In Christus vrij – Verbonden met elkaar

Proeve van het NZR-jaarthema 2023

NZR-Cahiers

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Voorwoord

"Vrij als ik ben ten opzichte van iedereen, ben ik de slaaf van iedereen geworden om zo veel mogelijk mensen te winnen." (1 Kor. 9:19)

Paulus' woorden aan de gemeente in Korinthe laten zien hoe vrijheid in Jezus Christus onlosmakelijk verbonden is met de verbondenheid aan iedereen, aan de hele gemeenschap, alle mensen. Daarvoor gebruikt hij het werkwoord "tot slaaf worden". Maar hij is niet slaaf of eigendom van een menselijke heer en meester: hij dient God en iedereen, met als doel het Goede Nieuws te verspreiden. Zijn vrijheid bestaat uit de roeping om zich zelfbewust te verbinden aan Gods missie.

Vrijheid en slavernij. In het jaar waarin we in Nederland het beëindigen van de trans-Atlantische slavernij herdenken, is het goed om ook als kerken en zendingsorganisaties vanuit de vrijheid in Christus na te denken over het doel en de praktijk van onze missionaire roeping. Hoe verhouden vrijheid en verbondenheid zich met elkaar? Als we over zending vandaag praten, hoe belangrijk zijn dan de vragen rond de geschiedenis van slavernij en kolonialisme? Welke systemen van macht en ongelijkheid zien we – ook in zendingsrelaties? We hebben dit uitgewerkt in ons jaarthema "In Christus vrij – Verbonden met elkaar".

Tijdens verschillende bijeenkomsten hebben we, met de leden van ons netwerk, nagedacht over wat vrijheid in Christus eigenlijk is en waartoe we vrij zijn. We stelden de vraag hoe het verbonden zijn met God zich verhoudt tot de verbinding met elkaar, met de erfenis van het verleden en met oog op Gods toekomst. In deze bundel delen we de integrale (Engelstalige) tekst van drie lezingen die gehouden zijn op NZR-bijeenkomsten in 2023. De presentaties zijn met toestemming van de sprekers opgenomen. Ze geven een indruk van de doorgaande bezinning op de missionaire roeping in een wereld vol ongelijkheid en onderdrukking.

Berdine van den Toren-Lekkerkerker, directeur Nederlandse Zendingsraad

Wat is vrijheid in Christus? Waartoe zijn we vrij? Hoe verhouden vrijheid en verbondenheid zich met elkaar? Wat is het verband tussen christelijke vrijheid en het gezonden zijn als christenen, individueel en collectief? Deze vragen voeren ons terug naar één van de kernvragen: Wat is heil, wat is het goede nieuws? Hoe oriënteert ons antwoord op deze vraag ons in woord en daad?

Tijdens het NZR-symposium op 24 maart 2023 hield Prof. dr. Esther Mombo onderstaande presentatie. Zij is universitair hoofddocent aan de theologische faculteit van St. Paul's University in Limuru, Kenia. Mombo doceert kerkgeschiedenis en theologie vanuit het perspectief van vrouwen. Ze publiceert op het gebied van evangelisatie, HIV/AIDS, christen-moslimrelaties, vrouwen en armoede in Afrika. Mombo is lid van de *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*. Mombo hield deze voordracht samen met haar student Jacklin Makena.

Freedom for the Bent-over Woman: Lessons for our Mission Endeavours

Introduction

Africa among other marginalized societies has been plagued by various injustices over the years. Economic and mental slavery have been prevalent among others. These injustices have had a profound impact on the lives of many Africans. Economic slavery refers to the systemic exploitation of labour and resources by more powerful nations or groups, which results in economic dependence and subjugation of the affected country or region. This phenomenon has been a significant challenge in Africa, where many countries have been unable to benefit from their vast natural resources due to exploitation and marginalization by external forces.

One of the key factors contributing to economic slavery in Africa is the legacy of white supremacy. For centuries, European powers colonized Africa, plundering its resources and exploiting its people for their own economic gain. This legacy of exploitation has continued long after the formal end of colonialism, with multinational corporations and wealthy nations continuing to exploit African resources and labour for their own benefit. The current situation in Africa is also as a result of mental colonialization. Mental colonialization is the process by which the minds of people in colonized or formerly colonized societies are influenced by the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the colonizer. This process can result in a lack of self-esteem, self-doubt, and a perception of

inferiority. In the context of African history, mental colonialization has been a significant challenge.

