



## Hearing Sa'aq<sup>i</sup>—the practice of *hopeful, liberating speech*

***“A silent community, merely observing the events of the time, would not be a Christian community.”(Karl Barth)***

***“Every time we open our mouths, whether in conversation with one another or in prayer to the Lord, Christian truth and community are on the line. And so, high on the agenda of the Christian community in every generation is that we diligently develop a voice that speaks in consonance with the God who speaks, that we speak in such a way that truth is told and community is formed...” (Eugene Peterson, 2008, *The Word Made Flesh*)***

The Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit is engaged in what Walter Brueggemann calls practices of *hopeful, liberating speech*.<sup>ii</sup> We blog on the internet to try and create something of a *glocal* conversation that explores issues of social justice; we engage in advocacy and in public debate to challenge and counter changes in legislation that smack of elitism, exclusion, injustice, or the marginalization of low income families; we write discussion papers to try and fuel activism and something of a countercultural faith; we deliberately do research to debunk *what is* with images of *what could be*; we make submissions to Select Committees of Parliament to try and energize fatigued or tired social policy with alternative and fresh thinking; we sit on community boards and local trusts to hear the clatter of our neighborhoods; we mine the Scriptures to expose and confront our own preconceptions and prejudices and to look for counter-texts, new stories with which we can re-describe and re-narrate what is important, new words with which we can re-imagine and re-organize society; we speak at churches, with local Kaumatua and with different faiths; we give interviews on radio and on television; we intentionally sit down to listen to and learn from the clientele and staff of our social service centers; we poke fun at each other to not take ourselves too seriously; we pause to pray; and, whenever we can, we speak face-to-face with parliamentarians and policy makers to try and ensure that the future direction of our nation is compassionate, fair and inclusive of everyone.

We engage in these practices of *hopeful, liberating speech* to not only gain something of a hearing for our own Salvationist peculiarity; we engage in these practices to try and hear the “cries” of “sa’aq”, to try and secure something of a voice *for* the voiceless. And *that* is what changes history. Walter Brueggemann puts it like this:

***“We face a crisis of speech in our time. The crisis of contemporary speech is caused by the silence of those who are on the margins of society... **History moves and life is transformed when the powerless get speech.** We need, therefore, in all our institutions, to be asking: who has speech? Who does the talking? Who does the decisive speaking?”<sup>iii</sup>***

*See what is at stake?*

There is a historical contest of speech, a controlling of *what is said?* and *of who get's to say what?* The contest chokes and impedes freedom. And it is only when we learn to share the microphone and the stage with *different voices*, with the excluded, marginalized, oppressed and poor, when we learn to practice a more *hopeful, liberating speech* that things change and history moves forward.

See that?

Think of the Exodus. The escape of the Hebrews from Egypt starts with a God who heard the “cries” of His people, a God who counters the dominating reality of Pharaoh with His own liberating speech: *“I have indeed seen the misery of my people... I have heard them cry out... I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptian...”*<sup>iv</sup>

The “cry” of pain is a defiant *“act of civil disobedience. The outcry is an announcement for all to notice that the peasants would no longer conform to the system, silently meet quotas, and go home at night exhausted... The outcry is an announcement that the peasants would no longer have their lives defined by the dominant technology. They would no longer bow before the ideology offered by the ruling class. The ‘withdrawal’ is surely liturgical, political, economic, psychological – the end of the ‘known’ world of Egypt.”*<sup>v</sup>

Everything changes with God. He hears and intervenes in a history without freedom to set in motion a newer narrative of hope and liberation.

Think of Nathan who heard the “cries” of Bethsheba and Uriah. He challenges the denial and dishonest grabbing of the monarchy, and, while eyeballing King David, declares: *“You are that rich man!”*<sup>vi</sup>

Think of Elijah, a dangerous character who heard the “cries” of Naboth. He criticizes Ahab and Jezebel of the Omri dynasty, and in a fiery exchange of words, disputes the legitimacy of the excesses they had grasped from mishandling everyone and everything like they were purchasable and consumable commodities: *“Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth’s vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?’ Then say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood - yes, yours!’”*<sup>vii</sup>

