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Dharma of Jesus: Crossroads of Philosophy and Theology

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Abstract: In his keynote address Joyce Kaithakottil provides a dharmic reading of the first and last books of the Bible. He sees God asking human beings two crucial questions in the Book of Genesis, one about their rootedness in God and the other about their relationship to one another. The dharma of Jesus is the response of Jesus to these two questions. The Book of revelation is read as the continuing response of the Church to the same questions in the historical context of persecution in the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Book of Genesis; Book of Revelation; God's questions; Jesus' response.

1. Introduction

At the outset I appreciate the courage of Dr. Selva Rathinam, President of JDV, in asking me to deliver the key note address to the distinguished members present here for the seminar. I am really honored and I thank the president for the trust he has placed in me and encouraging me to take up this honorable task.

Most of my years as a priest, I was walking with the youth, especially in the peripheries. But there are two reasons for me to take up this task: one is my personal relationship with George Soares Prabhu and the other is my ever growing passion for the dharma of Jesus. I had the rare privilege of writing my BTh paper under the guidance of Soares. During this period of work, I did not develop any special affection for him as such, but his personality, his life style and theological reflections began to

challenge me personally. His classes were for me a source of energy and challenged me to examine my own value system and the value systems of the church in India. I should say, as a result of a serious reflection of the challenges he raised, four of us from the Papal Seminary decided to go and live outside the seminary in a semi-slum area in Vadagonseri. The “dharma of Jesus” challenged us to dialogue with the context and the text. Social context changed our perspective of reading the text: it demolished certain pseudo traditions, made us develop a new way of understanding sin, and so on. Since we were staying outside, we used to attend the Mass celebrated by Soares at noon in De Nobili College. Those masses gave me a glow of the foundational experience of the dharma of Jesus, that is, the experience of God’s unconditional love for every human person.

Standing at the cross roads of dharma of Jesus as proposed by Soares-Prahbu, I am trying to situate the theme in the context of the Book of Genesis and the Book of Revelation. It is my humble opinion that there is a thread running through the whole Bible beginning from the Book of Genesis till the Book of Revelation. I do not go into a detailed description of the same here. The dharma of Jesus is framed by the first and last books of the Bible.

2. Book of Genesis: God’s Two Great Questions

As we read the first two chapters of Genesis we realize that humans are in perfect harmony or rather they are in communion with God, with one another, with oneself and with nature. But in the next chapter we understand that humankind has shunned God’s words and listened to the words of the serpent. They have slipped away from God’s protective presence and started journeying on their own path. But Yahweh confronts them and asks them a very pertinent question, the first question of

God in the Bible: “Where are you”? It is evident that it was not a geographical question but clearly a theological one. “Where do you stand in relation to me?” It is a call to return to the experience of God’s unconditional love and put their trust in the caring God of creation and rediscover the experience of freedom they enjoyed. God does not stand away from the human situation. He seeks a response from the fearful and ashamed human beings. The people who walked with God (Gen 3:10) began to run away from him. They began to fear God and consider other beings as a threat. Having lost their oneness with nature, they begin to feel a sense of insecurity and shame. Our fundamental, biblically informed, insight is that our worth and security are grounded in the unconditional love of God. Moving out of God’s caring love has led humanity to dissonance in inter-human relationships, between humans and God, between human and non-human world, and dissonance within self.

One of the intentions of the temptation is to question the mental image of God. God is portrayed as an enemy than a loving parent. The method is to twist and misquote God’s words with regard to prohibition. God is presented as cruel. This is what the serpent implied by distorting the words of prohibition. But both God’s permission and prohibition are issued from his sheer goodness and love. The primordial experience of humanity in the Garden of Eden is the experience of oneness with God, with others with himself and with all of God’s creation.