The legacy of colonialism has left many Africans with a sense of inferiority and a belief that Western culture and values are superior to their own. This perception has been perpetuated by the media, education system, and other cultural institutions that often prioritize Western knowledge and values over local knowledge and values. However, it is possible for Africans to change their mentality about themselves, and Westerners to change their mentality about Africans. This change is only achievable through a commitment to freedom and unity. Freedom in Christ refers to the spiritual liberation that comes from recognizing one's worth and dignity as a child of God. Therefore, this paper seeks to expound various ways through which freedom and unity can be achieved and make the world a habitable place for all humankind. It will draw lessons from the story of the bent woman over for 18 years.

A Re-telling of Luke 13:10-17 in the Words of "The Bent-over Woman"

My story is narrated in Luke 13:10-17. Even though I have a name, the writer does not mention it. He only introduces me in view of my condition by describing me as "a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years." I come from a small village near Jerusalem. My life was normal until one day, when I woke up and felt an excruciating pain in my back. I became completely crippled and couldn't stand up straight. My family and friends were devastated and didn't know what to do. They tried to find a solution, but nothing worked. My sickness was not just physical, it was also emotional. I was in constant pain and struggled to do even the simplest tasks. This made me ashamed and felt like a burden to my family and community. People would stare at me and whisper behind my back, and some would even avoid me altogether. This period of sickness was not only traumatic and depressive but also humiliating and isolating. But one day, everything changed.

On this Sabbath day, I woke up early and made my way to the synagogue. I always had to leave home exceptionally early to arrive on time since my bent over condition did not permit me to walk in a fast pace like other people. When I arrived, I sat behind with my fellow women and children as tradition demanded. As the service progressed, a man who was teaching that day called me forward. I panicked! I wondered why this man was calling me to the front, yet tradition forbade women like me from accessing such a space. I was scared and nervous because I had not experienced such attention before due to my condition. I was used to my lonely life because no one wanted to associate with me. Nonetheless, I decided to walk forward; I slowly limped and made my way to the front. I had a better view of the man and realized it was Jesus. He then told me, "You are free from your infirmity!" While still wondering what all this was about, Jesus put his hands on me and immediately I was healed. I was no longer crippled! No longer bent over! I now could straighten up!

Then another man who I knew very well, the synagogue ruler, rose to speak. He expressed anger and disappointment that Jesus had the audacity to heal me on a Sabbath day. He was so furious and insisted that the law did not permit such an act on the Sabbath day. But Jesus appropriately reminded him of their constant double standards in applying the law. Jesus made it clear to him that since they tied and untied their oxen and donkeys on the Sabbath; it was of much more importance that the wellness, dignity, and value of humanity be prioritized on the Sabbath.

I walked home free! Jesus had moved me from the pain and humiliation of being described in view of my condition and led me to the freedom of being identified by my name. My 'bent over' condition, as well as being a woman in a patriarchal society, had compounded my vulnerability and exposed me to verbal, religious and even physical violence. But Jesus led the way in showing that a new reality is possible; a new reality where the dignity of all humanity is upheld and violence in

all its forms is shunned. He did this by challenging the political, cultural, and religious system of the day which had relegated me and my fellow women to a subservient position. Jesus led in eliminating the gender disparities of the time which denied women the privilege of being 'at the front' in the Synagogue. He called me and allowed me into this 'protected space,' touched me, and healed me as everyone who was in the Synagogue on that Sabbath day watched. He further defended his action of healing me on the Sabbath and made it clear to everyone that because I am a valuable daughter of God, I deserved that healing and freedom, more so on a Sabbath day! From that day on, my life was transformed. I felt like a new person, and I was filled with hope and joy.

Free in Christ and United Together

The story that we have read of a woman who was bent over for 18 years provides a fundamental metaphor for this struggle. It sheds light on the issue of economic and mental slavery in Africa and its connection to the legacy of colonialism. Economic slavery refers to the systemic exploitation of labour and resources by more powerful nations or groups, which results in economic dependence and subjugation of the affected country or region or people group. This phenomenon has been a significant challenge in Africa, where many countries have been unable to benefit from their vast natural resources due to exploitation and marginalization by external forces. The issue of economic slavery in Africa is deeply interconnected with the story of the woman bent over. The woman in the story represents those who are oppressed and marginalized by unjust systems of power. Similarly, the people often marginalized and exploited by those who hold economic and political power. One of the most troubling aspects of economic (slavery in Africa) is the fact that the continent is rich in natural resources, yet many of its people live in abject poverty. This phenomenon is known as the resource curse, where countries with abundant natural resources often suffer from

economic and political instability, corruption, and underdevelopment.