Think of Isaiah who heard the “cries” of King Hezekiah and a threatened Jerusalem. The Assyrian industrial military complex has already condemned the city and claimed victory, when Isaiah dares to speak “otherwise:” *“He interrupts the fearful calculus between the two governments and speaks from a different perspective... He utters the ‘do not be afraid’ which is always the intrusion of the gospel (Isaiah 37.6)... The prophet makes Yahweh the key player, thereby minimizing the threat of the superpower and giving the king some space...”*<sup>viii</sup>

Walter Brueggemann goes on: *“The wild card is the courageous voice of poetry, the artistry of the prophet who refuses to accept this power analysis, because there is on the tip of his tongue the name of Yahweh. It is this Yahweh who since Exodus has refused to give in to empires definitions of reality... In the midst of this unembarrassed prophetic speech, Jerusalem regains its intention and its maneuverability, reclaims its role in management, and refuses to yield it space to imperial intimidation. Of course, this is all a moment of rhetoric. The hard truth of Assyrian power is still there, still strong and still harsh. The community of faith, however, regularly gathers around its artisans of newness, its preachers and its poets, its dreamers and its hoppers and speakers, to reassert its daring capacity for counter imagination and daring action.”*<sup>ix</sup>

Think of Jeremiah who heard the “cries” of a grieved God and a forgetful Jerusalem. He debunks and dismantles its false, prosaic reality with these myth-shattering words: *“What are you doing, O devastated one? Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of*

*gold? Why shade your eyes with paint? You adorn yourself in vain. Your lovers despise you; they seek your life. I hear a cry as of a woman in labor, a groan as of one bearing her first child - the cry of the Daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands and saying, Alas! I am fainting; my life is given over to murderers.”<sup>x</sup>*

Think of Daniel who heard the “cries” of the exiled Israelites in Babylon. He goes head to head with Nebuchadnezzar, the imperial commander and chief of the largest known superpower on earth: *“O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king (is that Daniel ducking for cover?): You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed.”<sup>xi</sup>*

Think of Micah who heard the “cries” of marginalized peasants and confronted the greedy, indifferent, shameless and thuggish power of the centralized state: *“Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds. At mornings light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance (can we hear echoes of these “cries” against the banking system and finance companies with the current economic crisis?).” (Micah 2.1-2)*

The prophet of God expects more. He expects justice - a returning of rights, a righting of wrongs: *“Listen, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel. Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones...”*

*“Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel who despise justice and distort all that is right; who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness. Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money” (I’m thinking of the exploitative and money grabbing industry of televangelism, you?). (Micah 3)*

Think of Jesus who stopped to hear the “cries” of Bartimaeus. Even though the crowds forcibly try to silence Bartimaeus, Jesus generously gives the blind beggar a ‘hearing’ and a ‘say’: *“Many rebuked (Bartimaeus) and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’ So they called to the blind man, ‘Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.’ Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him. The blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’ ‘Go,’ said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’”<sup>xii</sup>*

These Scriptures have fueled a long history of *hopeful, liberating speech*.

Think of Te Whiti who heard the “cries” of Maori. He counters the land-grabbing and violent silencing of colonial settlers: *“Though some, in darkness of heart, seeing their land ravished, might wish to take up arms and kill the aggressors, I say it must not be. Let not the Pakehas think to succeed by reason of their guns... I want not war, but they do. The flashes of their guns have singed our eyelashes, and yet they say they do not want war... The government comes not to hither to reason, but goes to out-of-the-way places. They work secretly, but I speak in public so that all may hear.”<sup>xiii</sup>*

Imagine how different our national history would be if we had only embraced this peace-making of Te Whiti.

Think of W.T. Stead and Florence and Bramwell Booth who heard the “cries” of prostituted girls and collaborated to research and write *“The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon”*, a series of newspaper articles that exposed the clandestine sale of children in the sex industry of Victorian England: *“I resolved – and recorded my resolve on paper – that, not matter what the consequences might be, I would do all I could to stop these abominations, to rouse public opinion, to agitate for the improvement of the law, to bring justice to the adulterers and murderers of innocence, and to make a way of escape for the victims.”*<sup>xiv</sup>

Think of Dorothy Day who in the depression of the 1930s heard the “cries” of the poor in New York and founded a movement of Catholic Workers to engage with the growing masses of unemployed: *“If I have accomplished anything in my life, it is because I wasn’t embarrassed to talk about God.”*<sup>xv</sup>

