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The Dharma of Jesus

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Abstract: Beginning with Jesus' own foundational experience of God as *Abba*, as unconditional love, the author narrates how this experience becomes the source of his dharma. It enabled him to be free from internal and external conditioning, to be totally free for God and the people. His solidarity with the marginalized of society is incarnational and he was able to withstand the ensuing conflict even to the cross, and ultimately to the resurrection.

Keywords: *Abba* experience; freedom; agape; justice; solidarity; conflict and the cross

Every religious tradition begins with an originary experience of the Absolute Mystery that we call God. The Christian tradition begins with Jesus' experience of God. This is the starting point of the dharma of Jesus understood both as the dharma which he practised (Jesus' dharma) and the dharma he preached (Christian dharma).

The God-Experience of Jesus

Jesus experienced God as unconditional love. He did this, probably, at his baptism by John, at a moment when, in a great act of solidarity, he identified himself with sinful Israel (Mk 1:9-11). The experience irrupted into his life, shattering (as all such call experiences do) the ordinary patterns of existence, and impelling him to adopt the life of an itinerant charismatic preacher who announced in deed and in word (in miracle and in parable, in table fellowship with outcastes and in controversy with the leaders of his people), the imminent coming of God's Rule, that

is, of God's long awaited definitive act of salvation. His God-experience allowed Jesus to address God as *Abba* (loving Parent), a name which, like all names for God, is an invocation rather than a description; and which therefore tells us more about our own alienated situation and the way to redeem it, than it does about the absolute mystery that is God. *Abba* is the usual invocation Jesus used to address God in prayer (Mt 11:25; Mk 14:36; Jn 11:41), and 'my/your Father' is the standard expression he used to speak about God (Mt 5:45, 48; 6:1-9; 7:21; 10:32; etc.). In a religious tradition which stressed the transcendence of God to such an extent that God's name was never uttered, this usage of Jesus was absolutely unique. God is never directly addressed as 'Father' in the Hebrew Bible; God is addressed as 'Father' with a qualification ('Our Father in the heavens' or 'Our Father our King') in rabbinic texts of the time of Jesus. But nowhere in Jewish tradition is God ever addressed simply as 'Father', much less by the far more informal and intimate locution *Abba*. The language of Jesus, then, is unique and points to a unique experience of God.

Like every great religious teacher, Jesus shares his God-experience with his not always receptive followers. "No one knows the parent but the child," he says "and those whom the child has chosen to reveal the parent" (Mt 11:27). Jesus claims to 'know' the Parent. In biblical language to 'know' means to 'experience', 'to enter into intimate relationship with' – a relationship as intimate as that between man and woman in the closeness of the act of love (Gen 4:1). Jesus therefore experiences God as a loving parent; and he gifts this experience to those who follow him.

Indeed to be a follower of Jesus means precisely to share in this God-experience of his. What makes a person a Christian is not professing certain beliefs, nor practising particular rituals,

nor undergoing an initiation rite, nor belonging to a recognizable social group, nor even confessing the name of Jesus, though all these are inevitable stages in the evolution of a religious tradition. To be disciple of Jesus means to experience God the way that Jesus experienced God. That is why one can say 'Lord, Lord' and prophesy in the name of Jesus, or cast out demons in his name or do many mighty works in his name, and still not be acknowledged by him as his follower (Mt 7:21-23); and one may not have known Jesus at all and yet be recognized as one of his own, because one has fed the hungry, given shelter to the homeless, clothed the naked, cared for the sick and visited those in prison (Mt 25:31-46). The routinization of charisma, inevitable in the development of any movement, has transformed the community of disciples which Jesus gathered around him into a crowd of competing (often squabbling) churches, defining themselves in terms of doctrine (*homoousios* or *homoiousios*), ritual (communion under one species or under two), or forms of organization (monarchical papacy, collegial episcopacy or 'democratic' presbyterate). In the process we have perhaps forgotten that the one thing necessary for Christian self-definition, is the experience of God's love which impels us to love in return and to reach out in effective compassion to those in need. But Jesus has not forgotten this. His fellowship is not limited to the churches which carry (and too often profane) his name. It reaches out to the many who will "come from east and west, and from north and south and sit at table in the kingdom of God" (Lk 13:29).

The Freedom of Jesus

The God-experience of Jesus liberates him. For love experienced always leads to a freedom from inner conditioning, that is, from the compulsions and fears that hold us in bondage.