The current situation in Africa is also a result of mental colonialization. Mental colonialization is the process by which the minds of people in colonized or formerly colonized societies are influenced by the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the colonizer. This process can result in a lack of self-esteem, self-doubt, and a perception of inferiority. In the context of African history, mental colonialization has been a significant challenge. The legacy of colonialism has left many Africans with a sense of inferiority and a belief that Western culture and values are superior to their own. This perception has been perpetuated by the media, education system, and other cultural institutions that often prioritize Western knowledge and values over local knowledge and values. Therefore, the questions are, what is freedom in Christ? To what purpose are we free? What is the relationship between freedom and being united? "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." (1 Cor. 9:19) In regard to freedom and unity in Christ we have added the text from Micah that reads "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

The story of the bent over woman in the context of freedom and unity offers a solicitous theological rationale that can help Christians understand the importance of working towards a more just and equitable society. One of the key theological themes in the story is the concept of liberation. The theme of liberation in this story can be seen in several ways. First, the woman is liberated from her physical ailment. Being bent for 18 years had caused her pain and limited her mobility. By healing her, Jesus liberates her from this physical oppression. Secondly, the story shows that the woman was a victim of various systemic injustice. She was unable to stand up straight because of her condition and as a result, she was marginalized and excluded from many aspects of society. By healing her, Jesus liberates her from this social oppression and restores her dignity. Our freedom and unity in Christ we submit should be rooted in humility, justice and mercy.

Humility

The definition of "humility" as we know it comes from the Latin, "humilis," meaning "low. Employing "humility" provides an impetus to social equity which counters the natural tendency to look after one's own self-interest to the detriment of our neighbours. Additionally, humility requires that we actively advocate for the value of those who are on the margins. The notion of social humility requires us to put people ahead of profits and ensure that before we seek a profit for ourselves and of our nations that we think of those who do not have." A Washington Post article explores humility regarding the way it is espoused in leadership. Participants were divided into two groups – the intellectually arrogant and the intellectually humble. The intellectually arrogant skimmed material, quickly came to conclusions, and were slow to accept more information. The intellectually humble took more time to take in new information, and they were more able to embrace ambiguity. Humble leaders regularly "prioritize the organization's success ahead of their own." The Church and her mission should demonstrate intellectual humility while pushing civic leaders toward intellectual humility as a form of acceptable leadership.

This humility, for the oppressed, is to exhibit the strength to exert the authority God has given to seek recompense on their own behalf and on behalf of their communities. And, for those who operate from a position of obvious power and strength (such as financial power or State sanctioned power) the challenge is to actively participate in and advocate for those changes and behaviours which will benefit those who are vulnerable. If we "walk humbly with our God," we honour the full dignity of those around us. As a prophet, Micah says to walk "humbly with your God." By prioritizing humility in our solutions, we will prioritize the good of our communities over our individuals, while also prioritizing the country over individual companies. We cannot "do justice" without humility.

Mercy

In the Micah text, "love mercy" grabs the attention as it is the only part of this sentence which talks about emotion. Much of the current rhetoric about the poor works against an attitude toward mercy. Today, meritocracy has been used as a counter argument to dignity. It advocates that, those who have achieved any measure of success do so through hard work. It blatantly ignores those who work hard but are unable to get ahead due to systems and structures which provide obstacles felt by specified groups. Meritocracy further implies that those who do not have wealth must be somehow deficient or lazy.

Meritocracy counters the mercy we should extend to others. Such mercy should be extended both to those who are within the borders of affluent countries and those who are not. Mercy requires us to find ways to create connection between communities and even countries so that the gaps in different sectors are not further exacerbated along racial, class or ethnic, gender lines. Lack of mercy has impacted our inability to protect those who migrate to look for better places.

Justice

Biblically, we cannot flourish with the fullness God desires for us, until we address the suffering of the most vulnerable. The term for this is *tzedakah*, a relational term of righteousness which implies "doing right" by others. We accomplish righteousness through *mishpat* (or "justice"), as an ethical standard of equitable relationships. In Ps. 112:9, the Hebrew word translated by "righteousness" and throughout the Old Testament is *tzedakah*. The New Testament usage of righteousness is about alms, charitable giving, and more generally rescuing, redeeming, blessing, and saving. Modern slavery affects those that in the margins in myriad ways. Whether through immigration, or through current trade efforts, the hubris to treat other human beings without any regard for genuine mercy precludes the capacity to "do justice." *Mishpat* is a mandate which, when employed, provides better economic, quality outcomes for the poor among

us. *Mishpat* is more than charity. It's to take an active role of advocating for the vulnerable among us and changing social structures to prevent the continuance of injustice. The action point for the humility, mercy and justice will require repentance/ recognition, redress and redemption.