Think of Niemoller, a clergyman who couldn’t stay silent in front of a totalitarian Hitler. His famous poem captures how easy it is to fall into indifferent numbness and speechlessness:

*“When the Nazis came for the communists, I remained silent; I was not a communist.  
Then they locked up the social democrats, I remained silent; I was not a social democrat.  
Then they came for the trade unionists, I did not speak out; I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, I did not speak out; I was not a Jew.  
When they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me.”*<sup>xvi</sup>

Think of Martin Luther King Jr. who heard the “cries” of a racially divided America and campaigned for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. He spoke in 1967 of “A time to break the silence”: *“A time comes when silence is betrayal... (We) have already begun to break the silence of the night (and) have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. And we must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation’s history that a significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a from dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history. Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movements and pray that our inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.”*<sup>xvii</sup>

Think of Oscar Romero who heard the “cries” of the oppressed in El Salvador. He stated emphatically: *“We are never embarrassed of saying, ‘The Church of the Poor.’... When the church hears the cries of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.”*<sup>xviii</sup>

Think of Mother Teresa who heard the “cries” of the poor and dying in Calcutta (now Mumbai): *“I think that before people were speaking much about the poor, but now more and more people are speaking to the poor; that is the great difference.”*<sup>xix</sup>

Think of Bishop Desmond Tutu who heard the “cries” of a racially segregated South Africa. He knew the cost of speaking against Apartheid: *“I want to say that there is nothing the government can do to me that will stop me from being involved in what I believe is what God wants me to do. I do not do it because I like doing it. I do it because I am under what I believe to be the influence of God’s hand. I cannot help it. I cannot help it when I see injustice. I cannot*

*keep quite. I will not keep quiet, for as Jeremiah says, when I try to keep quiet God's word burns like a fire in my breast. But what is it that they can ultimately do? The most awful thing that they can do is to kill me, and death is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian.*"<sup>xx</sup>

Think of the Hikoi of Hope in 1998. The Rev. Tony Church likened the Hikoi to something of a holy pilgrimage: "... a time honoured journey of expectation, a form of providing a united voice and a physical presence against injustice. Each Hikoi has its own focus. Many will remember the Hikoi led by Dame Whina Cooper in 1975 which called on the government of the day to return the land stolen from Maori. This one is an expression of deep concern within the Church at the pain resulting from the intolerable levels of poverty in New Zealand. The Church has for years made submissions, statements, resolutions and sent delegations to Parliament, but has felt these concerns have increasingly fallen on deaf ears."

He goes on: "This Hikoi is a form of pilgrimage expressing a hope for new policies which will address structural issues contributing to hardship, ill health, lack of employment opportunities and social exclusion. It is a way of letting physical presence do the talking. It is not simply a protest march against an issue. It is a 'walk for a change' in political priorities so that people do not remain trapped in poverty. (This Hikoi)... is... Te Heke, the great migration. We seek to rediscover what God calls us to be. It begins with Genesis, the whole Hikoi of God's creation. The story of Abraham is a Hikoi. The movement of Jacob and Joseph is part of Te Heke. The Exodus is a Hikoi. It is allowing ourselves to be led by the Spirit to a new understanding of human relationships and of ourselves. We must create the environment of being on a spiritual journey, confronting not so much Parliament but ourselves and the Christian Church, with what we need to correct. It is a journey of discovery, of our destiny, of who and what we are. We are awakening our nation to the erosion of our community caused by economic policy in which we have become entrapped. We seek the rediscovery of human values and God's values within our lives. The challenge is to join our brother and sister churches and to communicate that to the rest of the community and the world."<sup>xxi</sup>

Think of Bob Geldof and Bono who heard the "cries" of a starving Ethiopia and with BAND Aid, LIVE AID, LIVE 8, DATA, RED, EDUN, and the ONE campaign they have given a new generation a platform to "give a dam" and a microphone to "speak up" (not to mention the good tunes): "So this is our moment. This is our time. This is our chance. To stand up for what's right. We are not looking for charity, we're looking for justice. We can't fix every problem but the ones we can we must. Three thousand Africans, mostly children, die every day of a mosquito bite. We can fix that. Nine thousand people die every day from preventable, treatable diseases like AIDS. We've got the drugs, we can help them. Dirty water, death by dirty water. Well we can dig wells. If you want to join us get out on the streets.... Text us, call us. There's phones. They're dangerous little devices."<sup>xxii</sup>

Think of Darren Frazer who in 2007 through Fair Trade and *micah clothing* started to engage with the "cries" of farmers and seamstresses in the cotton industry of India.

