what is destructive, and refining what is imperfect in human society.

(4) Providence as the vision of new possibilities within each situation.

In one of his sermons, Paul Tillich said, "Providence means that there is a

creative and saving possibility implied in every situation, which cannot be destroyed by any event." (11) Gilkey develops this idea as another of the ways God works in the world. God works in every event to give each person and group "an ordered vision of possibility." It is an ordered vision in that it bears some relationship to the present situation. Yet, it is still a possibility because it is a leap beyond the present and is not determined by or predictable from the present situation. Such possibilities do not appear before us simply as an alternative among other alternatives but as an insistent demand upon our conscience, as a moral imperative to which the only response can be commitment. (12)

The Old Testament prophets saw a possibility present and active in the disaster which was falling on Israel and Judah. They saw in the break-up of the old covenant the possibility of a new covenant between God and the people which, while related to the old, would be quite different. The new covenant would not be written on stone or scroll but upon the heart. The defeat of the nation and the disgrace of exile held the possibility of an emerging remnant of the faithful who would more nearly fulfill God's intention. God was at work in these most destructive events creating new possibilities.

The Cross is the supreme symbol of hope and possibility. Who could have predicted that God would have used an instrument of human torture to reveal the reality of divine love? Who could have predicted that this moment of godforsakenness would become the one unique place where God's presence is most clearly seen? Who would have predicted that this hopeless looking event would become our one sure basis for hope? The Cross, as no place else before or since, demonstrates God's work of offering to us in every event and in every circumstance a vision of new possibilities—a vision which calls us to commit ourselves to making the possibility a reality.

The Cross is truly good news not just wishful thinking. The Cross demonstrates God's presence and purpose at work in the most evil and hopeless of circumstances. The Cross proclaims clearly and convincingly that God is at work in the world even in the worst of times. The Cross assures us that whenever God is at work there is a purpose, that wherever God is at work there is a reason for hope.

II. DETECTING GOD'S WORK IN THE WORLD TODAY

These four forms of God's providential activity in the world provide us with important clues to help us find what God is doing in the world today. In every situation and in every event we can look for God to be at work setting people free, sustaining life, judging and correcting what is distorted, and providing a vision of new possibilities. With this guide before us we are in a position to speak a word of direction and hope in the midst of these pessimistic times.

Where is God at work and toward what purpose is God working in the present situation? Let us look at one of the contemporary problems. The problem which is felt most keenly and by most people, at least in this country, is the growing scarcity and soaring prices of natural resources. Petroleum is the one most keenly felt at the moment, but it is only the first among a long list of metals and minerals (to say nothing of water) which are becoming increasingly scarce and, therefore, increasingly expensive. The economic consequences for nations and individuals are obvious and frightening.

How and where can we expect to find God at work in this situation? It seems apparent that God's judgment against distorted values and destructive habits is

active here. We have thought that the resources of the earth were ours to do with as we please. We have imagined that economic growth is the ultimate goal. We can now see that these goals and values stand under God's judgment. We have been wasteful in our use of the world's goods. We have been destructive of the environment which supports us and unjust in the way the world's resources have been shared by all the world's people. We can now begin to see the reality of our failures and the consequences of our sins. We can expect God to continue to work through this impending crisis correcting our distorted values, destroying our destructive habits of consumption and calling into question our arrogance and our selfishness.

It is also possible to see evidence of God's work of liberation in this situation. God's liberating activity is at work on different levels. On one level there is liberation from economic bondage. This is difficult for us in the United States to see, but some of our brothers and sisters in South America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia read the shift of economic power toward the oil and ore producing nations as economic liberation. To say that God is at work in this economic shift does not guarantee that the results will be either godly or good. They may use their economic liberation selfishly and destructively. Yet candor requires that we recognize the purpose of God in the liberation of all people from all types of oppression. The anger and sense of injustice we are feeling because of the arbitrary pricing policies of the OPEC nations gives us a taste of the subtle yet powerful reality of economic oppression. This experience should help us to be more sensitive to the effects our own nation's economic policies, and the pricing and wage policies of large corporations, have on peoples in other countries as well as on segments of our own population.

There is another level upon which God's work of liberation can be seen. It is possible that God is at work in this economic readjustment to free us from our bondage to affluence. It is possible that this is the method God is using to free us from the illusion that our personal worth is measured by our standard of living and the significance of our life is determined by the size of our salary. This might just be the way God is working to free our energies and resources from the task of preserving and protecting what we own, so that we can put more into the work of building up the whole community of God's children.

As we look for God's purpose and work in the present situation we can expect to find God at work using the ordinary institutions and processes of society to sustain life. We could point to several examples of how God is using imperfect and often distorted human institutions, governments and corporations, political and economic systems to provide the goods, services and jobs necessary to preserve, sustain and enrich human life. One piece of that system worth mentioning is the segment we often call technology. By the term technology I am referring to the people and institutions involved in the research and development of scientific knowledge and the application of that knowledge to daily life. Some see technology as the culprit which created this problem we are discussing in the first place. It is certainly true that technology has required enormous amounts of resources for its development. Technology has spawned an extravagant waste of resources to keep itself going. Technology has nourished the arrogant illusion that we could and should accomplish whatever we put our mind to accomplish. Nevertheless technology is one of the institutions through which God has and is working to sustain human life. Technology has made us dangerously dependent on limited resources, but technology is one of the principal systems which God can, and I believe God will, use to relieve this danger. Technology is one of the systems through which God is at work

preserving, sustaining, and enriching the life of the world.

A fourth way we can expect God to be at work in the present situation is in providing us with a vision of new possibilities in the midst of our present dilemma. It is too early to say exactly what that vision will be. But the search for the vision has already begun. One expression of that vision which is now being circulated and discussed speaks of a "just, participatory and sustainable society." This vision was the basis for a recent (July, 1979) conference at MIT sponsored by the World Council of Churches and attended by theologians and scientists from around the world. The meaning of these adjectives is still developing as the vision is still taking shape. No one can predict from past experience or from the present situation exactly what the future will be. It will be God's gift. Yet God does bless us from time to time with a vision of the Kingdom of God which God is establishing and which God calls us even now to enter and to serve. Providing us with the vision and the hope of this kingdom is God's most powerful work in our midst.

The Lenten Season provides the Church, and especially the preacher, with the appropriate context in which the current mood of pessimism can be acknowledged and addressed. As we speak about the Cross and about the action and purpose of God in and through that event, we have both the opportunity and the responsibility to let that event illuminate God's activity and purpose in the events which mark our entry into the 1980's. It is our calling to preach Christ, crucified. To some people it will sound like terribly bad news. To some people it will sound like utter foolishness. But to some, especially to those who are tempted to give up hope, it would sound like pure gospel--"the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." (Romans 1:16)

- (1) Robert Heilbroner, An Inquiry into the Human Prospect, (New York: Norton, 1974).
- (2) Jacques Ellul, The New Demons, trans. C. E. Hopkins, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
- (3) Quoted in Context, June 1, 1979, p.1.
- (4) Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 106f.
- (5) Eliezer Wiesel, Night, trans. S. Rodway, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 75f.
- (6) Langdon Gilkey, Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History, (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 254.
- (7) Ibid., p. 262f.
- (8) Ibid., p. 236.
- (9) "A Declaration of Faith," Chapter 2, adopted by the 117th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. as a "contemporary statement of faith."
- (10) Jurgen Moltmann, The Crucified God, trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 205.
- (11) Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 106.
- (12) Gilkey, op. cit., p. 252.