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Reconciliation: Biblical Reflections

II. With Persecutions—Mark 10:30

VIOLENCE AND SUFFERING IN RWANDA

The search for paradigms for continuing the journey toward reconciliation brings us full circle back to the theme of the Institute: Mission as Reconciliation. Mission is “the manifestation or epiphany of God’s plan and its fulfillment in history.”¹ “Mission is a divine enterprise . . . we are collaborators, God’s fellow-workers.”² Reconciliation is also the work of God who transforms human hearts and creates new relationships among persons and between them and God. “The proper subject of reconciliation is the victim, not the oppressor”;³ the process starts in the heart of the victim transformed by God’s gracious mercy. The “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) is possible, because it is under God’s mandate and power.

If there is a word which Africa most urgently needs today, it is the “word of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19). There are currently about ten wars raging in the continent and hardly a nation totally devoid of civil unrest or ethnic conflicts. The story of Rwanda, admittedly extraordinary even by African standards, may serve to bring home to us the dire need of this continent for reconciliation. It will also show how even in the midst of death God works life and sows seeds of reconciliation. Among the many incidents, let us cite but one:

It is 16–17 April, 1994 in Nyarubuye, Rwanda. Over 1,000 persons of a particular ethnic group have fled three communities to the church for safety. But there is no sanctuary for them there. Soldiers and militiamen of the opposite group are upon them with guns,

¹ *Ad gentes*, no. 9.

² Desmond Tutu, “Mission in the 1990’s,” *IBMR*, 14, no. 1 (January 1990) 6.

³ Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992) 45.

clubs and knives. The carnage is on for two days until the church, the courtyards and the school classrooms are littered with corpses.⁴

The situation is repeating itself under our very eyes as we watch snapshots of 2,000 persons massacred by soldiers in a refugee camp. Rwanda is said to be 90% Hutu, 9% Tutsi, and over 60% Christian, that is, two of every three Rwandans are Christian. We should expect to hear touching stories of reconciliation and in fact some Christians preferred to give their lives in order to shelter and protect persons of the opposite group. There was the lady who was sheltering some thirty refugees from the other group. Her brother, a high officer in the army, came to remove her before the gangs would set upon her proteges. She preferred to die with them. The following day she had to observe while her proteges were done to death and was the last to be killed by people of her own ethnic group and cast into the common pit. The president of the Episcopal Conference, Bishop Thadee Nsengiyumva, bishop of Kabgayi, spearheaded an ecumenical contact committee, the purpose of which was to pressure the government to restore justice, peace and order and to promote reconciliation among the people. When the Rwanda Patriotic Front captured Kabgayi seminary, he with other churchmen handed themselves over as a gesture of trust and reconciliation and in order to protect over 30,000 refugees in the area. With two Church leaders, Bishop Vincent Nsengiyumva of Kigali and Bishop Ruzindana of Byumba, and several priests and religious, he was massacred in cold blood.⁵ Two months earlier, during the Synod for Africa, a bishop had foreseen that the work of reconciliation would be a risky ministry. He wrote:

I can hear the Lord calling the Church in Africa out of the safe haven of a type of ministry that is concerned mainly with the salvation of souls to the risky ministry of involvement in the socio-economic and political life of our various communities. This will mean challenging the principalities and powers, rulers of this world of darkness. And as this cannot be done without getting bruised, I foresee that the call to total and all-inclusive evangelisation in Africa must lead to new martyrdom. The new martyrs of Africa will not be made in defense of articles of faith but in the protection and pursuit of social justice and equitable political and economic order.⁶

⁴ *Herald Tribune*, June 4–5, 1994, 2.

⁵ *Origins*, 24, no. 6 (June 23, 1994) 83. The massacres were announced June 8.

⁶ Bishop Michael Okoro of Abakaliki, Nigeria, cf *Bulletin*, no. 16, April 18, 1994, 10–11.

A curious aspect of the Rwanda situation was the targeting of promoters of reconciliation, justice and peace, sometimes even by people of their own group. Nevertheless, Christians cannot abdicate their responsibility. As one bishop affirmed:

The ministry of reconciliation and mediation will be necessary; reconciliation will be very important in the work of evangelisation in Africa as she goes toward the year 2,000.⁷

BROTHERS AND SISTERS WITH PERSECUTIONS

The paradoxes of the Rwanda situation invite reflection on a paradox in the tradition of the sayings of Jesus in Mark 10:29-30:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children and fields with *persecutions*—and in the age to come eternal life.

The text is curious on three counts: It includes persecutions in a list of blessings, seems to promise earthly and material rewards for attachment to Jesus and appears to self-destruct its very promise of brothers and sisters everywhere. Is the promise of universal solidarity and reconciliation a deception? The texts of Matthew (19:29) and Luke (18:30) smooth over these difficulties in various ways.⁸ We find a similar line of interpretation in the text tradition of Mark itself as presented by the Codex Bezae and *Itala*:

whoever leaves house and sisters and brothers and mother and children and fields *with persecution* will in the coming age receive eternal life.