1. Recognition/repentance

As an act of repentance, we should recognize our complicity in perpetuating the spreading powerful hegemonies in all its manifestations including religious hierarchies that support racial injustice, capitalism, and economic inequalities.

2. Redress

Justice must not only be realized through the Mission of God, but it must also be seen and felt, just as the injustices are felt and seen by those who have been asphyxiated under the heels of religious hegemonies. Redressing is important and good for the Church as a way of interrogating the colonial heritage, patriarchy and sexism in the Church and culture. We need to interrogate further our religious and secular hegemonies that embody whiteness as normative. We must therefore interrogate what justice looks like for women, girls and children everywhere. This may include affirming and utilizing the leadership skills that they bring to the table.

3. Redemption

Inasmuch as the Bible, liturgy and tradition have been used as point of contact for inhalation of religious hegemony, we must also explore how we read texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion, especially those that have been read and used ideologically to further enslave those on the margins. It is time for redress; but it is also time to liberate people from under the yoke of hegemony by offering a balanced exegetical framework in the recognition and affirmation of non-traditional forms of biblical criticism. Exhume the texts and to ask "Why" questions. Be willing to

acknowledge conviction from the postcolonial rereading of the biblical texts, as in reading the story of the bent over woman.

Conclusion

This story in the context of freedom and unity offers a solicitous theological rationale that can help Christians understand the importance of working towards a more just and equitable society. Salvation is taking into account politico-economic ideologies which are also religious-spiritual-ethic issues, about the *Imago Dei* in all of God's creation, not to mention kingdom values like truth, love, and justice, peace and reconciliation. Christians are called to stand in solidarity with those who are suffering and work towards a more just society. This means working across racial, ethnic, and political divides to build relationships and create a more inclusive community.

Missionaire relaties worden vaak uitgedrukt binnen de structuren van projecten. Hierdoor speelt geld een grote rol in de partnerschappen. Maar wat is geld? Welke plaats en betekenis heeft geld in verschillende culturen? Wat betekent dat voor de missionaire relaties over culturele grenzen heen? Klopt het dat "de hand die geeft" bovenop ligt?

Op 26 april 2023 organiseerde de NZR een rondetafelbijeenkomst over geld in zendingsrelaties. Tijdens deze bijeenkomst deelde Charles Christian uit Noord-India zijn visie op geld in de context van internationale samenwerking. Christian heeft een Master in theologie en werkte in India onder andere voor Open Doors International, doceerde aan een theologische opleiding en was redacteur van een christelijk tijdschrift. In zijn werk heeft hij veel te maken gehad met internationale geldstromen en interculturele communicatie tussen kerkelijk organisaties en zendingspartners. Hij werkt nu aan een proefschrift aan de Protestantse Theologische Universiteit.

Why Is It Hard for the North Indian Church to Become Self-sufficient?

Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak and initiate a conversation that I hope and believe in some way will ultimately help those who are in need of it. I have been in the Netherlands for four years now, and I am aware of one trait that makes the Dutch distinct: the Dutch directness. Rather than fuss about it, I have decided to use it to my advantage. The topic of my contribution will be: Why Is It Hard for North Indian Church to Become Self-sufficient and What Can the Western Church Do About it?

Before I go further, it may be helpful to point out that I am a third-generation *Gujarati* Christian, and so a lot of what I am going to say is spoken from that standpoint. But it is also relevant to much of North India, which has a distinct context at least in three regards. First, since the North Indian church has always been swarmed and led by converts from the so-called low castes, discrimination based on caste within the church has not been a visibly persisting problem as it has been in the South Indian church. Second, the majority of donations in the mission in the past have gone Southwards, whereas the North Indian mission and its leaders have often sat on the fringes of Western charity. Third, access to knowledge of English has facilitated the South Indian Christians to make the most of recent IT booms in South Indian cities. North Indian Christians, in contrast, have been largely poor and their journey to acquire the knowledge of English and to IT has been both late and filled with difficulties.

