

Renewed Commitment to Gospel Vision on Women

Introduction

Pope John Paul II in his recent letter to women on the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, exhorts the whole Church to a "renewed commitment of fidelity to the gospel vision"¹ with regard to women. This article is an attempt at articulating the gospel vision on women.

The clarity of Jesus' vision

In the New Testament we find Christ among the people, vibrantly alive, active, concerned and involved as "the exact imprint of God's very Being."² All his preaching and actions stem from his deep gripping experience of God as his "Abba". This experience gives him the clarity to see the true meaning of the scriptures as intended by the Revealer. For Jesus, the key to understand the whole Bible is the fact that the God of scriptures is a compassionate, liberator God. All his words and actions come from the deep conviction that nothing oppressive can ever come from God. To the priests and pharisees who protected and profitted from the unjust social structures, he was "perverting" the Word of God. But in reality, he 'who is in the bosom of the Father'³ was simply drawing out the real, compassionate, concerned face of God that had been hidden for so long by the cultural traditions. Thus the prodigal enjoying the banquet, sitting close to his father while the elder son standing outside the house in the anger of encountering his lost brother;⁴ the publican who stood outside the temple and prayed, going justified more than the pharisee;⁵ the woman with the flow of blood

1. Letter of Pope John Paul II to women, no. 3. p. 1.

2. Heb 1:3.

3. Jn 1:18.

4. Lk 15:25-30.

5. Lk 18:9-14.

for twelve years pushing through the crowd touching many including Jesus himself and winning approval and praise instead of censure for polluting so many;⁶ the Samaritan being pointed out as a more genuine neighbour to the wounded Jew than the priest and the Levite;⁷ and scores of such parables and events angered and frustrated the priests and the pharisees. But this in no way intimidated Jesus who continued unassumingly proclaiming that this indeed was the God who entered into covenant with the people.

Reconstructing theology in the light of Jesus' Movement

In spite of the revolutionary nature of Christ's life and mission, the impact it created was rather short lived. After the initial excitement of proclaiming the risen Lord and the changed world order, Christian theology withdrew into an intellectual world of its own, full of professional jargon, incomprehensible to ordinary people. The oppressive cultures of the surrounding social milieu asserted supremacy and the gospel vision was lost. We are indeed in a critical moment in history when we are met with an urgency to reconstruct theology in the light of the original Jesus movement, taking into account the history of the oppressed, the poor and the marginalised in their struggle to reclaim their name, face and resources.

Jesus' mission towards women

In his gospel account, Luke reports a rare incident in the mission of Jesus :

“Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “woman, you are set free from your ailment“. When he laid his

6. Lk 8:43-48.

7. Lk 10:29-37.

hands on her, immediately, she stood up straight and began praising God".⁸

In the above passage, Jesus' heart and eyes are filled with compassion at the sight of the woman so crippled. He touches her and makes her stand straight.

In the scriptures events are recorded for their significance. Jesus' death on the cross is an event. It is the redemptive significance of the event that makes it a divine mystery, giving it an important place in the gospel. What is the significance of the above incident that made Luke incorporate it into his gospel narrative?

Through this passage, Luke brings out Jesus' understanding of his mission towards women. The crippled woman is the symbol of women all over the world, crippled by patriarchal and androcentric thought and behaviour patterns. A woman is born into a gender discriminative world, accepts it as her lot with a meekness that is demanded of her for survival and she lives a crippled existence from birth to death. As the liberator, Jesus' eyes are fixed on the most oppressed, namely, the woman and he makes it his mission to liberate her.

Woman crippled in her motherhood

The scriptures say,

"Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb?"⁹

Based on this verse homilies and books eulogise the unconditional love of a mother. This definitely is a man's experience of maternal love. Little girls have an altogether different story to tell. A woman can not only forget her nursing child but she can even kill the child if it is female. With no compassion she can kill the foetus in her womb if the high-tech medical intelligence tells her that it is female. This happens not just in one

8. Lk 13:10-13.

9. Is 49:15.

small village made famous by the media for female infanticide but in more places and households in India than human conscience would like to admit. Even in many other families that do not go to the extent of killing the infant, the girl child is not welcomed as much as the boy-child. She is made responsible for all the misfortunes that befall the family. Even when accepted and loved, a girl knows in her heart that her mother loves her brother more than her as proved by denied play, denied outdoor activity and at times denied or disrupted education in order to make her share the burden of household chores with her mother. For millions of little girls, the so called unconditional love of a mother is just a beautiful fiction. How is it possible for a woman who is ordained by God to give life, to destroy it so cruelly? Every mother who has killed her baby-girl attests that she had done it with her heart bleeding. But she was very firm in the murder all the same because she did not want her baby to go through the suffering that she herself was undergoing in the gender-biased society. Is not the androcentrically conditioned society guilty of pushing women into such extreme attitude and behaviour, crippling her in her God-given function as mother?

