

SACRIFICIAL COMPASSION FOR MY NEIGHBOUR

LUKE 10:25-27

1. Introduction

Rural communities in general, and farm workers in particular, have a history of their human rights being abused and they are confronted with various social malpractices.

Illegal evictions, unfair dismissals, unfair labour practices, assaults, rape and even murder by farmers are part of the daily diet of farm workers. More than a million people have been kicked off farms during the first ten years of democracy.

Farm workers constitute one of the most vulnerable categories of workers, especially those who live on the farms. The farmers are almost in control of every aspect of their lives. The farmers decide (who) and when workers will receive visitors; which church denomination can come and have church services on the farms; what political activity, if any will take place; whether or not they can join a union; when the children must leave school; whether the children can continue to stay on the farm after completing school etc.

Other social problems that farming and rural communities face are: alcohol abuse; TB; HIV/Aids; drug abuse; gangsterism and crime; teenage pregnancies; unemployment; illiteracy; foetal alcohol syndrome; domestic violence; etc.

Some of these hardships endured by the poorest of the poor, (even though they are crimes against these communities) are regarded as civil matters, hence we see the perpetrators are not significantly deterred and get off with a mere slap on the wrist.

These communities are in many instances voiceless. They have no organization to fight for them. They are partially or totally illiterate and do not know their rights. And yet we have witnessed the large scale deregistration of independent trade unions, who with their limited resources, try to render a service to these communities in the face of hostile opposition from the farmers.

2. Evictions

Despite the Extension of Security of Tenure Act 62 of 1997, the evictions of farm workers have reached pandemic proportions. In 2005, Nkuzi Development and Social Surveys completed a national survey on eviction of farm workers. The survey found that between 1984 and 2004, 1.7million people were evicted. It was found that the pace of evictions has not slowed down since the advent of democracy. The survey estimated that 942 303 people were evicted (1994 -2004) compared to the 737 114 1984-1994. Just between 2003-2004, 195 121 farm workers were evicted.

These evictions cause serious hardships for evictees. Displacements not only affect the breadwinners who have contributed so much to the growth of the industry but entire communities and families. It is particularly disruptive to school going children.

As far as evictions are concerned we need to understand first and foremost, who the evictees are. In many instances they are farm workers who have been living on the farm for the better part of their lives if not for all their lives. They are often semi-literate and sometimes totally illiterate.

Evictions are also the cause of the moral breakdown of our society especially on farms and rural areas. Families are torn apart; they are robbed of the right to family life. I refer to the Ertjieskloof case where 7 families are sharing one space without being separated by walls. They have been robbed of their dignity as human beings; they have been robbed of the right to privacy and are forced to raise their children under these circumstances.

What are the reasons given for evictions? Dismissals; retrenchments; sale of the farm; and the farmer needs his house.

Many of the houses on the farms were built with grant money for the explicit purpose to house farm workers. Farm workers are facing evictions because farmers want to diversify. They want to convert the labourers' houses into self-catering units to make bigger profits. Houses that were acquired to house farm workers are now used to generate profit as B&B establishments.

Farmers, abusing the ignorance of farm workers in terms of the legal processes, push eviction orders through the courts, knowing very well that the victims don't have a clue about how to defend themselves. They get the order through under the guise of an urgent application. Workers get evicted without the Land Claims Court ever having had sight of the eviction order for the purpose of ratification. Workers get evicted without alternative accommodation. Workers get evicted without the court being informed by a social worker concerning the situation and circumstances of the occupiers.

On numerous occasions workers found themselves stranded because when they woke up one morning they learned that the farm has a new owner. The previous owner is gone. The only thing that the new owner is interested in is for them to vacate his house. His argument is that he has no employment relationship with them. Their contract was not transferred to him as per S197 of the LRA, even though the farm has been sold as a going concern.

Farm workers get dismissed by the farmer and promised that they can stay on. Three months later they receive a notice from the farmer that he is going to approach the court for an eviction order. The 30 days to refer the original dismissal to the CCMA has now expired and an application for condonation for a late referral must be made. (I must hastily add that such applications are almost always declined). The only other remedy available to the farm worker in such a case is the High Court, but due to the cost factor it is not an option for them.

This is indeed a violation of their constitutional right that all are equal before the courts. They can't exercise their rights because of lack of money. There can be no administrative justice for farm workers unless they have free access to all the courts of our country.

Government with all its good intentions included in the LRA the farm workers, promulgated Esta, the Sectoral Determination for Agricultural Workers; the Employment Equity Act and the Skills Development Act. These laws came and went, without even getting close to touching the lives of the majority of farm workers. The farmers are very well aware that the Department of Labour lacks the capacity to enforce these laws and so they just simply ignore them.

However, what they, through their consultants and lawyers have learned well, was to exploit the loopholes of these laws and use it against the farm workers. Classical example here is the ways they use Esta to so call legally evict farm workers.