The list could go on and on, couldn't it?

Today, if we hope to continue this rich history of constructive dissent, if we hope to hear the "cries" of *sa'aq* in our own context then we have to learn to speak to:

1. *the anxiety of scarcity*. The Budget Speech of 2009 is likely to be grim. The National government has already forecast a likely fall in our GDP of some \$50 billion in the next three-four years. The current economic crisis is fueling a *despairing talk of crisis management, cutbacks, downsizing, rationalization, redundancy, and scarcity*. The noisiest and prevailing thought is that *there is simply not enough*. The future is

limited, finite, closed to surprise, with no new gifts to be given. We have to counter this despairing talk and with a more *hopeful, liberating speech* shift the national conversation from a sole focus on *what is* to a newer imagination of *what could be*. We have to (re)-engage deliberately in communal practices of generosity and in a prophetic voicing that says *there can be enough* for everyone. We have to speak against the grasping of excess and for the inclusivity of openhanded redistribution. We have to ensure that low-income families and marginalized communities have a 'say' and a fair slice of whatever plans and policies the government sets for economic recovery.

2. *debt and indebtedness*. The level of debt and indebtedness in Aotearoa New Zealand is crippling. Nationally, the Crown owes \$45 billion (25.1 per cent of our GDP), some 45.7 percent higher than forecasted in 2008<sup>xxiii</sup>; individually, we owe \$175.1 billion (\$5.2 billion of which we have to pay off our credit cards), which equates to a hefty \$41, 000 of personal debt per head of the population.<sup>xxiv</sup> And then there is the exorbitant interest that sits on top of what we owe? Sadly, this escalating debt is only matched by a growth in hardship stories of people not coping. The gospels imagine a Jesus who from His opening speech daringly proclaims a forgiveness and release of debt.<sup>xxv</sup> Is that possible or even practical today? Or is Jesus simply being spiritual? What if we could create countering communities of faith that'd deliberately hold everything in common, communities that'd intentionally forgive debt, collectively pooling our resources to meet the fees of Students, to gift genuine 'mortgage holidays' to families, and to release the debt-burden of others with interest free loans? Is that something of a *hopeful, liberating* conversation we could start?
3. *the degrading and dehumanizing of difference*. Miroslav Volf claims: "... that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference. The issue is urgent. The ghettos and battlefields throughout the world – in the living rooms, in inner cities, or on the mountain ranges – testify indisputably to its importance."<sup>xxvi</sup> I'm sick of hearing the degrading and dehumanizing *naming* of others that is going on in our neighborhoods. I'm tired of hearing shoppers at the local mall, hosts of talk-back radio, and even Members of Parliament name "them" *dole-bludgers, filth, mongrels, rat bags, scoundrels, scumbags, thugs, and terrorists* (and that is only the tame talk). The genocide in Rwanda started with the Hutus *naming* the Tutsis *cockroaches* and *tall tress*. We have to intentionally engage in *hopeful, liberating speech* that *renames* everyone, everywhere "valuable", "created in the image of God." We have to rediscover practices of neighborliness and reciprocity that strengthen a mutual responsibility of togetherness.
4. *the loss of perspective*. We blogged ([www.justcomment.org/](http://www.justcomment.org/)) that with the frenzy and hyping of the H1V1 flu virus we were losing some perspective on what is really important. The Blog compared the fuss of 'pigs flying' with the cold hard facts of the 25 000 kids who die from hunger, poverty and preventable diseases everyday. Darren Frazer forwarded this blog onto TVNZ and TV3. James Murray, a Chief Editor of 3 News replied: "*I cannot answer on 3 News' behalf but I can give you my own perspective. The news is essentially driven by events - it is a list of the most newsworthy events that occur in a day. Whilst it is undeniable that the death of children through poverty is an important story it is more suited to a current affairs show or a documentary - it is a subject that demands and deserves more than a two minute news story could give it... I would suggest that you direct your energies at those who control finances for longer programmes in New Zealand - there is not a*

*huge pot of money for documentary making and it is here where the issues you bring up can be most effectively addressed.*" Now, investing in and making a documentary that explores how we can engage with the global plight of children would definitely be a practice of *hopeful, liberating speech*, wouldn't it? Any takers?

