

The Bible: Four Centre of Faith, Part 3

Exodus: 15:1-13, Yr. B., September 20, 2015

In the year 2000, I was a doctoral student in New York City. In order to show us different teaching methods, my teacher Mary Boys invited a special friend of her to come to our class as a guest lecturer. She is a mathematician. This teacher told us she was about to teach the same concept through two different teaching methods. The first method was the traditional blackboard pedagogy. She picked up a chalk and started writing mathematical equations on the blackboard; she taught as she wrote. Occasionally she turned her head and looked at the students, then continued to explain. I knew that she was demonstrating how math was taught in the past. To me, what she said wasn't important; the method of teaching was important. But I was surprised my classmates, whom were all seminarians, constantly writing down everything appeared on the blackboard. I believe this is a natural consequence of years of schooling. We can say that they have become addicted, or even poisoned. Anytime teachers write on the blackboard, students will copy. Also need to write fast. Otherwise, the information can be wiped out. She asked me if there is any problem, I basically do not know what to ask, so I kept silent.

After a while, she erased everything on the blackboard. She used another way to teach the same thing; it was mainly through dialogue and metaphor. She asked: Do you want to know the distance between the planets? Do you want to know how big is the universe? In order to understand, "time" is one of the main factors. There are many invisible factors, so mathematicians use imaginative note such as "x". The whole time she spoke directly to us most of the time, with writings on the blackboard. I found the whole process very interesting, because slowly I understand what is behind the mathematics equation. I found that mathematics has another mission, that is to understand the mysteries of the universe. I said to myself, if someone explained this to me when was young, I would be interested to study mathematics. But when I was young, learning mathematics was boring. People only concern the accuracy of answers. No one ever told me mathematics is useful to unlock some of mysteries of the universe.

Everyone has read the Bible. But it is possible that we have not been told the perspectives from which to read the Bible. Today, I introduce four centre or perspectives from which to read the Bible. To say four, it means it is a generalization. I understand to summarize the Bible into four perspectives have its

danger. So I acknowledge there are inadequacies. It is just my suggestion. If you think reasonable, it may help you to read the Bible.

Exodus: A Liberating God

The scripture that we have just read concerns ancient Israelites after they have crossed the Red Sea, the people sang a song of praise. Although it says Moses led the people to praise God, history points out leading people to praise God was mostly the role of women.

Exodus is a story about God's involvement in human history. God stood on the side of the suffering slaves, and God brought them to a safe place where they could establish themselves. The Bible says it is a land with flowing milk and honey. We see a liberating God.

The Exodus occupies a foundational role in the Hebrew Bible. That story laid the foundation for ancient Jewish people to understand God. It is also the foundation of the Jewish culture. This story paints a vivid account how the ancient Jews left the land of suffering and entered into a better place. Although the whole Bible has many different books and writings, they were composed based on this assumption they learned from this story: That God cares about the suffering people. God will listen to the prayer of suffering people, and God would raise up leaders to liberate them. Biblical concept such as salvation is not abstract. Salvation isn't just about personal spiritual state, but has concrete societal and economics ramifications.

Exodus isn't just simply a religious story. This liberating God carries a clear and strong political overtone. At different times, because of different political backgrounds in various times, even Christian countries have found it difficult to hear it.

When Christians read the Bible, we must know this liberating God, because it lays the foundation for understanding the Bible. In the past, this has been a forgotten focus. Salvation is understood mainly in the personal spiritual dimension. The story of Exodus prevents Christians from isolating themselves from the political issues of the day. It challenges a simplistic understanding of salvation. Christians cannot forget part of their callings is to help the marginalized people of society. We need to remember the God whom we worship is a liberating God.

Prophets: Seeking justice

Seek righteousness of God in the Bible as can be seen everywhere, such as Isaiah 1:17 says:

"learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Jeremiah 5: 27-28 says:

"Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy."

When you hear the words of Jeremiah, I hope you do not feel embarrassed. If you think you are slightly overweighed, Jeremiah was not accusing you, unless you had done evil! These words are to show how God care about social justices and the situations of suffering people. It is an extension of Exodus' teaching.

I like to use Amos as a representative in this tradition because his words directly confirm this area of concern. Amos helped us to understand God is a God who seek justice. Amos was an unwelcome ancient prophet. Please note that the people whom Amos addressed were not those who have no faith or worshipping idols. Instead, they all worshipped God. God blessed them and they were no longer slaves as in the days in Egypt. So people of faith when they have political power, how should they treat one another?

In Amos' era, the powerful leaders of the time built themselves expensive homes, the Bible says they were ivory houses. Israel does not produce ivory, that was the consequence of trade. They established unreasonable trade policy, so that a handful of people in the country lived comfortable lives, but the rest of the people suffered. Amos declared that God does not like their worship. God wants to see justice on earth. Amos 5: 21-24 says:

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Amos preached at time when the nation experienced economic prosperity and political stability. It is when they experienced stability, how should resources be distributed? How society treats poor people? Who can live comfortable lives and who can't?

