

## **Victim theology - where justice and peace is shaped and articulated**

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*Bishop Duleep's address to the  
recent World Council of Churches.*

The harsh realities of our world and our communion in the God of Life urge us to endorse our Assembly theme as a timely prophetic petition.

It presses our parent-protector to arrest the terrible trends of human degradation and to bring speedy relief to all who groan.

In light of those who promote the ways of aggressive greed, it is a defiant call for repentance and visible change, now.

For the restless faithful within the fragmented Body of Christ, it opens a door to a common global witness.

As a fellowship of Churches sensitive to the plight of marginalised victims, it is indeed the mother of all petitions.

And, within the framework of this plenary our theme compels an intervention on behalf of the millions of children, women and men, who though made in God's image,



remain crushed and trapped at the margins of human societies.

### ***Jesus and Prophetic Diakonia***

The decisive victim vindicating act of God in Jesus undergirds our theme. It recurs in the behaviour of Jesus, who relentlessly searches out those on the margins; victims, who in the Biblical narrative long for exodus under violent regimes, suffer untold economic oppression and are entitled to Torah justice, such as widows, orphans and stranger-immigrants.

More explicitly, these are persons expected to stay alive without security, be human without dignity, harvest a land no longer theirs and feed their children from empty plates. They are the unseen real who fill the earth: the 'no people' with a 'no tomorrow' to whom Jesus announced an emphatic 'yes'.

Immersed in this world of marginalised victims, Jesus discloses a dynamic re-arrangement of right living and shared obligations

acceptable to God, which He called the 'Reign of God'. His passionate search for the marginalised victim—a sign of this new arrangement—highlights the diakonial character of Jesus.

But diakonial essence converges on prophetic transformation. The victim must be brought into the middle of the discourse. So a vulnerable woman in the midst of a male mob exposes moral hypocrisy; a child in the middle poses a corrective against a universal adult obsession; a marginalised woman engages in profound theological discussion on the omnipresence of God; a half-caste in the centre role of a stirring parable shatters the myth of ethno-religious superiority; a despised woman announces the Christ through a stunning prophetic act, and so on.

The system however refuses to surrender the gain of its greed to any compromise, and the victim's advocate is eventually victimised. But God, consistent in God's victim centred decisiveness, restores the advocate-victim to the centre of the human discourse. Humankind since then has been compelled to take note of Jesus's victim centred thrust, and to dare to imagine a world in which the empowered victim and the enlightened violator will sit at the same table. This is the Good News.

### ***Victim Theology***

Like it was then, the Good News is today to be articulated amidst the Pharaohs, the Caesars, the Herods and the Chief Priests of our times. In the Biblical idiom these are the enemy aggressors who mock righteousness, rob others of their humanity, accumulate the spoils of economic violence and rape mother earth; to generate the Jubilee Review. Within nations, across the globe and in a strange mix of fierce competition and subtle collaboration, the common task of the enemy aggressor is to deny the existence of the victim and resist attempts to restore her to the middle.

This is why when change is called for, advocacy is vilified as terrorism, truth silenced through censorship, negotiations humiliated by war, dissent intimidated by force, accountability replaced by cliché and integrity trumped by impunity. Indeed, attempts to clean the house are cleverly turned around to pack it with more sinister demons.

It is in these circumstances of brazen authoritarianism that victim theology emerges. This theology initially reclaims the centre of the discourse for the marginalised victim; just as Jesus did. It is from here that the enemy aggressor is identified and his obligations and needs discerned, and the ensuing cycle of repentance and forgiveness, truth and mercy, integration and community reconstructed to pave the way for justice and peace. The

exclusion of the marginalised victim from the centre, as is the case—for instance—in Sri Lanka today, ironically deprives all Sri Lankans of justice and peace.

Victim theology is then the indispensable stance from which justice and peace is shaped and articulated. It exposes the deception of 'war for peace' and continues to be the unwavering perspective of all who labour for a just world. It is the ecumenical meeting point of all like-minded partners and the crucible in which peace theology marinates. Consequently, any theology disconnected from victims or supportive of war in a violent world robbed of justice and peace, amounts to a mutilation of the heart and mind of Jesus.

### ***Presence and Voice***

Victim theology invokes a rhythmic spirituality of sustained pastoral presence among victims and a measured prophetic voice which calls enemy aggressors to accountability; just as Jesus did. It strives to bring the marginalised victim dignity and the aggressor to his senses, thereby reducing the alienation between the two and widening opportunities for justice and peace. This need not be further complicated. Our children teach us



to embrace the victim and engage the bully when the stone is thrown.

Pastoral presence and prophetic voice consequently sum up our shared witness. Since wealth and funding are not prerequisites in this witness, it empowers poor churches to serve Jesus with dignity. As a fellowship of Churches it has the potential to free us from the enticement of mammon and enhance our credibility in God's world, overflowing with victims of violence and injustice. It is none other than these early traits in Pope Francis that bring a sign of hope today.

The shift to presence and voice, however, has never been easy. Today's enemy is unimaginably sophisticated. He fights back when the ethic of his treasury is questioned. Market forces and military forces are kindred spirits. The catch words are security and development; but only for those with

deadly armaments and questionable wealth.

But our Churches have seen too much of the de-humanisation of the victim to exchange integrity for cordiality and our youth in particular are growing disillusioned with a neutral witness. So, we are compelled to take sides within the framework of an inclusive reign of God, with healing for all. If not, our efforts would be in vain.

If Jesus is the host at our gatherings —as He should be—an investment in victim theology is imperative. It is then that holy impatience will provoke hard talk on justice and peace, every day and not every seven years or seven times seven years.

### ***Being 'The Church'***

Victim theology inevitably redefines the character of Christian Community. The Church is much more than those who believe and belong. In a world drenched in exploitative violence with a corresponding urgency for freedom and rights, our behaviour more than ever defines our identity. While even passive cooperation with the enemy aggressor amounts to betrayal, presence and voice with the victim demonstrates faithfulness. But the stakes are high and some of us will betray our common calling.

Such a worrying possibility points us to the feet washing enacted by Jesus to induce faithfulness in circumstances of lurking betrayal. This memorable act, which contains the ingredients of a Sacrament, must return to the liturgical centre to stir and nourish our spirituality. There can be no stronger symbolic demonstration of Jesus's energy for faithful journeying than to touch and refresh one another's feet; as Jesus did and asked us to do.

As an added bonus, the feet washing at the centre will fill the frustrating Eucharistic vacuum at our ecumenical gatherings with a fitting alternative till we are ready to break bread together. It may even move more of our gatherings to warmer locations in the south!

### ***Conclusion - The Mystery of Kingdom Transformation***

Justice and peace are God's free and priceless gifts. They are beyond the manufacture or manipulation of humans. But within the mystery of Kingdom transformation, human endeavour is somehow indispensable for the growth of justice and peace.

Our Assembly theme is therefore a moment of grace. It invites us to journey with the God of Life who leads us to engage the manifold manifestations of violence and injustice in God's world; not the least, the rapid resurgence of

senseless civil wars, ethno-religious extremism and different expressions of poverty and disease which simply multiply victims before a bewildered world.

However such an engagement will only make a difference—if we strive with the resilience of the world's poor when desperate for water. We are to bring both hands to the shovel; so that the God of Life will make justice and peace flow like streams of living water to refresh and renew the whole created world.