According to T.E.Fretheim, a biblical theologian, the key phrase that leads to the eating of the fruit is “God knows”. (“God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). It is true that their eyes are opened but they see the world differently and each other differently, entirely through their own eyes. On the other hand, it highlights the fact that God has not told them the full

truth. The question then arises is whether God could be fully trusted, because God has kept something beneficial from the humans. The issue of knowledge at its deepest level is an issue of trust. Can the humans trust God even if they do not know everything? Can they trust that God has their best interests at heart? The primal sin, therefore, may be defined as mistrust of God and God's unconditional love, which manifests itself in disobedience and other behaviors.¹ God's first question to the humankind is left unanswered.

We could see a movement from a vertical crisis (Gen 3:1-24) to a horizontal crisis of relationship in the following chapter. The loving relationship is broken and it has taken a violent turn. The text does not explain why God treats Cain and Abel differently. But in the prophetic literature God's reason for rejecting a sacrifice or an offering was that religious ritual had become a substitute for obedience and holy living. In the story of Cain and Abel we find a movement from creating life to destroying life; from intimacy to anger and resentment; from invoking the name of the Lord to lying to God; from living in the presence of God to alienation from God. Cain brutally kills his own brother Abel. God encounters the humankind in the person of Cain, which raises the second question of the Bible: "Where is your brother?" This is a call to declare one's stand in relation to the neighbor/brother sister. But God did not receive an answer to this question either. Instead, Cain questions God. God has not lost interest in the murderer (see 1 John 3:11-18). God marks Cain with a mark signifying both shame and security. The mark that God placed upon Cain is a sign of God's grace. This incident of God protecting Cain raises questions about the appropriateness of later eye-for-eye legislation (see Ex 21:23-24). The issue of the brother/sister is the ultimate theological crisis. God is waiting for an answer to his second question in the Bible.

The whole of Old Testament is to be seen as God's search for an answer to these two questions: "Where are you" and "Where is your brother"? He sent prophets to call people to answer these questions. It is clear from the twofold prophetic critique of the society, namely, religious and social, that the effort of the prophets was to make people answer the two questions asked by God. The first one is about their relationship with Yahweh and second one is about their broken relation with their own people. Prophets call Israel not to "forsake Yahweh for other gods" (Jer 2:20-28; 18:13-17; Ezek 6:1-7). In the words of Soares, "she is not to abandon her experience of the God who is utterly free and turn to the legitimizing gods" and thereby "turn Yahweh into an idol" (2001, 18). The prophets criticize social injustice and the exploitation of the poor and the oppression of the widows and orphans. The foundational event of Exodus had given them "a new experience of God and a new vision of society". The prophets are agents of this "alternate vision" and they also empower the listeners to recreate an alternate community² But the community failed to respond and give a definite answer to God's questions.

But God did not give up. He wanted a definite answer. Therefore, God takes initiative again, just as he had taken the initiative in the calling of Abraham, in liberating Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, in delivering them from exile, etc. This time the divine initiative is becoming human in the person of Jesus. The experience of freedom, love, and joy are to be reestablished by humankind because God's purpose of creation is destroyed by humanity. Here begins the new phase of salvation history and God's next attempt to find answers for his questions. How Jesus answered God's two questions is the point of our concern.

Jesus' experience of God as unconditional love has given him an alternate vision of society which is seen in his

proclamation of the Kingdom of God in word and deed. In the temptation narratives given by Matthew, Jesus categorically says: "Away with you, Satan". "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Matt 4:10). He rejects outrightly the compromise with the ungodly culture of worshipping Satan. I think that the temptation narratives could also be taken as the symbolic representation of Jesus' confrontation with the religious, social and political establishments of the society of his time with an inner freedom. Jesus' experience of God as *Abba*, probably at his baptism, made him a supremely free person. Jesus' experience of God's unconditional love made him fearless and he could say that "I am with my Father". Jesus answered the first question of God by his total trust in God's unconditional love. Soares presents this as the foundational experience of the dharma of Jesus³

How did Jesus answer the second question? While Cain shed the blood of his brother, Jesus shed his own blood on the cross and manifested his relation to the other. He revealed his love through his death and said: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). Jesus gave his answer on Calvary. Disobedience of Adam to God's command led all to death (Rom 5, 12-19). Christ's acceptance of death was his ultimate 'Yes' to God and to humankind. The love for the neighbor is the "reflex of the experience of God's love for us" (Soares 2003, 8).

