

# **Let the Oppressed Go Free**

## **Isaiah 58**

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<sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Sisters and brothers

We meet here in the shadow of major religious festival – “Kirchentag”. Thousands gather from Germany for this major religious event. I am sure most come with good intentions. They want to worship, learn and live out their Christian faith.

Today's reading from Isaiah 58, teaches us a lot about “being religious”. The text is talking about fasting in particular but can be applied on piety in general. It is a particularly important reading for us and our world today. Isaiah seems to be with us today and as if he is writing to us. In today's reading, Isaiah

answers the people's question: "Why have we fasted, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" (Isaiah 58:3).

The Israelites might have thought that the matter was "mechanical" or a magical formula – we stop eating, and God listens! (1+1=2). They were in some kind of distress and thought that fasting was the solution. The prophetic tradition, on the other hand, wanted to point that the problem is not solved by merely abstaining from food! Technically, fasting is indeed abstaining from food. But is this true fasting?

The prophet then goes on to reveal their true motivation behind this religious practice. "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please" – meaning that fasting had become a source of pleasure! Why? Because fasting meant rest and not working. They would spread sackcloth and ashes and sit idle! The worst part: they exploited their workers according to Isaiah. This means they would exploit or enslave others to do their work! This is twisted piety: we rest, feel better about ourselves having done something religious, while exploiting and oppressing others to do our work! And we call it fasting!

And then he says: "Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists". It seems that the period of fasting had become a time of disputes and quarrels – even violent ones! I wonder what they discussed! Was it theology? Dogma? Religious practice? What is permissible and what is not – to make their religious practice seem easier?

Finally, he says: “You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.” It appears that they were fasting not for God to see and hear, but for people to see and hear. They wanted human praise. They cared more about what others think of them – not what God thinks!

It is clear that the people then completely missed the concept of fasting. When we fast, when we deprive ourselves, we remember others. This is the concept of mercy and charity. The closer we get to God and His heart, the more we realize that God wants us to serve others. Helping people – caring about justice – is the heart of fasting! Fasting is mercy!

Isaiah’s message to the people who asked: “Why have we fasted, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” – is as follows: The problem is within you. The problem is the lack of mercy, the absence of justice, and the neglect of your neighbor. The absence of these things is the reason God does not listen to you! And God’s message to us today is: religiosity and piety that do not produce a hunger for God and care and mercy for people is false piety! Piety that does not lead to a hunger for justice is false piety; false spirituality. Piety without mercy and compassion is false piety; false spirituality.

Today’s text: true meaning of religiosity or piety; repentance; spirituality, and even solidarity. This is precisely what we need to recover today in our discussions on Gaza and Palestine.

It has been more than more than a year and a half since the war on Gaza began. It is beyond my comprehension to believe that this war, this genocide is still going on.

And before we talk about Gaza, let us remember that western churches and theology have for years, and for the last year and a half in particular, provided a theological cover to the existence of Israel, even defending its actions.

I have just finished a book about this war, and there is a whole chapter that could have been an entire book on who the western church called for, justified, defended and/or was silent during this genocide. The western church is heavily involved in what is happening in Palestine.

In Gaza since last October: More than 50,000 thousand killed; including 17000 children. Thousands more still missing under the rubble. More than two million displaced; trapped and starved. This is beyond inhuman! In fact, the Lancet, one of the world leading medical journals estimates the death toll to be 186000.

They still call it “self-defense”; or response to October 7. You have no moral grounds if you say so! He have lost every ounce of humanity and ethical integrity.

To make things worse, Israel has completely denied the entry of aid and food into Gaza for the last 2 months. Deputy Director General Michael Ryan told reporters at the WHO’s headquarters: “We are breaking the bodies and minds of the children of Gaza. We are starving the children of Gaza. We are complicit.”

This is a war crime. You cannot deny aid and food from civilians during warfare! For years the West lectured us on the international law. Human rights! The hypocrisy is appalling! The racism is even more appalling.

What happened to the conscious of the world leaders; I say world leaders, and lord of wars, because the voices in the street are speaking loud and clear: stop this genocide. But will the warlords listen?