Are not such bondages, after all, always the result of an absence of love? Is not the concupiscence of the eyes (our consumerism) and the concupiscence of the flesh (our eroticism) ultimately compensation mechanisms through which we strive to make up for the emptiness caused by the absence of love in our lives; and is not the pride of life (our macho assertiveness and craving for power) ultimately a defence mechanism through which we try to cover up the absence of self-worth we experience because we lack love? Is not the poverty of our people the result of our greed and of the structures of exploitation that greed engenders? Is not their social rejection on grounds of race, caste or gender, and the profound psychic scars this leaves, a result of our 'patriarchy', our urge to dominate, and of the vast structures of domestic and societal oppression it creates? Does not our unfreedom make others unfree? Does not Mammon (personal bondage) generate and is it not generated by Satan (structured evil)? Love leads to freedom (to personal freedom and ultimately to structural freedom) because it frees us from the constraints and fears, the doubts and compulsions that paralyse us.

Jesus, who has experienced God as love, was supremely free. We marvel at his freedom. He was driven by no demons of greed or ambition. "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" he said (Lk 9:58), describing the state of religious indigence that he had freely chosen. "The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for many," he announced (Mk 10:45), offering a pointed and moving summary of his life and mission. In a society that was politically colonized, socially patriarchal, and religiously conservative, he moved around with absolute freedom and authority.

The freedom of Jesus is all the more remarkable because he lacked position and power. Jesus could claim no religious prestige; he was not a priest born into a priestly family. He enjoyed

no intellectual status: he was not a recognized theologian who had been trained in a scribal school (Jn 7:15). He commanded no political power. He did not enjoy the privileges of wealth. Yet he taught with *authority* in word and in deed. "The crowds were astonished at his teaching," we are told on the occasion of the first miracle he performed (Mk 1:27); and of the first 'sermon' he delivered (so Mt 7:28). They were astonished because "he taught as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Mk 1:22). The scribes of course had authority because of their patiently acquired knowledge of the Torah and of the oral traditions which had grown up around it. But the authority of Jesus was not like theirs. It was not 'legal' authority based on learning and institutional sanction. It was charismatic and prophetic authority derived from his experience of God. The authority of Jesus, as he will explicitly affirm when challenged to justify his 'cleansing' of the Temple, is associated with his baptism by John (Mk 11:27-33). It derives from the foundational experience of God, given to him (as we have seen) at this baptism[1]

This authority of Jesus enables him to confront the religious, social and political establishment of his people with sovereign freedom. He re-interprets the Law with an authority which seems to parallel the authority of God himself. "It was said to them of old" (that is, 'God said to our ancestors'), he announces, quoting not just rabbinic interpretations of the Law but the written Law itself (Mt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38); and then goes on to correct this with his "but I say to you" (Mt 5:21-48). No prophet has ever spoken like this. The prophets spoke in God's name, with God's authority, communicating God's message. "Thus says the Lord" was the prophet's way of speaking; but Jesus says: "I say to you". Even if these antitheses of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount may be editorial compositions formulated at a time when Jesus was already

interpreted as the founder of the New Israel standing over and against the formative Judaism of Jamnia which stood for the old, they carry the memory of the remarkable authority that Jesus must have shown in his interpretation of the Law.

Such authority is very evident in the Sabbath controversies which were a conspicuous feature of Jesus' ministry, attested to in all the Gospel traditions (Mk 2:23-28; 3:1-6; Lk 13:10-17; Jn 5:1-18; 9:1-34). Jesus breaks the Sabbath whenever human need demands it, justifying his infringement of the sacred law of Sabbath rest with the radical principle that "the Sabbath is made for the human person, not the human person for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). Every human institution or law (no matter how sacred) is thus subordinated to human need.

The pervasive law of purities, which so restricted every aspect of Jewish life, is abrogated by Jesus in the single striking observation that "nothing which enters anyone from the outside can make the person unclean; it is what comes out of the person that makes him or her unclean" (Mk 7:15). All purity laws are thus abolished at a stroke. Cleanness or uncleanness is not a matter of ritual purity, but of the disposition of the heart. "Nothing in itself is unclean," as Paul rightly understands Jesus to have said (Rom 14:14). No places are of themselves holy, for God is to be worshipped not in Jerusalem or in Gerizim, but in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:21-23) – wherever, that is, a community assembles in sincerity and love. No person is more sacred than another, for there is only one Parent, God, and all humankind are brothers and sisters (Mt 23:8-10). There is here a radical de-sacralisation of the cosmos, a radical de-hierarchisation of society (that is, a radical affirmation of the equality of humankind) and a radical shift from an ethics of observance (ritual or legal) to an ethics of love ('the heart').