Collective Approach to Money

Now that I have laid the groundwork of what I want to say, let me get into details. Recently, *The Print*, one of India's well-known news outlets published an article that was titled: "Jain, Muslims, Baniyas, Dalits—communities helping their own crack UPSC exams."

UPSC stands for Union Public Service Commission. Candidates passing this exam, get to acquire some of the most coveted positions as civil servants in the central government with huge perks and great influence in formulating public policies. The communities mentioned in the article provide free food, lodging and tuition to the candidates from their own communities travelling from different parts of India to appear for the exam. Though this news is recent, the phenomenon of communities helping their own to occupy the helms of power is not.

Let me give you an example from my own state of Gujarat in India, where a community called Bania are the wealthiest group of people. They fall under Vaishya, the third caste in the orthodox Hindu hierarchy, and are mostly either Hindus or Jains. Considered to be between 1% and 6-7% of India's population, they occupy a disproportionate amount of wealth, and most of the positions in the lists of India's richest. In fact, it has been argued that indigenous credit from the Banias was a vital source for the founding and expansion of the British empire in the Western India.

Many different reasons are given as to why the Banias are rich, one being that they approach money collectively. To give an example by imagination, let us say that a Bania makes it to the Netherlands and launches a startup. Once he has established himself, he expands it and calls his siblings and relatives to help him. If a Bania meets another Bania in the Netherlands, he either hires him or lends him money without interest to found his own business. Many times, there is not even a written contract involved. After his company is established, he returns the money, because the transaction is not only trust-based, but accountability is tied to the structure of shame and honour. With this

approach, Banias make sure that they not only create wealth, but their wealth circulates within their own community, making them a powerful community, whose rights and dignity cannot be trampled upon easily. This idea of community is so strong among the Banias, as is among other castes, that helping someone of the same caste often takes preference over other moral concerns. This is why Indian communities that have immigrated to Western nations often help immigrate their kith and kin and facilitate their transition by providing food, lodging and protection until they feel settled in the adopted country. To do anything less for a fellow caste member is a matter of shame.

The Indian Church and Money

Let me move to the next point here and ask: Where are Indian Christians in this picture? In fact, we too share the same collectivist understanding of money. My father, for example, migrated from village to city in his late teens and worked in the same cotton factory where his brothers were. He considered it the responsibility of his elder brothers who had migrated before him to help him move to the city by finding him a job in the same company. The same holds true for many moving across states of India today in search of work.

However, despite the collective ethics, and India shining globally and becoming an IT hub, North Indian Christians have not progressed much. Simply, because the North Indian Christians, almost all of whom come from Dalit communities, never had a capital to begin with. Our forefathers certainly had skills that they taught their children. But many of those skills are too rusty for today's world, and the ones in demand are not affordable to acquire. After moving to the city, we did acquire new skills with sweat, blood and tears, but those skills are enough neither to make us a prosperous community nor the North Indian church self-sufficient, as the Western church often expects us to. The fact is that it will take years for us to accumulate enough capital and compete

and negotiate our space with communities such as Banias. In the recent past, many Christians have found immigration to the West as the shortest route to challenge their given space in this structure, but here too the migrating Christians often lack power, vision and organisation, and even help from Western churches, to match more established communities such as Banias.

Western Theology and Missions

Moving to the next point, let me briefly explain how the Western theology and practice has, perhaps unintentionally, aggravated our situation, hoping that it will push our conversation in a better direction. I want to give three points here:

- Much of the Indian church, in its theology, in the past few decades was influenced by American pre-millenialism, which claimed to prepare the believers for their rapture into heaven, while leaving the wretched earth with all its prosperity behind them. This 'otherworldly' theology has produced an attitude that considers material progress as harmful and a distraction from heaven.

- The Indian church finds itself stuck between prosperity theology and what I call "poverty theology." Theologians in India either condemn prosperity gospel wholesale or they find solace in idealising the "God of the poor" who is only remotely interested in their material wellbeing. I also think that to some extent, the Western church is responsible for this, for in order to critique its own materialism, it often romanticises our poverty and powerlessness. In my last three years, I have had many sincere Christian believers reminding me that God is closer to the poor. I understand the noble sentiments inherent in this claim, and yet at times find it frustrating, for I have seen enough poor, including many Christians in my church, deserting their faith in God because this God is not just disinterested but even against their material wellbeing. The theology that glamorises poverty and disparages wealth has worn them out. To add, "power" has become such a touchy

issue in the Western church that it refuses to recognise the difference between power-mongering and empowerment, fearfully declining to stretch their helping hand to empower, lest it be accused of power-mongering.