Codex Bezae smooths over the three curious elements of the Markan text and makes eternal life the reward of leaving family and suffering persecutions to boot.

Modern interpreters have continued to grapple with Mark's text. A line of interpretation would see here the enactment of the Jubilee (cf.

⁷ Bishop Raphael Ndingi, Press Conference during the Synodal Assembly for Africa, Rome, April 26, 1994, *Bulletin*, no. 27, April 26, 1994, 5.

⁸ Both omit the listings; Matthew abolishes the distinction between this age and the age to come: "shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit eternal life." Luke: "shall receive manifold more in this time and in the world to come eternal life."

Lev 25) in which the disinherited peasant followers of Jesus would receive hundredfold redistribution of land,⁹ the new norm for acquisition being faithfulness to Jesus and the gospel. Another line of interpretation considers that Jesus' tone of voice would have indicated that irony was at play—the saying amounting to the very negation of earthly recompense, the only promise being persecutions.¹⁰ In what follows I shall restrict myself to the narrative world of Mark and presume that most of verse 30 comes from the pen of Mark. The Markan composition updates the saying of Jesus to the actual situation of the Markan community. In mind are Christians as followers of Jesus¹¹ and not just a select group of “wandering charismatics” of the Jesus Movement¹² or apostolic missionaries¹³ who would experience solidarity everywhere they went. The language of “leaving and following” is constant in the tradition concerning the disciples (1:18, 20; 8:34; 10:28). Here, however, the second element (“following”) has been replaced by “for my sake and for the sake of the gospel.” When Mark makes a dual statement, the second member generally interprets and specifies the first. Hence, “for the sake of the gospel” gives a closer definition of “for my sake”; it also reflects the standpoint of Mark and his community, “gospel” (*euangelion*) being early Church language and an indication that Mark is actualizing a saying of Jesus for his community.

The promised rewards, when seen within the cultural matrix, prove to be essentially the family and the family stead, land being the necessary means of subsistence for a peasant family. They are not considered in their materiality, but rather in terms of the relationships which underlie them. The underlying social institution is that of *kinship*. Members of a kinship are held together by bonds of loyalty and mutual dependence. The kinship is a *reconciled* community.

“Persecution” is a pervasive feature of the entire life of Jesus in Mark. The Christian is warned to expect trial and persecution on account of the word (4:17) and to be hated by all men on account of Christ's name (13:13). The language of love and hate refer to attachment and *disattachment*: followers of Jesus may expect to be shunned, avoided and

⁹David M. May, “Leaving and Receiving: A Social Scientific Exegesis of Mark 10:29-31,” *Perspectives in Rel. Studies*, 17, no. 2 (1990) 149f.

¹⁰Maurice Goguel, “avec les persecutions—etude exegetique sur Marc 10, 29-30, *Rev d'histoire et de Phil Rel* (1928) 277.

¹¹Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, Sheffield, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series no. 4, 1981, 113.

¹²Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988) 8ff., 33.

¹³Jean Martin, “avec des persecutions—Marc 10:29-30,” *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 69 (1956) 39.

even expelled from the kinship. The Christian life in Mark is lived under the shadow of the cross: “if anyone wants to be a follower of mine let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (8:34). Scholars depict various scenarios for the reality of persecution in Mark’s community, all of which are pertinent to the situation we are considering. Persecutions are essential conditions of the preaching of the gospel, for that gospel involves a confrontation with the powers of this world and with the demonic powers just as in the mission of Jesus himself.¹⁴ It would seem that the situation of false messiahs, betrayal and persecution depicted in 13:6-13 reflects the actual experience of the Markan community. Some of the Zealot leaders during the Jewish War were messianic pretenders who in the quest to purify Israel set upon the gentile neighbors and fellow countrymen who advocated peace with Rome. Mark’s community, with its redefinition of the meaning and boundaries of holiness would seem to be striking at Israel’s sense of identity. Further, its doctrine of universal mission (13:10) and the transfer of the vineyard to a new people embracing Jews and Gentiles (12:9) would make it an obvious target.¹⁵ In a culture where individuals are embedded in the kinship, conversion may occasion familial or social tension. Because the kinship makes a total claim on the person, it can set itself up as a rival to any other attachment. Kinship reaction to a follower of Jesus who is seen as turning the back on family traditions might be to deny him inheritance (land) and the solidarity vital for survival. The conjunction of the new family with persecutions accords with Mark’s statements about family relationships in the wake of Jesus: “brother will betray brother to death and a father his child. . . .” (Mark 13:12).¹⁶ Survival for a male who negated family integrity was only possible by moving into another kinship, real or fictive.¹⁷ Jesus offers believers a new kinship and transformed relationships in a renewed family setting. That setting is one of reconciliation, even with brothers who may have fallen away under persecution or betrayed the fellowship, as the disciples portrayed in Mark whom Jesus nevertheless promises to meet in Galilee.

Mark presents the community of the gospel in terms of a kinship. Relations between the members are presented in terms of the

¹⁴ Donald Senior, “With Swords and Clubs. The Setting of Mark’s Community and his Critique of Abusive Power,” *BTB* 17 (1987) 19.