In a patriarchal society where women were numbered with children and slaves as 'minors' with diminished responsibility, and a restricted role in worship and in public life, Jesus admits them into his movement as helpers and disciples. Not only do women follow him to take care of his needs (Lk 8:2), but Mary who sits at his feet listening to what he teaches (and so assuming the role of a disciple) is commended for having chosen "what is best" (Lk 10:42). Even in a tradition which has suffered heavy editing, coloured by patriarchal biases, the role of women in the Gospels is striking. Three conspicuous incidents in the ministry of Jesus, each heavy with theological significance, feature women (Jn 4:4-42; Lk 7:36-50; Mk 14:3-9). In all these the women are not only occasions of significant teaching, but emerge favourably in comparison with their male counterparts. The spontaneous testimony of the Samaritan woman, who after conversing with Jesus proclaims him as the Christ to her people (Jn 4:28-30), contrasts with embarrassed silence of the disciples who do not dare to question Jesus (Jn 4:27). The moving love shown to him by the woman who 'had lived a sinful life', but shows by her loving actions that she is now a forgiven sinner who has experienced God's forgiving love, is contrasted by Jesus with the indifference of Simon the Pharisee, whose unloving behaviour shows him to be the real unforgiven 'sinner', one who cannot love because he has not experienced forgiveness. The sensitive loyalty shown to Jesus on the eve of his passion by a woman at Bethany contrasts sharply with the ideological fixation of the disciples and the disloyalty of Judas. This contrast is carried a great step further in the stories of Passion and Resurrection, where the women disciples of Jesus are found at the cross and at his tomb, when the male disciples have all abandoned him and fled (Mk 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8).

So like all genuine freedom the freedom of Jesus was

born of love (his experience of God as *Abba*) found its fulfilment in love (in his passionate concern for people). Where the Pharisees (the Jews of strict observance) and the Sectarians of Qumran tried to renew their society through a rigorism that sought to enforce the observance of the Law as strictly as possible, Jesus opted for a radicalism which sought to realize as perfectly as possible the spirit of the Law, which he saw embodied in love (*agape*), that is in interhuman concern.

The Love (Agape) of Jesus

That is why Jesus could sum up his ethic in a love commandment (Mt 22:34-40) which he formulated by joining the great text of Judaism, (Deut 6:4-5 ("The Lord your God is one God and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind") to a little known text from the Holiness Code of Leviticus, Lev 19:18 ("You shall love your neighbour as yourself"). As understood by Jesus this commandment does not ask us to love God *and* neighbour as if these were to be two different objects to our love. Rather Lev 19:18 is meant to be an interpretation of Deut 6:4-5. The content of Deuteronomy ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart") is spelled out by Leviticus ("You shall love your neighbour as yourself"). The love command of Jesus therefore reads: "You shall love the Lord your God will all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, this means, you shall love your neighbour as yourself". To love God means, concretely, to love neighbour. The one commandment that Jesus gives us as the 'great commandment', one that founds and includes all the others, is, therefore that we love God by loving neighbour.[2]

"Who, then, is my neighbour?" Is not this for Jesus a question as significant as that other Christological question he will ask, "Who do you say I am?" In defining 'neighbour' Jesus allows no distinctions of caste, race, gender or class (Lk 10:

30-37). For the love with which we love our neighbour is not a human disposition (determined by human prejudices or preference) but it is the reflex of the experience of God's love for us. To the extent we experience God's love, we love our neighbour the way God loves us. But God loves us unconditionally. His love is not a response to our goodness. "God does not love us because we are good," as Augustine has somewhere said, "we are good because God loves us." God loves because God *is* love. God's love is not a reaction but an action. God loves the way the sun shines – because it must. That is why our love for neighbour, which issues from (1 Jn 4:4) and images (Mt 5:43-48) God's love for us, can make no conditions and put no limits. It reaches out to the unrewarding, undeserving, even those hostile to us (Lk 6:32-36).

