

Forgiveness on whose terms?

Reflecting on Matthew 18:21-35

The global pandemic today has created at least four kinds of crisis. The medical crisis, which is the epidemic itself, the economic crisis where the divide between the rich and the poor is ever widening, the psychological crisis with anxieties and mental health of several people at risk and the crisis created by racism, migration, where people from marginal communities are severely affected. The economic turmoil caused by this pandemic is pushing countries with debts in the world deeper into crisis. Earlier in the lockdown, several Christian organisations have been campaigning for debt cancellations from the powerful nations to those countries of lower economies, so that they can spend on proper medical and health facilities for their people. As churches, there is a greater role for us in thinking about our neighbours in other countries and to act so that we can urge our governments to cancel the debts of the countries in the global south.

Many a times, we have heard dominant groups complaining how one group of oppressed community oppress another group of oppressed community, and argue that the system of oppression has always have a spiralling effect. We need to make it clear that oppression done by any person is against the will of God, which calls to stand in the light of justice, calling to address and defeat it through liberative means & methods. However, we should not miss the larger narrative in this frame, which is the ploy of power to deviate the struggle from fighting the larger evil of dominance by trying to focus on the conflicts and divisions between and among the oppressed communities. By magnifying the conflicts between the oppressed groups, the dominance of the dominant groups is left untouched, for they continue to exercise power unabated, due to which the saying 'the king is always right' has gained currency.

The passage from Matthew 18:21-35, has been one such passages which has been used, quoted and interpreted from the perspective of colonial episteme, highlighting how one 'forgiven' slave oppresses another of his fellow slave, by unforgiving and acting cruel to him. Towards the end the 'forgiven' slave is turned to be 'unforgiven' and further tormented to pay back his debts to his master.

It is Peter who is asking Jesus about the limits of forgiveness to his neighbour in a Church, who commits sin against him. Jesus replies to Peter by de-limiting the limits that he has set for forgiveness from seven times to either seventy-seven times or seventy times seven, by which he proclaims forgiveness comes unlimited and unconditional. This is the gospel of this passage. A postcolonial reading of this text further elucidates this point.

In a context where slavery was so prevalent under the Roman empire, this given passage, the system of slavery is left unattended by eulogising the acts of pity & power by the king, and by criminalising the acts of the forgiven-unforgiven slave. The king and his authority to employ slaves is uncontested because one of the tenets of empire is 'king is always right.' In order to establish that the 'king is always right' it has to be the 'slaves who are always wrong.' The forgiveness given to the slave with larger amounts of debt was only of his financial debts out of king's 'pity' and by the pleading speech of this powerless person. This person though was released by the king, he continued to be called as a slave, and towards the end of the passage

the king calls him 'wicked slave,' which conveys that this powerless person continued to live in slavery, for there has been no change in his status or personhood. Once a slave always is a slave, for this jeopardises the very understanding of forgiveness from the gospel. Did the king seek forgiveness from this forgiven-unforgiven person for being a perpetrator of the system of slavery? No doubt, the king and those in power enjoy impunity from times immemorial till today. Imagining if the king as an act of reparation has forgiven this person from his large amount of debt at one instance, waited for an opportunity at another instance to get it back by any means and took the opportunity to tormenting him till he repaid his debt back.

Peter has asked Jesus how many times should we forgive, and further asked is it seven times? The king in this text was not able to forgive his debtor for a second time, forget about seventy-seven times. The text rightly ends in verse 35, by saying 'my heavenly father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.' The king need not always be right, for forgiveness comes from God to all people of God.

Allow me to reiterate the gospel once again from this passage:

- Forgiveness does not come with limits or conditions, for divine forgiveness is unlimited, unconditional and is impartial, as revealed in Jesus Christ.
- Power dynamics should not go unattended and uncontested in any act of forgiveness, for those in power don't enjoy impunity in the sight of the God of justice.
- Forgiveness is not based on our terms but is practiced on the terms of the God of justice.
- Forgiveness and forgiven-ness go hand in hand, for to be forgiven is to forgive, and to forgive is to be forgiven.
- As local churches, we are called to join in the campaign for debt cancellation.

Forgiveness is hard work, and we have to find a way for it whether someone asks for it or not.

Allow me to conclude with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for he said,

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

May God grant us that spirit of forgiveness so that we can practice it not on our own terms but based on the ethos of God in Jesus, so that love is illumined and is in action at all times and for all people.

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11th September 2020