



*"...The heart of the sons of men
is full of evil,
and madness is in their heart
while they live..."
(Ecclesiastes 9:3)*

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before the high God?
He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God?
(Micah 6:6, 8)*

a homily on just society and our mad state of rebellion
healing our brokenness inadequately (part 2): billionaire's row

*"They heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:
'It's OK! It's OK!'
But nothing is OK!" (Jeremiah 6:14, author's translation).*

Introduction

Judicial inequality and injustice. Economic inequality and injustice. Rampant greed and fraud on the part of wealthy individuals and essential institutions. Bribery and corruption of government officials. Inordinate influence of the wealthy on laws and public policy. Unjust laws and policies favoring the powerful and influential while disadvantaging the less powerful and influential. The infliction of the vulnerable with hunger, homelessness, sickness, and anxiety. Self-righteous justification of the mad state of rebellion. Stubborn refusal to acknowledge these and a host of other societal ills.

No, I am not talking about America of 2024. However, if the shoe fits...

I am talking about late 6th and early 5th century B.C. Judah. These, and many other evils undermined the temporal, moral, and spiritual health of the nation. All the signs were there. The nation was on the verge of collapse. It was in desperate need of truth, however sour it might be to the national palate. But the nation's shepherds fed the populace an empty diet of

propagandistic myths of nationalism. Many of Israel's prophets joined the fray. Israel's watchmen, Jeremiah charged,

“Heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:

‘It's OK! It's OK!’”

“But nothing,” Jeremiah replies, “is OK!”

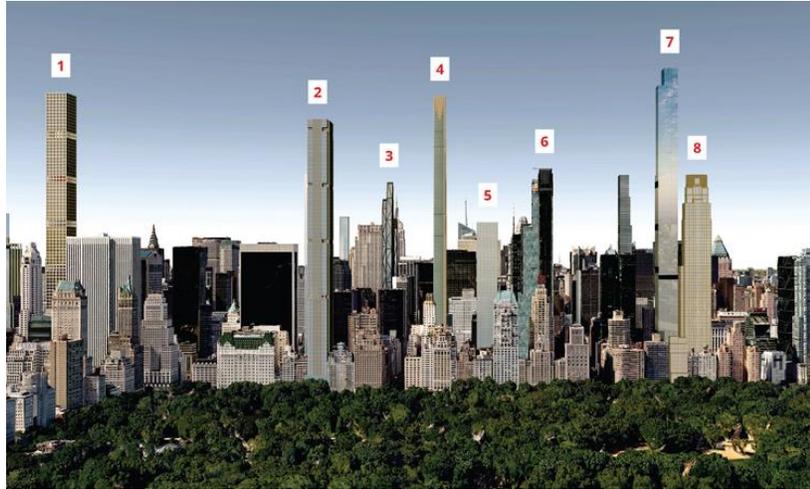
Does this, too, sound familiar? Strike close to home? It should. Too often, today's religious leaders—whether they go by the name, “prophet,” “priest,” or “pastor”— seem to lack both discernment and courage. They seem utterly blind to and mute about sin and evil, unless, of course, it involves some form of real or imagined sexual deviance. If they do speak out, it is often with muted, vague, delicate, and generalized voices and statements. These shepherds seem not up to the challenging task of bold and clear truth telling of the sort that our society so desperately needs. Now is not the time for delicacy and caution.

This homily is the second in an ongoing series entitled, “Healing Our Brokenness Inadequately,” based on Jeremiah 6.¹⁴. In this series, we explore specific examples of individual and societal sins about which political and religious leaders all too often remain willfully blind or, if sighted, stubbornly mute... and therefore complicit. Tragically, sometimes their complicity is even active and enthusiastic. With these examples in mind, we will often call upon the classic Hebrew prophets as well as other ancient and not so ancient prophets to speak as if from the dust. We read these discerning writings in light of the societal ills and injustices that abound in our modern world. Sometimes we even imagine and take a stab at replicating what a Hebrew prophet might have to say if he were to come to us from the past.

In today's homily, we offer another example of our brokenness about which too many remain silent and worse, in which too many engage themselves. Such moments as ours desperately cry out for the type of discernment, boldness, and truth-telling so characteristic of the Hebrew prophets.

billionaire row and housing insecurity

In an article by Liz Theoharis on the site, *TomDispatch*, entitled, “The US Government Has Abandoned the Nation’s Poor,” Theoharis reminds us of the existence of a grouping of tall ultra-luxury residential towers known as “Billionaires’ Row” that can be found at the southern end of New York City’s Central Park.



In these modern-day manors, the wealthy purchase luxurious condos and penthouses for 10’s of millions of dollars—some for well over 100 million dollars—or rent apartments for 10’s of thousands of dollars a month.



Several investigations and studies have revealed that many of the condos, penthouses, and apartments in these great and spacious buildings; these monuments to decadence remain unsold or unrented. Many of the condos, penthouses, and apartments that *have* been sold or

rented remain without inhabitants. Many that have been sold, rented, and furnished remain unoccupied for all but a few weeks of the year, while others remain furnished and unoccupied year-round.

It is an open secret that for many developers and purchasers these condos and penthouses serve only as tax havens to hide money lest it be used for the public good and/or as laundry mats to clean dirty money. For the “less corrupt,” the condos, penthouses, and apartments are simply somewhere to put money that they have no earthly idea what else to do with.