Jesus' experience of oneness with the Father, with others, with himself and with all of God's creation is in fact the primordial experience of humanity in the Garden of Eden. The radical freedom they enjoyed in God's presence is now seen in the person of Jesus. Jesus invites everyone to this experience through his proclamation of the kingdom of God, which is his vision of a new society born out of his experience of God as *Abba*. Jesus does not give any blueprint for the new society. But the two pillars of the

kingdom of God are the experience of God's love and our response to that love in loving our neighbor. This has been realized in the life of Jesus through his response to the two questions God has raised in the first book of the Bible. From these two answers of Jesus are derived the two commandments: Love of God and Love of neighbor, the two pillars for the building up of the Kingdom of God. This is practicing the dharma of Jesus.

3. Book of Revelation: Response to the Questions

How does the church give testimony to this dharma in the world in which she finds herself? We shall look at this question by turning to the Book of Revelation. There are a few reasons for me to turn to the last book of the Bible. The first reason is that the final vision of the Book of Revelation is the full consummation of the Kingdom of God and thereby the final and total destruction of evil in the world. Though we do not find the term "kingdom of God" frequently used in this book, the rule of God is its central concern. Secondly, we find a prophetic discernment of the historical situation of the church and the society in the Book of Revelation. According to P. Guttesen, a biblical scholar, there is always a contrapuntal tension between the heavenly reality (an alternate vision of society) and the earthly actuality. Finally, we find the dialectic between the expected future and the shaping of the present existence⁴

The Book of Revelation offers us no neutral perception of the context. It challenges us to adopt either the heavenly perspective, with an "alternate vision of society" born out of an experience of the divine or adopt the ideology of Rome, reconcile with the hegemony of imperial power, a kind of peaceful coexistence through compromise.

The imperial power of Rome is a system of violent oppression maintained by a system of political tyranny and

economic exploitation. John presents the demonic system through two symbols. Political and military power of the Empire is presented as the “Beast” or “Sea monster” (chs 13-17) and the economic exploitation of the imperial Rome is presented through the symbol of the Harlot of Babylon, Great Prostitute (chs. 17-18). These two are intimately related (Rev 17:3; R. Bauckham 1993, 35-36). John presents through these symbols what the world is. But he does not stop with the critique of the present. “Come out from Babylon, my people” (18:4) is John’s call “against culture”. He presents a vision of a radically new counter-definition of reality through the construction of a new symbolic universe which presents what the world should (will) be. While Babylon’s economy is centripetal, privileging the central elite at the expense of those who occupy the periphery, the flow of goods in the New Jerusalem is centrifugal, the river of life flows from the throne, feeding the sap of trees that heal those battered by history (22:1-2).

The readers of the Book of Revelation, the persecuted Christians, are caught up in the conflict of sovereignties: Universal worship of God or worship of the Beast; Sovereignty of God or sovereignty of the Emperor. What is the dharma demanded of the Christians living within the idolatrous context? The choice of exclusive loyalty to the values of the kingdom would inevitably bring social hostility and political harassment. They are experiencing a crisis of values. According to Bauckham, another Biblical scholar, if only they adopt the standpoint of prophetic resistance to evil, in which faithfulness and endurance to the point of death are required, will the Christians share in the Lamb’s victory. In other words, John of Patmos presents the role of Christians in this book in terms of an alternate vision of society to be accomplished in the world¹. The Book of Revelation, according to M. Gilbertson, “has the effect of locating the present

earthly experience of the reader within a framework of ultimate reality. It also, however, refocuses back to the hard realities of earthly experience, now seen in the light of that ultimate perspective”⁶.