But by 'love' Jesus does not understand primarily friendship, or fellowship or erotic passion – all these (more or less correctly) are understood as 'love' today. The *agapç* which the New Testament uses as its own very special term, stands rather for an active, effective concern. It is best understood perhaps as the attitude of those who, because they have experienced God as Parent, experience (and not merely talk about) their fellow human beings as brothers and sisters, and so respond spontaneously to their needs. Like the Buddhist attitude of 'mindfulness' the Christian attitude of *agapç* is thus an existential attitude, deriving from a change in one's being. The change is not (normally) a sudden, once and for all transformation as a 'conversion' is often understood to be, but a life-time process of growth. Christian life is a life-long lesson in love.

Agape then is effective love. The New Testament defines it as "doing good to" (Lk 6:35; 1 Thess 5:15) and understands this (as the parable of the Good Samaritan shows) as responding effectively to the real needs of the people we encounter. Love

implies an effective response to the whole spectrum of needs that we observe around us. Because it is increasingly evident that the effective response to many of our most urgent needs is necessarily a structural one, justice understood as a change of structures is an inescapable dimension of love.

Jesus and Justice

Jesus may not have been as aware as we are today of the structural origins of the evils of the society in which he lived. But he was committed to justice and to structural change because his proclamation of God's Rule implied the vision of a new society. The Rule of God that he announced was the realization of the 'alternative community' previsioned in biblical history at the Exodus, where Israel was liberated from bondage in Egypt that it might become God's people (Ex 6:2-7); and frequently invoked by the prophets who appear precisely when the monarchy has reversed the thrust of the Exodus (1 Sam 8:6-18; 1 Kings 5:13) to protest against the perversion of the community that Israel was meant to be (Is 3:13-15; Am 2:6-8; Mic 2:1-11). The proclamation of God's Rule by Jesus is both a promise and summons. It looks forward to the ultimate realization, through the dialectical interaction of God's grace and human effort, of this alternative community, which is best depicted in the core metaphor implicit in all the teaching of Jesus, wherein humankind is imaged as 'the family of God'.

As part of the realization of this vision, Jesus (who shares the apocalyptic worldview of the time) sees the coming of the God's Rule as end of Satan's reign. Satan is the "prince of the world" (Jn 12:31), ruling the world through demons and demonic people. Satan stands, as we would say today, for structured evil, organized might (the 'legion' of Mk 5:1-20). It is this Satanic power-structure that Jesus combats through his controversies and

his healings and exorcisms. The miracles of Jesus are therefore not to be taken as isolated actions of compassion (relief work). As such, the thirty or so healings and exorcisms that Jesus performed would not have amounted to very much. Rather they are an indication that God's Rule has dawned and that Satan's rule has ended. "The strong man has been bound and his goods taken away" (Mk 3:27). The Satanic power structure has been destroyed. The miracles of Jesus are the subversion of a power structure and so manifestations of a structural change. They invite us to our own subversion of the Satanic structures that we see hindering the coming of God's Rule in our world today.[3]

So the love exercised by Jesus in a loveless world necessarily leads to conflict. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness tries to overcome it (Jn 1:5). Such conflict is not a negation of the absolute universality of God's love. God loves every person and all things. But though it is universal in its object, God's love is differentiated in its action. So while the *agape* of Jesus reaches out indeed to all, it affects different people in different ways. The same love which prompts Jesus to say "Blessed are the poor" leads him to announce "Woe to you rich" (Lk 6:20-27). The concern he shows when he identifies his mission as the proclamation of the good news to the poor (Lk 4:16; Mt 11:5) is paralleled by the concern implied in his warning that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk 10:25). In an unequal world where class, caste, and race and gender conflicts exist, love must take sides. For nothing, it has been said, is more unjust (or more unloving) than to divide equally among unequals, or to treat oppressor and oppressed alike. The love of Jesus leads him to make (as the God of Bible makes) an unambiguous option for the poor and the outcast, because they are, as the Bible sees them, always victims of oppression.[4]

Because of this self-defining option, the life of Jesus is lived out in the twin dimensions of solidarity and conflict..5 These are the complementary expressions of his God-experience. The Gospels show Jesus living a life of progressive identification with the poor and of growing conflict with those who oppress them.