Meanwhile, due to inadequate wages and predatory rent prices due—both, no doubt, championed by the very people buying space in the great and spacious buildings—on real planet earth and in New York City, 10’s of thousands of individuals and families are racked with anxiety and worry over the prospect of losing their homes, living in cars, tents, or cardboard boxes.

It is difficult to imagine how an actual Christian could countenance such corruption in a nation they claim as “Christian.” It is impossible to imagine an actual Christian participating in such corruption of individual integrity and public welfare. And it is the height of unfathomable grotesqueness that Christian leaders—prophet, priest, or pastors—should remain mute or refrain from just criticism of such immoral decadency and inhuman indecency.

To be sure, the Hebrew prophets would not be silenced by the intimidating arrogance of the self-promoting and self-justifying wealthy. Indeed, as we have commented elsewhere, Isaiah, for one, did address a kind of housing piracy not unlike this one.¹

“A cause of lamentation and warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead, combine property after property

¹ See our meditations on Isaiah 5.⁸⁻¹⁰.

until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.”²

Though Isaiah does not mention it here, there can be little doubt that such ancient real estate practices did nothing to better the lives of vulnerable people, but only served to create additional insecurity and homelessness among them. But, here we are in New York, a few wealthy taking up enough resources and space to house thousands.

No, I don't expect developers to invite the poor in to live in the palaces they built for the rarified. I expect, if not the developers, then those with conscience to build affordable living for the vulnerable. That's what a real Christian nation would do. Jesus may have encouraged his disciples to be more anxious for their eternal soul than their temporal body, but he did not intend his disciples to live without physical shelter or to, themselves, direct a full-scale attack on the emotional peace or temporal existence of their fellow beings.

Yes, these rich New Yorkers are like those ancient rich Israelites.

“They covet tracts of farmland, and find a way to steal them.
They covet houses, and seize them.
Thus, they violently extort a property owner of their home,
and an individual of their property.”³

Yes, that's right. I accuse those rich New Yorkers and the society that condones and even lionizes their behavior of what is tantamount to violent extortion which robs others of the security of home. They are the modern-day equivalent of medieval barons living lavishly in their defended castles in complete disregard for the welfare of landless serfs. Yes, those rich New Yorkers would do well to answer the very pertinent question and heed the applicable warning issued by Jeremiah.

² Issiah 5.⁸

³ Micah 2.², author's translation

“Shalt thou reign,
because thou closest thyself in cedar?
Did not thy father eat and drink,
and do judgment and justice,
and then it was well with him?
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well with him:
was not this to know me?
saith the LORD.
But thine eyes and thine heart are not but for
thy covetousness,
and for to shed innocent blood,
and for oppression, and for violence, to do it.”⁴

Conclusion and imprecation

True followers of Jesus would see what has been happening on the south side of New York’s most famous park—and many other places from sea to shining sea—for what it is. Theft and pillage committed by the wealthy against the disadvantaged, vulnerable, and powerless. True Christians would not actively participate in such theft and pillage, nor become complicit in it through inaction or silence. They would not elect politicians who legislate in such ways as to make such behavior possible, and certainly not “legal.” Furthermore, it is certain that brave, caring, and discerning prophets, priests, and pastors would speak up and denounce the decadent covetousness that does violence against the disadvantaged—a violence that has certainly led to much anxiety, my a failed heart and even a few early deaths.

Yes, that’s right. We see red when we look up at those monstrosities of covetousness and greed and hubris that line the south side of Central Park. We see the red of human blood dripping from the shimmering windows of New York City’s Billionaire Row.

⁴ Jeremiah 22.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

The cowardly silence of modern-day prophet's, priests, and pastors is profoundly shameful and unlike the vocal courage of the Hebrew prophets as well as that of Jesus of Nazareth. If they were around today, we can imagine that we might hear something like this:

A cause of lamentation and warning!

Glittering palaces march in line on Billionaire's Row.

Manors of lustful warlords.

Castles of entitled and privileged crusaders.

Plantations of merciless masters.

Idolatrous temples of human sacrifice.

Like shafts of biting steel,

shards of cutting glass

and long, jagged, and gnashing teeth,

they rend wind and sky,

and, worse, shred the flesh of everyday working people,

Declaring war on humanity.

Ordinary folks, seen as lesser,

lack capital, resources, and reserves,

and experience needless and unwarranted anxiety.

Will they lose what little they have, their humble abode?

Will the open sky become their only roof,

motor cars and cardboard boxes their bed?

But hard-hearted lords of the manors,

masters of the high and haughty domains,

high priests and priestesses of fertility,

like those of babel's tower,

build siege ramps to storm the heavens,

challenge God's rule,

and defy His best wishes and just counsel.

Consumed by greed and lust, insatiable appetite,
hubris, pride, arrogance, self-centeredness, false self-importance,
and contempt for fellow citizens—
siblings for whom they have no care—
they feed on their own unfortunate kin;
engorge themselves with the flesh of the powerless.

May their mammon molder, their stocks slide,
and their glittering gold turn to fine dust.
May their edifices, monuments of ignominy,
and symbols of human depravity,
creak and crack, crumble and corrode;
totter, wobble, tilt and implode.

May the builders and their clientele with whom they collude
find no lasting abode
but in dark, and damp dungeons of lower earth,
patrolled by guards and jailers of like mind as they.
May they gnash their teeth in bottomless pits,
where light and sky ever allude their view.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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