3. Compassion for my neighbour, the farmworker

It is in this context that I ask you to consider the parable of the "Good Samaritan". Especially the question: Who is my neighbour?

A biblical name for the drying up of compassion is hardness of heart. The biblical images of hardening one's heart are used to describe individuals and communities that have become blind to the pain and suffering of other people. Hardness of heart blocks grace and denies God's spirit, which calls us to be compassionate in our personal conduct and to build compassion in our communities and institutions.

When there is lack of compassion in societies, it is often perceived that God has abandoned His people. When the truth about Auschwitz concentration camp, the massacre of Hiroshima and the senseless killings in Vietnam was revealed, God was put on trial. Is God guilty of hardness of heart? Has God abandoned the world?

Can there be authentic Christian faith that does not honestly wrestle with the agony of the human situation? What kind of God reigns in the midst of widespread hunger, poverty, oppression and the eviction and dismissal of voiceless farmworkers? What does it mean to be a Christian in world that is subjected to a recession, a world that experiences an economic meltdown? The question of God's hardness of heart or abandonment of this world can be a necessary step towards our involvement in the world and the plight of farmworkers as responsible Christians. World poverty, oppression and exploitation should put on trial both human compassion and our belief in an all powerful God. Because, Christians who seriously consider the reality of hunger, economic exploitation, and injustice, eventually meet a God who suffers.

The agony of the world, reflected in the pain of the millions of starving children, causes God to suffer. The suffering of both the world and God is alleviated when I and you become instruments of healing, hope and justice. God works through our compassionate action. Conversely, God suffers, and hunger and injustice thrive when you and I lack compassionate action.

And all of this Jesus demonstrate in a very practical way through a parable. I have heard several sermons on this parable and I am sure that some of you have even heard more. But I am almost certain that the majority of these sermons concluded with the appeal to be nice to other people.

During the days of our struggle against apartheid, I could not tolerate the injustice that I saw, nor could I accept the indifference to injustice often reflected in the conduct of many Christian, including members of the Lutheran Church. People who had opened their hearts to my needs when I was in detention seemed to harden their hearts to the agony of the rest of South Africa. It was easier for them to identify with me than with my fellow comrades. They had a narrow definition of compassion. Compassion seemed bound by the familiar, the noncontroversial. Their definition of compassion was nearly

always associated with personal relationships and divorced from social problems such as apartheid, oppression and economic exploitation.

It is in this context that we need to consider the response of Jesus when one of the scribes who “desiring to justify himself” ask Jesus “and who is my neighbour”. Jesus responds with a description of a real-life situation. Many of the priests who served in the temple in Jerusalem lived in Jericho. Some of them were returning home after completing their duties in the temple. Robberies were common along the road to Jericho. A priest and a Levite come across a victim who was robbed and passed by on the other side of the road. But the Samaritan, when he saw him, he was moved with pity, and went to him and bandaged his wounds...and took care of him. But what is it that Jesus is saying to us through this parable?

1. Firstly, the parable of the Good Samaritan is not about being good or bad; it is a story about compassion. We often interpret the meaning of this parable from the perspective of one of the characters e.g. the Samaritan, the Levite or the priest. The problem with such an interpretation is that we individualise and personalise the meaning of the parable and therefore lose much of what it is saying. We either bask in the false glory of self-righteousness behaviour or we sink deeper into guilt, which reinforces our sense of our own worthlessness. The truth is that we are all of the characters in the story: scribe, priest, Levite, Samaritan, and victim. Each one of us is capable of denying or giving birth to compassion.
2. Secondly, Jesus defines neighbour in a far broader sense than the scribe expected. The Jews could not imagine a good or compassionate Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans were enemies. The example of a compassionate Samaritan was repulsive to the scribe.

When Jesus asks: “Who proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” the scribe could not bring himself to use the word “Samaritan”.

He instead said “the one who had mercy on him”. Jesus, by using a compassionate Samaritan in the story, is telling the scribe that the breaking into history of God’s kingdom involves a redefinition of neighbour.

3. Thirdly, Jesus gives the term “neighbour” the force of a verb. The neighbour is someone who seeks out others in need, he “neighbours” them. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote: “The neighbour was the Samaritan who approached the wounded man and made him his neighbour. The neighbour ... is not he whom I find in my path, but rather in whose path I place myself, he whom I approach and actively seek”.

Being a neighbour implies action. We create a neighbourly relationship between ourselves and others through compassionate action. Compassion or neighbourliness is not simply a matter of sentiment or good intentions. It involves action that seeks to effectively alter the situation of those who are in need. The Samaritan “had compassion ... bound his wounds ... set him on his own donkey ... brought him to an inn ... took care of him ... and gave” money to the innkeeper. We become neighbours through compassionate action.