- From a Gujarati point of view, the claim that there exists a 'universal church' that is inclusive of all castes, cultures and languages, in practice sounds hollow and distant when compared to the Gujarati collective ethic of uplifting other members of one's community. In Gujarati way of thinking, the feeling of family permeates the giving and taking of money. The elder brother who has lent money to his younger brother, waits patiently, and if needed, gets his hands dirty to make sure that his brother's business is established and he is able to feed his family. The brother to whom money is lent dare not practise corruption with the money or squander it because his reputation in the family, in the community is at stake. In the collective thinking, monetary transactions are considered a family-affair and naturally trust-based. This is why the members of my community find it incomprehensible when the Western church refuses them monetary help and yet claims to be interested in building relationships. In fact, rather than feeling connected, in the absence of monetary help, they feel abandoned and severed from the body of Christ, because for them relationships cannot be complete without a genuine desire to help them out of their poverty. Sometimes, along with them, I get upset and wonder if the Western church really considers us a family, a part of the global body of Christ, or does it feel so self-sufficient in its material prosperity that it doesn't matter to it if the rest of the body of Christ withers and dies?'

Conclusion

As I end, I would request the church in the West to rethink its strategy from bottom up and invest into making the North Indian church self-sufficient and self-sustaining. This would mean that the Western church may have to challenge the status quo, modify or even renounce the agenda set by it, genuinely listen to the North Indian Christian

community and work towards uplifting it. In terms of practice, perhaps it can begin by raising scholarship for young North Indian Christians to pursue courses such as medicine, IT, engineering and other similar academic programmes. Perhaps a low-interest credit scheme for the North Indian Christians to set up their own small businesses. Such an investment may not yield immediate fruit (and certainly no quick and flashy reports either!), but when all is said and done, a genuine relationship in the body of Christ will have emerged.

Tijdens deze NZR-bijeenkomst op 28 september 2023 werd gereflecteerd op hoe de oproep om alles op te geven voor het Evangelie zich verhoudt tot de verantwoordelijkheid voor de zorg en het welzijn van de mensen die zich inzetten voor zending. Het thema van deze studiemiddag was 'Kostbare zending'. Kunnen we die radicale solidariteit die kan leiden tot het brengen van grote offers wel van elkaar verwachten? Gaat navolging zo ver? Wat mag de missionaire roeping ons kosten?

Onderstaande bijdrage is van Berdine van den Toren-Lekkerkerker, directeur van de Nederlandse Zendingsraad.

Costly Mission – Between Care and Sacrifice?

In her article in the 2023 Mission Yearbook of the of the Evangelischen Mission Weltweit Hannah Wolf tells the story of Zara Alvarez, a Filipino activist for human rights. On the 20th of August 2020 Zara was murdered at the age of 39. Zara knew that her activism would put her into danger. As a daughter, mother, wife, sister and neighbour, she knew that this choice would have an impact on the life of others too. She saw that other activists stopped their activism or left the country, but she chose to stay. Wolf writes that this was not an easy or heroic choice, but one made in vulnerability and with fear. For Zara this was a choice of love and justice, a choice that would lead to life for all whom she loved. She never wanted to be a martyr.

To go, to act, to leave or to stay in the face of danger, how can such a choice be made? What are the questions that need to be asked, what are the things that need to be considered? These questions also need to be looked at in the context of mission, where boundaries of difference, such as cultural, ethnic, religious or social difference, and sometimes geographic distance, are crossed in order to live and share the Gospel of Christ. Zara's choice was specific to her personal context and community. This choice she made by and for herself, knowing full well the consequences for her and her community. Can such choices be made by organisations on behalf of their workers? What needs to be considered when a young family feels the call to move to Rotterdam-Zuid

in order to live missionally and share their life in a neighbourhood that struggles with insecurity? And what are the questions to be raised when a young family, living as mission partners in Cali, Colombia, realises that insecurity is mounting? When they feel a deep connectedness and solidarity with the local community in Cali, but also carry responsibility for the wellbeing of their children?

In this contribution, I will reflect on the ambivalence that exists around mission, where responsible decision-making regarding one's safety and wellbeing may seem to contradict the radical call to follow Jesus. Zara's life shows that mission in contexts of danger can be costly. How should we evaluate that ambivalence? Is there a right choice? And what are the elements that need to be taken into consideration in order to come to a choice? In order to reflect on these questions, I will look at theological, biblical and cultural notions such as *Missio Dei*, incarnation and kenosis, discipleship, *Ubuntu*, and *Sangsaeng*, to help clarify what these points of consideration are. Yet, this will not lead to a single answer. At most, these notions will serve as a guide towards possible answers, that depend (heavily) on personal and contextual realities.

