

Vennard, Jane E. *Embracing the World: Praying for Justice and Peace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011; xxii+145

As a Christian from the Peace Church tradition, I would take Jane E. Vennard's *Embracing the World: Praying for Justice and Peace* seriously and gladly. Her writing style is accessible to non-scholars, yet readers can find deep reflections of the Christian tradition touching upon the relation of prayer with justice and peace.

The impetus for the book was in 1999, when she received the invitation to teach a course on spirituality at Illif School of Theology in Denver. She was asked to elucidate the nexus between spirituality and the work of justice and peace. Vennard, however, was doubtful whether she has the qualifications for teaching that course. This feeling of inadequacies was overcome by an advice from her spiritual director. She was told that she had many advantages (p. x) and by stories and wisdom which she reflected (p. xii).

The book is an inquiry into specific methods of praying for justice and peace. As a minister, teacher and spiritual director, she is of the opinion that the true prayer immerses the praying person into the reality of the world. Prayer, indeed, does not snatch her out from the daily life. Contemplation and action, or prayer and deed, go hand in hand. This leads her to see the connecting point between the discipline of prayer and the work of justice and peace. The book is divided into five actions: intercession, action, renewal, transformation and discernment. These actions build a circular process, with discernment is at its center. Vennard suggests that readers do not have to read the book in sequential way because "each prayer form is connected to another and to the whole" (xvii).

Prayer means to ground ourselves in God. In her own words, prayer is "God's invitation to closeness" (p. 3), or a response of "Yes" to it. Human beings long for a deep relationship with the divine, and prayer deepens it into an intimate friendship with God. God also longs for humans by empowering them want to pray. It can be said, prayer is a meeting point between human yearning for God and God's yearning for humans. The main idea of the book is: God is available for us to hear our prayer. She, however, in my opinion, is too quick to suggest that God is always available for human being. There is no quite a room for the absence of God. She argues, "Our all-too-human temptation when we hear silence in response to our prayers is to believe that God does not hear us, that God is absent, or that God is punishing us with silence" (p. 5). For

Vennard, God's absence seems to be identical with God's intentional abandonment of the people. Hence, the absence of God should be avoided from Christian life.

For Heschel and Moltmann, the Auschwitz was one of the cruelest human atrocities. From this experience of *Shoah*, some Jewish rabbis develop theological reflections on the absence of God. God's absence, they say, is not about God leaves the people behind, but God suffers with the people. In such absence, God empties Godself even to a shameful death. God died at the place of the dying people.

The book can be better if Vennard also discuss God not only as the source of justice, but also the victim of human injustice. How is spirituality played out in this? It might be of interest to see that divine intimacy and friendship merge with perplexity and weeping of the people. How do people find God amid their afflictions, and *vice versa*? This topic can help people who suffer from injustice, oppressions and traumas.

In many parts of the world, injustice and oppression take place. Whether in Asia, or Africa, Europe or even North America, humanity still fights for each other. The weakest in the global society become victims of such atrocities. People who have survived from those cruelties have to take the burden of traumas through their lives. Today's world needs a book which explores spirituality, prayer, justice and peace, and the location of God amid human cruelty.

I, however, also take this book with great joy, because the content resonates with the historic peace church tradition to which I belong. In Mennonite tradition, Jesus calls his disciples to be peacemakers and taught them the new way of living a non-violent way—the third way. One should surrender (*Gelassenheit*) oneself wholly to God, and have commitment to live in non-violent way. This is a resistant, too. Some scholars in the Peace Church tradition call it the “non-violent resistance” (e.g. John H. Yoder and Walter Wink). Peace and justice, therefore, are not human initiatives, but God's. In the words of Vennard, “For God to transform our actions into prayers, we need to surrender to the grace and mercy of God and allow God to work first in our hearts and then through our actions.” (p. 39)

Vennard's essay contributes to the importance for Christians to pray for peace and justice. All Christians know the vitality of prayer in our works as peace workers. Yet, people often do not realize the importance of a fuller Christian formation. In this book, prayer is pictured as a “cycle of reflection and service.” This is similar to many spiritual disciplines of ancient church fathers and

mothers, such as Benedict of Nursia or Clare of Assisi. It can be said that all forerunners of faith were prayer-warriors. This heritage should be preserved and reinvigorated in today's generation and generations to come. Vennard's book is a gift, not only for those of the Historic Peace Churches, but for all Christians.

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