It is in the light of the ultimate perspective that the story of the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation (chapter 11) is to be read. It represents the witnessing activity of the church in the world. It is the story of the prophetic witness of the community of believers in the hard realities of earthly experience but they have an alternate vision of society. The testimony of the church is meant to create a New Jerusalem. The presence of the prophetic witnesses is a counter presence to the presence of the dominant and oppressive culture of the time. Their presence is a presence of resistance and of involvement. The ministry of the church is inherently polemic and prophetic. The prophetic witness of the church, to create a New Heaven and New Earth in the midst of the hostile forces, “culminates not in the annihilation of their opponents but in their own martyrdom” (Koester, 109). That is the logic of the Bible. Jesus conquers not through domination but through sacrificial death. The central Christological symbol in the Book of Revelation is pointing to this victory: slaughtered Lamb standing. Jesus is called the faithful witness.

The Church in the world is taking over this dharma of Jesus. Through the faithful witness of the church, what is true in heaven becomes true on earth. They are modeling their lives after the life of Jesus, the faithful witness par excellence. There emerges a New Heaven and a New earth through the faithful witness of the church in the world. Christ has fulfilled the purpose of God through his sacrificial death and uncompromising faithful witness to the world. The church in the same way has given faithful witness in the world in order that the world may be converted and become part of God’s people. The early Christians carried forward the

definite answer given by Jesus through his life. They answered the first question by accepting God's sovereignty and resisting the sovereignty of the imperial power. They refused to compromise with the ungodly culture of imperial Rome and its oppressive and exploitative ways. They responded to the second question by shedding their blood for the values of the Kingdom, for they loved not their lives unto death (Rev 12:11). Babylon, symbol of economic exploitation and oppression drank the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

The critique of the present scenario of the church in India I shall leave to the impressive audience here present. We can ask whether the church has lost the sense of faithful witness. It will tell upon both the personal and social dimension of the prophetic witness. Perhaps the church in India is playing a very good role of "systematic distraction" from its role, what Pascal called "divertissement". Have we lost Dante's vision of that "love which moves the sun and the other stars"?

4. Conclusion

Let me conclude by using an imagery of a tree. If the Christological stem is the dharma of Jesus, its theological roots are the two theological questions in the first book of the Bible and ecclesiological branch of the dharma of Jesus is the faithful witness of the Christians moving towards the creation of New Heaven and New Earth in the last book of the Bible. The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of God as the divine throne descends from heaven to the earthly realm in which no trace of the old order will be found (Rev 21:8, 27; 22:15). And then we will hear a voice: Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them" (Rev 21:3). This was the first experience in the Garden of Eden. This is the experience Jesus had reestablished

for humanity. This is the experience that the Jesus-community has to maintain throughout its troubled history.

Post script: “Synod Assemblies are not meant to discuss beautiful and clever ideas, or to see who is more intelligent. They are meant to better nurture and tend the Lord’s vineyard, to help realize his dream, his loving plan for his people”. (Pope said in the homily during the opening Mass for the Synod).

Notes:

1. Cf. T.F. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis” in *NIB* Vol. I, p. 361
2. Cf. George M. Soares-Prabhu, *Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective*, Collected writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, Vol. 4, (ed.) Francis X. D’Sa, JDV, Pune, 2001, p. 18-19.
3. Cf. George M. Soares-Prabhu, *Biblical Spirituality of Liberative Action*, Collected writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, Vol. 3, (ed.) Scaria Kuthiralkkattel, JDV, Pune, 2003, p. 3-4.
4. Cf. Guttesen, Poul. F., *Leaning into the Future: Kingdom of God in the Theology of Moltmann and the Book of Revelation*, (Princeton Theological Monograph series 117), Pickwick, Eugene, 2009, p. 5-10.
5. Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge University Press, p.45-47.
6. Michael Gilbertson, *God and History in The Book of Revelation: New Testament Studies in Dialogue Pannenberg and Moltmann*. SNTSS 124, Cambridge 2003, p.108