

## The rejected becomes the cornerstone in the Kingdom of God

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Reflecting on Matthew 21:33-46

#BlackHistoryMonth (BHM) is observed in the month of October, which is an invitation to recognise diversity in our context and time. It is also an opportunity for us to acknowledge that we are all created in the equal image of God and any discrimination in the name of colour, race, gender, ethnicity, caste, is unethical and unchristian. BHM also gives churches an opportunity to engage in reading our texts from the perspectives of the powerless and understand that the divine resides among such communities. In that knowing, we are called to join with God in Jesus in pitching our tents among the powerless communities and work with them in transforming our society today. This reflection is an attempt in re-reading the text from the perspective of the powerless people.

To the chief priests and the elders of the temple's question, "by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (21:23v) Jesus answered them with two parables, one was the parable of two sons (28-32v) and other was the prescribed lectionary text for this Sunday, the parable of the tenants (33-46v).

This parable of the tenants has been one of the most over-read parables, where the landowner in this parable has been equated with God in the popular readings of this text interpolating with the death of Jesus in this parable as the son of the landowner. For that matter in most of the parables, the master or the land owner have always ascribed the role of the divine. Such a reading suits to all those in authority for it upholds their rule, status, privilege and power. And over the period of time such a reading of the master as the divine became the norm of reading and interpreting the texts in the scripture, leaving the dynamics of power untouched in it. But as a person coming from an outcasted community of the caste system, and as also a person from BAME background now living in the western society, I am at discomfort divinising all the masters and the land owners both in the text and outside of it. The question that always comes to the fore as I read my scriptures has been, is Jesus identifying himself with the masters and landowners' class both in the text and in our context today? How do we perceive Jesus, the rejected stone becoming into the corner stone way of reading the text? How do we understand Jesus' servant ministry withing the text and in our context?

As I began to read this text from the perspective of Jesus, the rejected one becoming into the corner stone, I recognise the land owner mentioned in this parable of the tenants, represent the chief priests and the elders of the temple. In the grand pericope of the text in Matthew from 21:23-46, Jesus is explaining about his authority in contrast to the kind of authority that the chief priests and the elders understand and is exposing their unscrupulous power exercised against the poor peasants. In this given parable we see that landowner went on to another country leaving his vineyard to the tenants on a lease. The land owner is a rich guy who planted a vineyard, for he invests in a commercial crop that brings profits. He put a fence around it, for it demonstrates his insecurity by putting a secure fence. He dug a wine press in it so that he can make wine from the yield, where again he wants to rotate the economy all around his own household. He built a watch-tower, displaying his status and wealth in his city, for his tower catches the attention of the people to know about his economic power. Now it is important to ask why did this landowner go on to another country leaving this his vineyard?

In the context of the Roman empire it was a common practice for the rich landowners to keep investing in other parts of the empire, making money at the expense of the cheap labour available from the colonised communities. For the landowner his mantra is to become richer and richer, leaving the local peasants poorer and poorer. During harvest time he sent his servants to collect the yield of the fruit, to extract the profit from it, discounting the hard labour of the labourers who have worked hard day in and day out for the harvest to yield. The tenants revolted against the unjust systems of the landowners making profit from the landless labourers. Such revolt went on for several months where the landowner sends several of his servants to collect the produce which he has not worked on. Finally, the landowner sends his own son thinking they will respect if someone from his own family goes to collect the produce, and the landless tenants took the opportunity to occupy this their own land by attacking and killing him. By this kind of reading I am not justifying killing of people, for we need to understand that Jesus was figuratively exposing the unjust authoritarian system that the chief priests and the elders of the temple have been exercising against the landless peasants in this parable.

Now the lead of this parable for my kind of re-reading comes in verse 40, when Jesus said, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" The chief priests and the elders of the temple expose themselves, their power, and their understanding of authority in their reply, where they said to Jesus, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." (41v) If Jesus intended the landowner to be the divine, he should have endorsed what the chief priests and the elders have said about the landowners doing of "putting those wretches to a miserable death..." God in Jesus never calls the poor peasants 'wretches' nor is a God who puts them to a miserable death, for God in Jesus offers forgiveness even on the point of his death on the cross. As I was reading this parable again and again I am surprised how the words of the chief priests and the elders, and their theology of God became the seedbed for a conservative theology for some Christians, where God in Jesus is a God who puts the poor peasants to miserable death projecting God in Jesus as such an unloving God.

As the chief priests and the elders exposed their own understanding of authority as revenge, vengeance, violence, punishing the landless peasants, it is again interesting to note that Jesus immediately reminds them their scriptures, asking them have they not read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?" (42v) By this parable of the tenants, Jesus explained that authority is not about bossing over, but it is about an alternate authority, an authority from the kingdom of God's perspective, where the rejected, the excluded, the defeated, and the broken will emerge to be the corner stone (42v). In short Jesus was explaining that authority doesn't come from somewhere, but it is the powerless who are considered as those outside of the authority, whom the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone. This is an unthinkable way of authority for the chief priests, but Jesus continues to say that such becoming of the rejected people as the cornerstones in the society is the doing of the Lord, which is amazing in the eyes of the community (42v).

Jesus further goes on to say that the kingdom of God will be taken away from these chief priests and the elders and from their authority and will be given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom, (43v) those that work like the labourers on the land. In other words,

the authority of the powerful will be taken away from them and those that are rejected will be and become the cornerstones in the kingdom of God. Jesus would also mean that this rejected-cornerstone will be very transforming in the society, when he said anyone who falls on this rejected-cornerstone will be affected and it will also crush anyone who falls on it (44v).

On hearing these two parables, the chief priests and the Pharisees realised that Jesus was speaking about them and wanted to arrest Jesus, but feared the crowd and did not venture to such a thing. They got their message on hearing from Jesus, are we getting the message on reading this parable and hearing from Jesus?

So, what is the relevance of this parable for us today? As Black History Month (BHM) 2020 is observed in October across the world, the call is to recognise that power dynamics exist in the name of race, colour, caste, gender etc. and to address them at all levels in striving towards justice, equality, peace and love in the society. Reading our scriptures from the perspectives of the powerless and the rejected people is one way of offering our support and solidarity to such BHM initiatives. This reading of the parable is an offering in that direction and is an invitation to begin reading our texts from the perspectives of the powerless people in our public sphere, for God in Jesus locates among such people and such sites. Secondly, the call for us as a church is to present a theology of God as love, contesting all forms of God as unloving and putting 'wretches to miserable death.' For God in Jesus is ever loving, all loving, ever forgiving, ever receiving, always on the side of the poor and the powerless communities. Thirdly, as a church we are called to recognise that authority is not where the powerful exercise it against the powerless, but it is about an alternate authority, an authority from the kingdom of God's perspective, where the rejected, the excluded, the defeated, the unchurched, and the broken will emerge to be and become the corner stone, for among them the divine resides.

May the spirit of God lead us and guide us to be the champions of promoting equality, peace, justice and love in our society, overcoming all forms of racism, sexism, casteism, classism etc. in our society today. Amen.

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