Missio Dei

The first and most fundamental notion in mission is the fact that we are not speaking of a purely human endeavour, but of God's mission (*Missio Dei*). This mission originates in the character of the triune God, a character of overflowing love between God as three persons and towards the whole of creation. Creation, including human beings, are taken up into this movement. We are called to participate in this movement. This means that Christian mission does not depend on human effort or is structured along a fully human agenda. People in mission are not Messiahs. Even though they are taken up into God's active engagement in this world, they remain vulnerable and regularly failing, they remain human. The mission remains God's.

Incarnation and Kenosis

This brings us to the notion of incarnation, in which God chose to enter fully into this human vulnerability. God became human. In Jesus God became flesh. In the incarnation Jesus is not just entering into our lives and our neighbourhoods, to speak with Eugene Peterson (*The Message*), but becoming fully part of us and our community. Jeremy Heuslein writes that God does not enter creation as a visitor, but becomes fully entangled in our reality. God enters our lives, with all its limitations and vulnerabilities, and so creates the possibility of true relationships. And in doing so, "God brings the fullness of life into all of creation (…) which enables creation's ultimate joining in the life of God."[1] God's self-giving love leads to resurrection and new life. Yet this life grows out of death. Resurrection follows death on the cross, which is ultimate vulnerability and solidarity. God's love is cruciform. Understanding this notion in the context of mission and participating in God's mission, therefore, cannot be partial or easy. It will involve ourselves completely and fully, and may involve suffering.

Discipleship

Jesus called the disciples to follow Him. And the story of the Bible makes it clear that this following was costly. Paul writes in Philippians 2:5: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." Emptying oneself, making oneself fully available to the other, is self-giving love. And if we are to follow Jesus, this is also what is asked of us, so that together we become part of the resurrection and life in all its fullness.

1 Jeremy Heuslein, "Give us Today our Daily Bread: Towards a Phenomenological Theology of Embodied Finitude." In:*Practical Theology* 16(3) (2023), 397-410.

Self-giving Love

Yet, it is important to give some qualifiers here. First, self-giving love is not equal to self-denial or self-negation. Rather, it is a conscious and free choice to limit or put our self-definition on hold, in order to become fully open to the other, to be able to receive the other in our life. Self-giving love creates true and deep relationships in which both flourish. Second, we need to make a distinction between self-giving as a free choice and an act of love, and self-giving that is forced upon a person by others or through a system of power or expectations. This is destructive and abusive. And third, we need to remember that understanding the call of God in the daily reality of our lives is not so easy.

How do we know what God asks of us in the here and now? What does it mean to follow Christ in particular situations? Freek Bakker, in his book *Het Verdriet van de Zending*[2] shows clearly that sometimes missionaries made costly choices based on their understanding of the will of God. These choices could be closely related to career promotions or personal desires of fathers of a family, while at the same time they were painful for the others. The children, for example, were sent away, far from home and family, to boarding schools that turned out to be unsafe places. Bakker asks if these choices really were the call of God, or man-made. Did God really want these children to be "sacrificed" for the mission of their parents? Exploring the story of Jephthah's sacrifice, Andrew Lane[3] wonders if the sacrifice of his daughter was really the consequence of Jephthah's desire to honour God or rather his human pride and a quest to prove himself as a true man of his word.

2 Freek Bakker, *Het verdriet van de zending: De stem van de kinderen in Nederland,* Zendingserfgoedreeks 1, 2022.

3 Andrew Lane, *The Jephtah Inheritance: Reflections on the Sacrifice of the Church's Children on the Altar of Evangelism.* Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2023.

Suffering and Mission

In the Gospels Jesus does link suffering to discipleship and mission. The lives of the apostles also show this reality, as we can read in the book of Acts and their letters in the New Testament. Charles Ringma, in his book about mission spirituality, states that suffering an unavoidable part is of the human condition. He calls it "a dark intrusion, an inexplainable violation."[4] Suffering is never something to be glorified and romanticised. It is complex. He writes that we cannot look at suffering in isolation. It is connected to who God is, who we are, and the nature of goodness and evil in our world. Suffering is a theological, relational, personal, social, and spiritual experience that involves the nature of human failure and sin, the madness and brokenness of our world, the forces of spiritual evil, and the way that God has chosen to work with us – and in spite of us.