Woman crippled in her very being

The book of Genesis proclaims :

“So God created man in his own image in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.”¹⁰

The God-likeness that is attributed to man and woman alike in the creation narrative is not found in practice. It is not sufficient for a young woman to be intelligent, principled and have the capacity to earn a living, in order to qualify herself as a bride. She has to pay a big fat sum to buy a man to be her husband. Even during the dark days of slavery, the one who paid the price became the master and the one who was bought was the slave. But we find a strange reversal in the marriage ‘market’. The one who buys the bridegroom becomes his bonded slave for life

10. Gen 1:27.

and if she survives him even after his death, only as his widow. Buying him at a high price, she serves him all his life, seeing to his comfort in every way while he thinks he has the right to humiliate her whenever she does not please him. What is the meaning of the sacrament of marriage in a society whose hands are reeking with the blood of domestic violence and even dowry murders? The lives of women are considered so cheap and disposable that once a woman does not bring more money after marriage, she can be quietly disposed of. Dowry murders are not taking place among rare barbaric groups in some far flung parts of our globe. It is becoming so frequent and is found even among the so called respectable class in the society that if a woman is reported dead within the first few years of marriage, the police force suspects that it could be dowry murder. With all our 'pro life' slogans, we in the Indian Church, do not seem to be aware of the ramifications of the vicious practice of dowry and remain deaf-mutes before this custom among our people. While moral theology devotes much discussion to abortion in the event of rape, there is hardly any discussion on domestic violence or dowry murders. Is not a woman made cripple in her very being?

Woman deprived of personhood

A woman is looked on as an object and not as a person. She exists for the use of others and does not have a life of her own. So men think she can be made use of in any way without consulting her feelings. Such defective ideologies are communicated to women for the benefit of men; and women internalise them for the sake of survival and acceptance. A raped woman is considered as a broken object just to be thrown away while the rapist continues his life unaffected. The hateful trading in female body completes the objectification. It is not for eighteen years, as the biblical woman who was healed by Jesus, but for centuries and millennia that women had been kept crippled.

The new dawn

Pope John Paul II in his letter to women says,

Bringing to light the buried talents

In "mulieris Dignitatem", the present Pope quoting Pope Paul VI says,

"It is evident that women are meant to form part of the being and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear."²²

In the parable of the talents, the master is angry with the servant for burying in the ground the talent that was given him. Through this parable Jesus makes us know that he expects us to develop the talents given to us by God. But for long centuries, the talents of women were forcefully buried. It is imperative that these are brought out, developed and used for the good of the Church and the society. If concerted efforts are made in every level of the Church's living and working structures to actualize the potentialities of women, soon women can be installed in their rightful status of equal discipleship intended by Christ. The Christian men must purify themselves of the capitalistic attitude of considering and using women as cheap labour force. Being sons of the soil, it is quite easy for the Indian clergy to imbibe male chauvinism that is so rampant in the environment, unless they stand firm on gospel values. It is very commendable that the Church leadership in the person of the Pope is aware of the situation and is giving directives to establish women in their status of dignity as children of God and help them to live equal discipleship which is theirs through baptism. It is an urgent need of the hour because as the Pope warns,

"When women are prevented from truly being themselves, it results in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity."²³

22. Mulieris Dignitatem, no 1, p. 2.

23. Letter of Pope John Paul II to women, no. 3, p. 1.

Memories from the past

While the Pope's letter to the women seems to bring in the dawn of women liberation, yet, there are memories from the past that quite dampen our hope. In "Inter insigniores" (15 Oct. 1976), the sacred congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith says,

"But it must be noted that these ordinances probably inspired by the customs of the period, concern scarcely more than disciplinary practices of minor importance, such as the obligation imposed upon women to wear veil on the head (1 Cor 2:26); such requirements no longer have normative value."²⁴

In this passage, the sacred congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clearly states that wearing a veil on the head could be due to the culture of the first century Corinthian Church and that it is not normative any more. It is twenty years since this document was published and yet the Indian Church had not enlightened our women on this point. On the contrary, there are instances of women who were denied communion for approaching the communion rails without covering their heads. Veil on the head is a visible and powerful symbol of oppression of women in the society and in the Church. It is true that in cosmopolitan towns there are a few women who do not cover their heads in the Church. It is not because they are informed of the new thinking in the Church but because of the changes in society in the matters of dress. In many other places, if a woman does not veil her head in the Church, she is considered to be immodest and revolutionary. If twenty years are not enough to do something which can be done in as many days, one begins to despair when the Indian Church will take the Pope's letter seriously and implement it. But considering the urgency of his exhortation that his regret be transformed on the part of the whole Church into renewed commitment of fidelity to the gospel vision,²⁵ let

24. Inter insigniores, no. 4, p. 3.

25. Letter of pope John Paul II to women, no. 3, p. 1.