The International Court of Justice was clear in its description of what is happening and its rebuke to Israel and those complicit in it, yet even the ruling of the ICJ was not enough to stop this genocide. We have arrest warrants that sadly mean nothing. We are heading to the days of “might is right”. This is a critical moment in our history. Faith leaders must speak up!

The people of Gaza broadcast to us scenes of their genocide, and the war leaders declared to us and to the world their intention to wipe out Gaza and recolonize it, and the world is still debating and deliberating whether what is happening is a war of genocide or not.

Israeli solders are posting mocking videos of the destruction of an entire civilization... while the world still debates and deliberates!

When we as Palestinians talk about genocide, here is my message: We did not invent the term. We did not write the definition. The Western world did. So that “never again” truly becomes never again! You then educated and lectured us on

human rights and international laws. Now that it is an ally – you deny it?

Let us consider the evidence based on the Genocide Convention:

- the South African case in the ICJ,
- numerous UN experts
- many leading genocide and Holocaust scholars, including Israeli professors like Amos Goldberg, a Holocaust and genocide researcher at the Hebrew University, Raz Segal, associate professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Stockton University, Omer Bartov, professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University
- Francesca Albanese, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories,
- Over fifty- five scholars of the Holocaust, genocide, and mass violence
- Joint report by the University Network for Human Rights, International Human Rights, Clinic, Boston University School of Law, International Human Rights, Clinic, Cornell Law School, Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, and the Lowenstein Human Rights Project at Yale Law School,
- Human Rights Watch,
- Amnesty International,
- A report commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council

The question is not whether there is a genocide or not. The real question: why isn't the church recognizing it as a genocide?

Could it be because it would be an admission of guilt, so many churches supported and defended this war from the beginning?

“Never again” has become “Yet again!” Yet again to genocide; yet again to racism; yet again to church siding with power. You have learned nothing!

(All while celebrating Bonhoeffer!)

Friends. Truth is evident for all to see. There is nothing to debate. Apartheid is clear. Genocide is clear. We don't need to explain anymore. Truth is evident for all to see World leaders know the truth. They are denying it. In fact, they have been denying it for 76 years. How many delegations did we receive? How many lectures did we give? How many times we explain things?

Don't tell me it is not racism! Those complicit in this genocide do not see us as equals, as humans. How else do you explain this lack of empathy for human lives? For children dying, pulled from under the rubble, for babies found decomposed in Gaza hospitals?

(The EKD still did not call for ceasefire!)

We need Isaiah to speak to us anew today. To challenge our false spirituality. It is time to repent! Oh how our world needs to repent today from apathy; numbness to suffering; and normalizing and justifying a genocide. Even worse: today: Denying a genocide!

When world leaders watch a genocide and ethnic cleansing unfold live on TV and social media, yet continue to explain it,

while only raising concern over the death of innocent civilians  
--- our collective humanity is at stake.

When churches justify a genocide or are silent watching from  
distance, making carefully crafted balanced statements --- the  
credibility of the Gospel is at stake.

We need to repent from our racism, superiority, and bigotry.  
God's message to us through Isaiah: Piety that does not produce  
compassion and mercy is false piety! Piety that does not lead to  
hunger for justice is false piety.

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
    to loose the bonds of injustice,  
    to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
    and to break every yoke?

Our world is full of false piety; A piety that lacks mercy, justice,  
and truth. Today's reading from Isaiah is as if it were talking  
about today.

Friends, these words from Isaiah go beyond "charity". This is  
about taking a stance and active participation to bring justice and  
liberation. (not a statement!)

Jesus did not say: I was hungry, and you prayed for me and  
made a statement! Jesus said: I was a prisoner and you came to  
me!

This is not about "praying for peace", "raising concern", and  
sending support. Piety, says Isaiah, means active participation in  
loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the straps of yoke, letting



the oppressed go free, and breaking every yoke. This is active solidarity; this is about action.

This is about costly solidarity. Solidarity by definition is costly. It means identifying with those we serve; even visiting them in their prison; saying: I am with you. This is what is even more radical in Jesus' version of this text in Matthew 25. According to Jesus:

- What we do to victims of unjust structures is the basis of our divine judgment.
- What we do to victims of unjust structures is what we do to him!
- It also entails visiting a prisoner; identifying with them!

This is in a time when some western church leaders won't even meet with us because we are Palestinians.