5. *the real threat of violence*. The peaceful future of our communities is dependant on a more *hopeful, liberating speech* that helps re-imagine society to re-establish grace over efficiency, "... *quality over quantity, service over profit, neighbourliness over competition, people and other creatures over machines, health over wealth, a democratic prosperity over centralized wealth and power, economic health over 'economic growth'...* If we hope to be at peace, we will have to (learn to speak of and practice) *wasting less, spending less, using less, wanting less, and needing less.*"<sup>xxvii</sup>

The last comment goes to a rephrasing of Walter Brueggemann: *hopeful, liberating speech* is a practice of "*imaginative speech that does not conform to the economic interests, moral limits, or epistemological convictions of the dominant culture... it re-describes the world so that selfish capitalism, which looked so benign, is now seen as exile, so that the community of Aotearoa New Zealand, which was loved and lost, now looks like home, so that we who look like docile and helpless pawns are now activists and on our way rejoicing. The central task of ministry is the formation of a community with an alternative, liberated imagination that has the courage and the freedom to act from a different vision and a different perception of reality,*" a countercultural community that deliberately engages with the "cries" of *sa'aq*.<sup>xxviii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Sa'aq is a Hebrew "... expression of pain, the ouch, the sound we utter when we are wounded. But *sa'aq* is also a question, a question that arises out of the pain of the wound. Where is the justice? Did anybody see that? Who will come to my rescue? Did anybody hear that? Or am I alone here?" Rob Bell and Don Golden, 2008, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*.

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 1986, *The Hopeful Imagination*; 2001, *The Prophetic Imagination*

<sup>iii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 1986, *Theological Education: Healing the Blind Beggar*, cited at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org), emphasis mine.

<sup>iv</sup> Exodus 3.7-9.

<sup>v</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 1987, *Hope within History*.

<sup>vi</sup> 2 Samuel 12

<sup>vii</sup> 1 Kings 21.18-19.

<sup>viii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 1993, *Using God's Resources Wisely*.

<sup>ix</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 1993, *Using God's Resources Wisely*.

<sup>x</sup> Jeremiah 4.30-31

<sup>xi</sup> Daniel 4. 24-27

<sup>xii</sup> Mark 10.46-52

<sup>xiii</sup> Te Whiti, 1880 cited at Wikipedia.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bramwell Booth, cited in Neelson Munn and David Collinson, 2007, *Insane: the stories of crazy salvos who changed the world*.

<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.catholicworker.com>

<sup>xvi</sup> A poem attributed to Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), cited in Milton Mayer, 1955, *They Thought They Were Free*.

<sup>xvii</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., 1967, *A Time to Break the Silence*, a sermon delivered at Riverside Church, New Your City.

<sup>xviii</sup> Oscar Romero, Christmas Eve, 1978, Sermon.

<sup>xix</sup> Cited at [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)

<sup>xx</sup> Desmond Tutu, cited in Shirley Du Boulay, 1988, *Tutu: Voice of the Voiceless*.

<sup>xxi</sup> Cited at *The Common Good*, No 9, Spring 1998, [www.catholicworker.org.nz](http://www.catholicworker.org.nz)

<sup>xxii</sup> Bono speaking at Live 8, 2005.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cited in *The New Zealand Herald*, Thursday May 7, 2009.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Brian Gaynor, Debt Dependence dangerously out of fashion, Weekend Herald, Saturday, April 25, 2009.

<sup>xxv</sup> See The Gospel of Luke 4.18-21.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Miroslav Volf, 1996, Exclusion and Embrace.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Wendell Berry, 1990, 'What We Learned from the Gulf War', Progressive 55, no.11 (Nov 1991:26, cited in Jim Wallis, 1994, The Soul of Politics – a practical and prophetic vision for change.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 1986, Hopeful Imagination.

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