Amos reassures that the God whom we worship cares for all people. God does not only care our spiritual lives. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we see a very clear direction. God wants human society to be fair and just. Amos is a role model among the prophets because he stands alongside with other prophets condemning social injustices. They ask: Why can't politicians exercise compassion toward the people?

We live today in a free and democratic society. We are able to change the social system to make it more humane and just. Together with the prophets, we ask: Is it too much to ask politicians to exercise compassion? Politics isn't just about economics. The true purpose of politics is people; it involves equity, compassion, and fair policies. This is a traditional the prophets remind us. Our country is now entering an election period. We do not look at whether the candidate is a Christian or not. We need to ask whether the candidate exercise fairness, compassion, and generosity. This is not socialism, but to honour God's desire.

Gospel: Serving People

The gospel introduces us a God who is a servant God. The Bible says that God so loved the world, that Jesus gave us his only Son.

The first section of the first chapter of the gospel of John, all the English Bible says : "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Greek "logos" into English of "word", is a noun.

Chinese Bible NIV translation of this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The English word "logos" translated into "word". But the Spanish Bible says: "In the beginning there was the "Verb"

Those who read the Spanish Bible will find Jesus is a verb, that there is dynamic, he is active. This understanding is worth considering. It is very interesting and challenging.

This verb is Jesus, God's son being to us and lived among us, full of truth. This word sums up the life of Jesus on earth well, putting faith into action. We are not just reading a book. The Bible is not rigid. Not the so-called written down in black and white document. This document is to express the giver of life. Jesus' actions expressed the desire for justice, implementation of mercy for others, forgive each other, and love our neighbor as ourselves. This is not a philosophy, but to put faith into action. To this end, we learn to serve others. Faith is a verb.

Paul's Letters: It is All Grace

Paul's letters were personal letters Paul wrote to different churches, at the time of writing, he was not thinking about writing the Bible. It was later when the church liked his messages so much that they included them as part of the Bible. The original name of Paul was Saul, he arrested those who followed Jesus and handed them over to the government to be imprisoned. But on the road to Damascus, Saul experienced the risen Jesus, and Jesus sent him to be a special apostles. He was sent to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul preached to the Gentiles and he introduced them gracious God. This gracious is whom ancient Hebrews have worshipped but God welcome the Gentiles just like the Jews. This is all grace, God's unconditional love. Paul was not talking about empty philosophy, but his personal experience of God.

Jews heard the rumours that Paul taught Gentile believers to worship the Lord but didn't require them to circumcise. It caused a dispute. Acts Chapter 15 recorded this case to us. Jewish believers insisted Gentile must comply to the law of Moses. If not, they can't be saved. They made it very serious. So Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the apostles. In the process, they heard that Gentiles also received the gospel, and received the mark of the Holy Spirit, just like Jews. Finally we decided not put this burden onto Gentiles. Acts Chapter 15: 11 says:

"We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Jews treat circumcision seriously, it is about observing God's command and to be faithful to God. But the decision of Jerusalem was an important milestone, they told the church the basis for welcome is God's grace. The grace of God through Jesus has accepted them, the church cannot restrict people to worship God. Jews should continue to observe circumcision and other festivals as ways to worship God, but these are not the eternal requirements other people, people of other culture must abide.

For this reason, we who are being welcomed on this basis, our message to the world is this: You are all loved by God. You, like us, are able to enter the house of God because of grace. Whoever you are, come, let us experience God together. The Church is not behavior officer, or regulations police. If people confess Jesus as the risen Lord, with all their hearts and souls, they are our friends on the road of faith. This is what it means to be justified by grace, the foundation of welcome and acceptance. All other things may be valuable, are secondary in terms of welcoming to be part of God's family.

Finally, let me sum up. "Liberating God", "Seeking Justice", "Serving People", "It is All Grace." These can be used to understand The United Church of Canada and its direction. Faith is not only about personal spiritual growth, but also work toward fair societies, active social action as ways to share the good news, help the marginalized people who have been excluded. These are from the Bible.

However, today most churches when they preach the gospel, often they forget the dimension of social justice, sometimes even merciful heart and compassion are gone. When The United Church of Canada implements hospitality, tolerance, forgiveness, inclusion and generosity, some Christians think we have abandoned the gospel. We have not! I'm not saying this denomination is perfect; quite the contrary, I believe that there are many rooms for improvement. Today, with these words, I hope to give you a positive understanding of The United Church of Canada, and be proud of it. When you face challenging comments from others, I hope you know how to answer. This month's sermon manuscripts are available for everyone to read. I am not boosting my ego, but to give everyone a chance to think. I believe that if we have a positive understanding of the church, then it is helpful for us to do outreach and develop ministry for the future.

Let us pray.