Solidarity with the Poor: Incarnation

Born into what we call a lower middle class family belonging to the *petite bourgeoisie* (the class of artisans, who own the tools of their trade), Jesus de-classes himself becoming an itinerant religious beggar with nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58). He breaks with his family to join the family of God made up of all those who do the will of God, which is to love (Mk 3:31-35). He abandons himself wholly to God's provident care (Mt 6:28-34) depending for his livelihood on the casual help provided by sympathizing friends (Lk 8:1-2). A well known religious teacher, he associates with outcasts, becoming an untouchable with the untouchables. He touches a leper (incurring ritual uncleanness) to welcome him back to human fellowship (Mk 1:40-42). He dines with the ritually unclean and socially ostracised tax collectors and sinners, incurring the hostility of the religious elite (Lk 15:2; Mk 2:16), and demonstrating without any possibility of doubt that there are no 'outcasts' before God.[6]

Conflict with the Powerful: The Cross

The solidarity of Jesus with these victims of economic, social and political oppression is not merely a passive solidarity which assumes and endures their lot. It leads to a confrontation with the religious and political establishment which oppresses ultimate sources of oppression. Jesus confronts the theological

establishment (the scribes) to free people from a burdensome interpretation of the ritual and moral law (Mk 2:1-3:6); the religious establishment (the chief priests) and their misuse of the Temple, to protest against the exploitation of the people in the name of religion (Mk 11:15-18); and the political establishment (Herod) whose threat to kill him (a clear sign of the political impact of his ministry) he dismisses with contempt (Lk 13:31-33). The life of Jesus is thus riddled with conflict. Indeed conflict spills over even into the Gospel narrative of his infancy (Mt 2:1-23; Lk 1:27-32), and finds its resolution only with his death on the cross.[7]

The Cross is therefore no arbitrary intrusion into the life of Jesus. It is the natural outcome of a life of solidarity with the poor and the outcast and of confrontation with the powerful who oppress them. Conflict with the rich and the powerful leads inevitably to the fatal confrontation which could only end with a foreseen and freely accepted death. And this death becomes the appropriate fulfilment of a life lived out with and for the poor and the outcast. For on the cross Jesus is wholly poor and totally outcast. Identification and confrontation have here reached their furthest possible limits. Jesus is one with all the marginalized and all the martyred victims of the earth. The journey from the centre to the periphery which, as Kosuke Koyama reminds us, was the basic movement of his life now reaches its goal.[8] A life of freedom and love expressing itself in a radical identification with the poor and the outcast and a resolute confrontation with all the oppressive powers of the world arrives at its paradoxical outcome baffling all human calculation, where "God's power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9); and where "the foolishness of God is (shown to be) wiser than the human wisdom and the weakness of God stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25). For the

Cross shows forth not just the death of Jesus but announces his resurrection as well.

The Goal of Life: The Resurrection

The Resurrection of course escapes the net of history. Unless it is conceived as the resuscitation of a corpse it is not an observable, locatable event which can be grasped by the historian's empirically oriented tools. It is however accessible through the two past historical traces it has left (the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to his first disciples), both of which can be reached (though not easily) through the confused, sometimes contradictory and not easily decipherable stories about them in the Gospels. But above all, the resurrection is accessible to us in our present experience of the living Jesus, which assures us that Jesus is alive. "The Resurrection is not a doctrine that we try to prove or a problem that we argue about," Thomas Merton has said, "it is the life of Christ himself in us by the Spirit".[9]

Rooted in the past event of Jesus, made actual in the present experience of his living presence among us, the resurrection grounds our hope for the future, turning, as Leonardo Boff would say, all our *utopias* ('nowheres') into *topias* ('somewheres')[10] But this faith experience which grounds our hope is only available to us in a life of love. Because it anticipates the end of history, the resurrection of Jesus, which is God's overwhelming answer to our cry for life, "can be understood only through a praxis that seeks to transform the world."[11] Indeed the mystery of Jesus can be grasped only through praxis, because Jesus is essentially the way. It is not in constructing theoretical models about his being that we 'understand' Jesus (these alienate us from him), but in following him in the life of solidarity and conflict that is his way of life. We understand Jesus and his dharma when we begin to practise it.

Notes:

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2 G.M. SOARES-PRABHU, "The Synoptic Love-Commandment: The Dimensions of Love in the Teaching of Jesus", Jeevadhara 13 (1983), 85-103.

3 G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Miracles of Jesus: Subversion of a Power Structure?" in: S. Kappen (ed.), Jesus Today (Madras: AICUF, 1985), 21-29.

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5 G.M. SOARES-PRABHU, "The Spirituality of Jesus as a Spirituality of Solidarity and Struggle", in: J. Vattamattom and others (eds.), Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society [Forum Series 1], (Hyderabad: Forum Publications, 1991), 136-161.

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10 L. BOFF, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 135.

11 J. SOBRINO, *Christology at the Crossroads* (London: SCM Press, 1978), 259.