¹⁵ Cf. Joel Marcus, “The Jewish War and the Sitz im Leben of Mark,” *JBL* 111/3 (1992) 453, n. 58.

¹⁶ John R. Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983) 44.

¹⁷ Bruce J. Malina, “Let him deny himself (Mark 8:34 and par)—A Social Psychological Model of Self-Denial,” *BTB*, 24, no. 3 (1994) 115.

reconciliation, solidarity and mutual service of the members of a kinship group. The new relationships are not founded on blood, but on attachment to Jesus and to doing the will of God. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (3:31-35). Nor is the new kinship relationship exclusive. Mark pushes the boundaries in every direction. Little children, that is, the peasant poor and all the lowly, are not to be hindered (10:14). There will be no exclusive barriers of purity (7:1-15) and God's house will finally become a house of prayer for all nations and peoples (11:17). I believe that the Markan idea of universal kinship and reconciliation points the way forward for mission in Africa. It is vital to promote relationships of mutual service, love and trust among all the peoples of the continent. The bishops of Africa denoted this when in the synod they proposed an African ecclesiology of Church as the *Family of God on earth*,¹⁸ on condition, of course, that the transformed relationships of the new kinship in Christ be allowed to subvert the tradition. The bishops' declaration amounts to an option for reconciliation as the paradigm for continued mission in Africa, especially in places like Rwanda. In such places, Christians have no choice but to embrace the gospel of reconciliation as a prime indicator of the force of the Word.

What resources for reconciliation does Mark offer his community suffering from neighbours and society at large? Violence and suffering warp the human heart and seek to hold it prisoner, thus effectively cutting off any meaningful relationships with others. People under persecution may develop the "martyr complex" or delight in images of apocalyptic vengeance on their tormentors. Mark allows neither. The community has an essential and reconciling relationship to the world; it is the carrier of good news for all the nations (13:10). The good news is one of repentance and faith (1:14f) of healing, restoration and reconciliation. Even persecution itself becomes an occasion for witness (13:9). The community is unshaken because it knows that the master of the house (cf 13:35) is also lord of the universe and is about to appear. The martyr complex is debunked. Peter no sooner makes his boast than fails woefully. The young man with a linen cloth over his naked body (14:51) may have been a confident would-be martyr already dressed for martyrdom,¹⁹ but he too failed. Reconciliation never glosses over the pain or trivializes the suffering. The correct posture before suffering is that of Jesus in Gethsemane who is borne down by suffering yet transcends it through prayer and submission to the

¹⁸ Proposition 8.

¹⁹ Cf. Robert Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark" *The Function of a Narrative Role*, in W. Telford, *The Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and SPCK, 1985) 151.

Father. The Markan Jesus reels before the cup of suffering and dies with a loud groan, yet in full submission to the Father. Mark consciously presents Jesus, the *reconciled* and *reconciling* sufferer, as model for the “passion of the community.”²⁰ The centurion “seeing how he died . . . said: ‘in truth this was Son of God’” (15:39). The manner of Jesus’s suffering and death brought the centurion to reconciliation and confession. There is a way of dealing with suffering which is in itself gospel. The cross of Jesus is in this sense a potent “word of reconciliation.”

TOWARDS UNIVERSAL RECONCILIATION

Life will elude the people of Rwanda unless they embrace the word of reconciliation portrayed in the cross of Jesus. Crushed hearts and bruised memories need to dip into the blood “poured out for many” to discover the power of reconciliation implicit in the gospel of the cross. The Christian need not be imprisoned in suffering, but is enabled to break its bonds and reach out in reconciliation. Rwandans must be enabled to break out of the cycle of hatred and violence. The new kinship established by Christ subverts exclusive loyalties of blood and clan. The missionary stands in the middle, wounded by the conflicting stories, seeking to kill the enmity and make the two one in the one body.

The situation is compounded by the fact that there is hardly a person who does not feel himself or herself both victim and oppressor at the same time. Cholera so cheapened human lives that people seemed to forget the duty of burying the dead, or they simply were no longer able to rise to it. The spiral of violence has swung around a couple of times such that groups who were oppressors became victims and vice versa. In a culture where group identification is high, group memories become highly personal ones, even for people who may not have been personally involved. Further, victims and oppressors have appeared within the same ethnic groups, such that many people are doubly victims. People have been victimized for simply wishing to return to their homesteads, others for advocating reconciliation. The word of reconciliation has become a risky ministry. All this means that the need for reconciliation is general and urgent. The land which has drunk so much blood must be exorcised, perhaps in common rituals of purification. For in the African conception, blood does not wash off so easily and without purification from blood no reconciliation is possible. Beginning at the face-to-face level of basic Christian communities, even with loud cries and *persecutions*, Christians will in their body kill the

²⁰ Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984) 37–39.

enmity (cf. Eph 2:16) to discover the promise of Christ of a new and universal kinship, a reconciled and reconciling community.

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