While suffering often is painful and destructive as it is caused by human failure and sin, by evil, it can also be transformative, as for example the story of Paul and Silas in the prison in Philippi shows. In this context Ringma points to the liberation movements in Latin America: suffering was and is a consequence of the churches' choice for radical solidarity with the poor. I believe that the story of Zara Alvarez fits in this category. Bringing the notions of *Missio Dei*, incarnation and kenosis, discipleship and suffering together in view of the cost of mission, we see that in all of them love is the foundational notion, love as God's reality in which we are invited to participate. This love is lived in love for God and for neighbour as a self-giving love that seeks to bring life in all its fullness, salvation and reconciliation offered to all and everyone in a broken and wounded world. Therefore, it cannot be good for some and harmful for others.

Ubuntu and Sangsaeng

To translate this reality into the process of decision making in mission in today's world the (South) African notion of *Ubuntu* and the Korean notion

4 Charles R. Ringma. *In the Midst of Much-Doing: Cultivating a Missional Spirituality*. Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2023, 437.

of *Sangsaeng* are helpful. The late Archbishop Tutu has often taught the church that we cannot see ourselves as self-sufficient individuals.[5] And from this follows that we cannot exist as Christian individuals alone with their God. Using the African understanding of *Ubuntu* he showed that we are all interdependent: "I am because you are" and "I am because I belong." Human beings are all related. We are made for interdependence, and as a church we are one body, "the Body of Christ." The language of family is used, both in Scripture and in theological reflections. Christ is our brother (Rom 8:29, Hebr. 2:11-12). We speak of fellow Christians in terms of "brothers and sisters" (siblings). And in such close relationships we understand ourselves as unconditionally loved and served, as well as being called to love and serve unconditionally.

The idea of *Sangsaeng* is deeply relational too. It is a word in two parts, mutual or together and life. *Sangsaeng* means mutually lifegiving. It speaks of a reciprocity in love and service, that also carries connotations of justice and mutual responsibility.[6] Bringing those two concepts together, with a view on decision-making for mission in a broken and wounded world, we first realise that as family of God we cannot exist on the private islands of our own local church communities. We are members of a community, part of a family of God worldwide. This means that as one of us is joyful, there is joy for all of us. It also means that if one of us is hurting, we are all affected. We cannot say that this is not our business. We belong together and therefore also have a responsibility towards each other and each other's wellbeing. These communal relationships are mutually life-giving. Secondly, as we together as body of Christ are called to participate in God's overflowing self-giving and life-giving love, our love will extend into the whole world too, inviting, sharing and seeking justice. As community of God, caught up into the mission of God, love flows outward, the love of Christ is proclaimed and shared in a hurting world.

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ttr9mk6Ujg.

6 Jooseop Kuem, "Shalom and Sangsaeng: Transforming Discipleship in a Pandemic-Stricken World." In: *Mission Studies* 39(2) (2022), 186-202.

Gathering the Threads

This is not a message that sits easily in our (Western) individualistic and risk-averse culture. Is this again not a call that romanticises and spiritualises suffering or imposes self-negation? What about Zara Alvarez? And the two families, in Rotterdam-Zuid and Cali? If mission is understood in terms of being part of the family of God, connected and interdependent with our brothers and sisters worldwide, living in this world as a witness to God's self-giving love, then suffering will be part of that life. It will not only come as an unavoidable part of the human condition, but also as a consequence of radical solidarity and discipleship. Yet, with Zara, we are never called to desire martyrdom. Our desire needs to be shaped by the call to mutually lifegiving relationships as a sign of God's overflowing love. This is a desire that needs consideration in all relationships and connections, with the people closest to us, the communities in which we live and serve, our own children and ourselves.

It will be clear that no-one can answer these questions for another person. Our lives remain deeply personal, shaped by our experiences and communities. They can never be fully understood by others. And each person has a unique place within multiple relationships and communities, which each carry specific responsibilities. This too cannot be fully known by others. Yet, both personal experiences and responsibilities play an important role in how we live and are able to cope with challenges and dangers. As a consequence, we can help each other in decision-making, but should be very careful in making decisions for others. We can ask each other the hard questions and search together, but we also need to realise that the consequences of decisions for each person will be different, within their field of relationships and responsibilities. In this complex field of seeming contradictions, let us remember that God's self-giving love invites us all, gives life to all, albeit sometimes through suffering.

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