I ask: Is this what the church is doing today? Let us be honest with ourselves! Do you see why I have been crying out --- where is the church? The question when we face injustice and suffering should not always be "where is God?" Many times the question is "where the church?"

We are occupied by religious practices...theological discussions...

Moreover... today I feel the thing we lack the most is courage. We know the truth. But we are not speaking... we fear the consequences... we fear the backlash!

The church wants to avoid controversy. Can you imagine if Jesus walked on earth avoiding controversy! Can you imagine if time he was asked a question, he would craft a balanced statement?

The way church statements dance around the issue of “ceasefire” or (god forbid) condemning Israel is indeed amazing. They write 2 pages long statements that basically say nothing other than unequivocally condemning Hamas!

Honestly, we should not be surprised; as Palestinian Christians, how many times did we experience rejection from the church? How many times were invitations sent to us to speak in global venues canceled? For fear of controversy. There are church leaders who are willing to sacrifice for the sake of avoiding the hustle of having to explain to outsiders why they are meeting with us Palestinian Christians! They sacrifice us for comfort. They sacrifice us for comfort, the same way they offered us as an atonement sacrifice for their own racism and anti-racism – repenting on our land over a sin they committed in their land!

All of this while we claim follow a crucified savior, who sacrificed everything, endured pain and rejection for the sake of those he lived!

When the church does not want to lose its comfort... something is seriously wrong with our Christian witness.

When the church sacrifices truth for the sake of conformity and avoiding controversy --- something is seriously wrong with our Christian witness.

Sisters and brothers.

Piety and true religiosity mean being in solidarity with the marginalized and the oppressed.

In 2023, in our church we created the concept of Christ in the Rubble. I was trying to answer the question: where is God in Gaza? Why did not he respond?

God is under the rubble in Gaza. He is with the frightened and the refugees. He is in the operating room. This is our consolation. He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. If we want to pray, my prayer is that those who are suffering will feel this healing and comforting presence.

If Jesus were to enter our world today, it will be in Gaza among those under the rubble. Jesus under the rubble is the message of God identifying with humanity in its suffering and pain. It is about the Gos who sides with the oppressed, even being born among them, as one of them, becoming a refugee and a victim of the violence of Empire.

God is in solidarity with the marginalized and the oppressed. He takes sides; he is not neutral...

And here is my message: God's solidity should become our solidarity! If God takes sides, so should we.

Where was God? Where where the people of good will? In the spirit of Isaiah 58, where was the church?

Dear friends: Gaza is indeed today the moral compass of the world. This war, I truly believe, has clearly divided the world; and maybe this is good thing. Gaza is the moral compass of the world. We either side with the logic or power and ruthlessness, with the lords of war, and with those who justify and rationalize the killing of children. Or you side with the victims of oppression and injustice, and those who are besieged and dehumanized by the forces of Empire and colonization. It is really a simple choice: you either support a genocide, turn a blind eye or justify a genocide, or you cry out: No! Not in our name.

History will remember!

The church must seek justice and righteousness, in obedience to the commandment of Christ, we must have the courage to speak our and call things by name! This is not a conflict; Israel is not exercising its right for self-defense. Rather; Israel is the colonizer; Israel is a settler colonial entity. We live under apartheid. What is happening in Gaza is a genocide and ethnic cleansing. Continuing to repeat the Empire narrative only serves to empower the aggressors.

On the basis of the foregoing, we must no longer speak in our churches of “peace,” or even of the resolution of conflict - but of an end to tyranny and injustice. Vocabulary is important. We are not talking about a struggle between equal forces. This is not simply about a ceasefire; but putting an end to 76 years of ethnic cleansing. And today, ending a genocide in Gaza.

Solidarity by definition is costly. Today I wonder, can you be in solidarity with Palestinians while denying our genocide? This is in fact an assault on our humanity – when you deny our genocide, or justify or defend it.

This is a time to act: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...

It is time for the church to be the church!

The way and how the churches of the world deal with injustice in our land will reveal a great deal about these churches. We do not exaggerate to say that the credibility of the churches and our Christian witness is at stake.

I am convinced that we as Palestinians will recover. God is good. We will keep believing and existing. This is our Sumud. Will those who were complicit in this genocide recover?