

## **Oh, my anguish, my anguish!**

Some reflections on Copenhagen from the sidelines  
Diocese of Exeter, Shrinking the Footprint, 21 December 2009

Watching from the outside, the stories coming out of Copenhagen and its aftermath remind me irresistibly of Walter Brueggemann's book *The Prophetic Imagination*.

In it, Brueggemann describes the 'royal consciousness', a condition in pre-exile Israel that is mirrored today. It is characterised by: economic affluence – when there is satiation and pain is not noticed, which makes a revolution of freedom and justice difficult; an oppressive social policy – when affluence is hierarchical, some people live well by exploiting others, and the cries of the marginal are not heard; and a controlled, static religion – when the free wild God is contained and accessible in a temple, or in our day reduced to psychology and replaced by the individual and the market.

The 'royal consciousness' leads people to numbness and refuses to consider limits, endings, suffering and death. It also leads people to despair about the power to new life.

In just this way, the rich and powerful at Copenhagen do not recognise that the planet has limits; that 'business as usual' will lead to suffering on a massive scale; that the paradigms of continued economic growth, and technology and market-oriented 'solutions' must die. As inevitably as Israel was taken into exile, and the Roman and British Empires collapsed, so the current world order will hit the buffers. And neither do the rich and powerful at Copenhagen recognise that a radical turning is possible, towards the economics of equality, the politics of justice and the freedom of God.

Whatever next? Brueggemann says: "It is the task of prophetic ministry and imagination to bring people to engage their experiences of suffering to death... and to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God."

The prophet Jeremiah used the language of grief to cut through the numbness: "Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent. For I have heard the sound of the trumpet; I have heard the battle cry. Disaster follows disaster; the whole land lies in ruins. In an instant my tents are destroyed, my shelter in a moment." (Jer 4:19-20). He invokes his own grief, the grief of his fellow prophets, of Rachel the mother of Israel and even of God.

And Jesus understood grief as the ultimate criticism that had to be addressed against Jerusalem: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." (Luke 19:42-44)

Martyn has written about the grief triggered when reality hits home, the reality not just of the suffering already occurring in many parts of the world, but also the reality of the future of the planet, its people and its ecosystems. Martyn also touched on the five stages of grief that are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Where are you in this cycle? Where is my government? Where am I? Because we cannot stay with anger and depression; we must also offer hope and the promise of newness. We must find symbols of hope, bring to public expression the yearnings that have been hidden and denied, and speak in concrete terms of the newness that redefines our situation.

Jeremiah also knew this, as did Isaiah when speaking to the exiles: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." (Isa 43:18-19).

For me, the main positives from Copenhagen were the exposure of the tactics of developed and emergent economies, in particular the US and China; the refusal of developing countries to be bullied into accepting unacceptable deals; and the alternative declaration agreed by the People's Summit. This begins "There are solutions to the climate crisis", and then describes the transition that needs to be made.

So this Christmas and in the year ahead, let us grieve in criticism of the old ways, and imagine a new world together.