4. Fourthly, in the parable Jesus tells us that it is easier to be compassionate with those whom we know well or who are similar to us. Conversely, it is more difficult to be compassionate with those who are racially, economically, nationally or otherwise different. Jews despised Samaritans; they were considered as being racially inferior. Jews did not consider Samaritans their neighbours.

"Crossing over to the other side of the road" can be a metaphor for distancing ourselves from the claims of others on our humanity. Suburban development is a means by which middle-and upper-class families physically separate themselves from the poor. Ideology is an effective tool of separation. The word "communist" distort debate about key issues. Racism and sexism are other common ways of keeping individuals and groups of people "out". So it is clear that we have become very creative in creating vehicles that can take us "to the other side of the road", to justify our indifference, our aloofness towards the poorest of the poor, one of the most vulnerable category of workers.

Against this backdrop of physical, ideological and sociological separation from the poor, the parable of the compassionate Samaritan reminds us that compassion means identification with the needs and humanity of our neighbours.

Samaritans were despised, ridiculed, abused, and oppressed. Perhaps his own daily experiences of oppression made the Samaritan in Jesus' story more likely to be in tune with the needs of someone who was beaten and left for dead on the road to Jericho. Jesus' call to compassionate action cuts through stereotypes of race, culture, and ideology, and affirms our common humanity, our oneness with God.

5. Fifthly, compassion is not something that can be legislated. Levites and priests were religious professionals. They are expected to be models of the faith. Even though all of them, including the Samaritan, lived under the Torah, only the Samaritan acted compassionately. There is no indication that the Samaritan acted out of a sense of duty. The point is not that laws are bad or that Jesus was opposed to the law. Jesus was a Jew who had great respect for Jewish law. However, Jesus opposed legalism, which violates the spirit and intent of the laws of God which was meant to encourage justice and compassion. Jesus understood that laws can be circumvented, ignored, or interpreted inflexibly. Compassion and the situation of the neighbour, on the other hand, daily implore believers to open their hearts to the pain of others and respond to their situation with compassionate action.

Laws are important but they cannot of themselves overcome hardness of heart or ensure justice. Most of the economic policies that result in widespread hunger are legal. Despair, indifferences, callousness, and selfishness can be legal. Fair and equitable legal systems are a necessary component of justice but they are not a substitute for compassion.

6. Sixthly, compassion is risky, it can be dangerous. Compassion demands emotional and physical risk. We need to rip open our conscience and explore our complicity in the suffering of others. Those of us who are adequately fed should acknowledge our fear of being victims. We should also be honest and say that we are glad that we are not hungry but that we often express our gratitude in ways that are fearful and self-centred rather than compassionate.

One reason why we are afraid to take risks for others is our enslavement to a sense of powerlessness and guilt. We assume inadequacy of our response to complicated issues such as hunger, evictions, poverty and injustice and thereby condemn ourselves and others to self-fulfilling prophecies of gloom.

4. Conclusion

Compassion may involve risky bodily harm as well as emotional distress. There are lots of examples of how "good Samaritans" who dared to intervene to help others are themselves beaten, killed or jailed. For example there is Dietrich Boenhoeffer a German Lutheran pastor who was hanged by the Nazi regime because of his attempts to save the lives of the Jews during World War II. To the point where he even participated in an attempt to assassinate Hitler. Some of you will remember Corrie Ten Boom, the woman from Netherland who worked with the Dutch underground to save the lives of the Jews during World War II. She continues to save the Jews even when she knew that was under surveillance. In the end she and the rest of her family were arrested. Her father died 10 days after the arrest in prison. Her brother died shortly after his release from prison due to sickness that he got in the prison. Her sister died in the concentration camp. The Ten Boom family showed compassion. Sacrificial Compassion. They paid the price. I remember how some people wanted the church to take action against me when I was arrested for defending the farmworkers. I am now again charged and have to appear in court on 17th November 2009 for defending farmworkers. Maybe there might be again people who will feel that the church must deal with me. According to Lev 21:11 "a high priest must not enter a place where there is a dead body. He must not make himself unclean, even for his father or mother". Maybe the priest was afraid that the "half dead" victim was dead and by toughing him, he might be compromised. His position as a priest might be in jeopardy. To show compassion might be risky. There might be a price to pay. But how can we still consider our sacrifices when Jesus did not hesitate to pay with His life for my soul because He showed compassion for you and for me. In the weeks, months and years to come, our faith will be tested, our brand of Christianity will be challenged. People will knock on our windows at robots, begging for money. People will be knocking on our doors at home, begging for food and old clothes, whilst others will fall victim to the brutal capitalist system. They might be subjected to exploitation and oppression. How will you respond? Will you, create a vehicle that will take you "to the other side of the road. Let us emulate Jesus. Let us go out there and show compassion to our neighbour, the farmworker, even if it demands a price.

AMEN!!