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Liberty to the Captives: Devotional Cameos of Liberation

I. Introduction

There is a thread that runs through the Bible: it is the study of God's involvement in the realities of human beings and communities and the whole *oikumene*. It is a study of God's intervention — not in the past only but in the present and with a promise for the future. The relationship is a dynamic one which God describes in the manner of self-disclosure. God is the great I AM; not a God of the past but also of the present and future whose self-disclosures are unending.

This disclosure occurs in real-life contexts and in liberating events in the experiences of individuals and peoples. Liberation connotes the exercise of power but power used to save, to redeem, to rescue, to reconcile and to counteract the principalities and powers which enslave, exploit and hold victims in bondage with psychological fear, sickness, poverty, stress, depression and so on.

Obviously, matters of enslavement, exploitation, bondage, suffering and vulnerability are not questions of literary beauty or a history of one race of people. No. They are situations of power-encounter. They apply to the whole universe and to particular contexts. They are not a matter of erudition or philosophy, but of life.

So, the contexts are our individual lives and the experiences of people in our various countries. We all come from situations of brokenness, where

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political, socio-economic and religious fragmentations have left a great number marginalized and impoverished. Even in the midst of affluence are cankerworms.

We must reflect on the meaning of Christ in those situations as well as in our own fears, and hopes and confrontations with impossible conditions. As Jesus said in his very first sermon, these situations are the reason for his coming:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim *liberty to the captives* and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.” (Lk. 4:18-19)

II. Cameos

Cameo 1: Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea. Exodus 14.

We are all familiar with the exodus story probably from our Sunday School days. But they say that familiarity breeds contempt or, in this case, lack of attention to the meaning behind the events. Some people would like to read the exodus event as one strand in the Jewish myth of origin. Deuteronomy 26: 5-10 leaves that strong impression. But look around the world in which we live; evidence abounds of racism, apartheid, political disenfranchisement, military tyranny and, caste system. There are many people who are unable to enjoy simple rights such as freedom of speech, association and worship or even movement.

In Johannesburg, colored people working in Jan Smut International Airport are not allowed to move from the floor on which they are assigned to another. Oppressive governments make it impossible for the people to be truly human. If you were involved or conscious of the power exercised over you and your own vulnerability or inability to escape, the most devastating feeling is hopelessness and frustration. How long, O Lord, how long will evil triumph? Like the exilic feeling, hopes are built and dashed

as the prospects of an end move into the dark clouds, and shadow overcasts humanity.

The exodus saga opens with such a background. As in the story of Job, the opening are words from a monologue in God's kingdom. God is very concerned with events in our world. Indeed, it is more than concern, which may leave the impression that God is out there and we are here. On the contrary, God says that:

- (a) my victory over the king will bring me honor
- (b) the Egyptians will know that I *am* the Lord (14:4)

Injustice in any shape or form is a dishonor to God, a rejection of God and a denial that the great I AM is the Lord of the universe. God, therefore, intervenes because his cause is the cause of the victims of injustice. He is on the side of the oppressed; he does not enjoy the humiliation and suffering of the oppressed. As Gayraud Wilmore has said, "The violence perpetuated against the oppressed is violence against God. Their death is God's assassination."

Quite often social scientists analyze the political and socio-economic trends as if an invisible, scientific force created structures. But the exodus story leads us to see that men create force. He feels dishonored, rejected and denied. Operators of unjust structures do not know that "I AM" is the Lord of the universe. This fact carries immense implications. It empowers us to resist and warns us against compromising with such structures. It is so easy for educated and professional people to compromise because we are spared the full onslaught of oppressive systems. Indeed, we may be the agents of oppression.

The story says more. Christians sometimes become conscientized and aware of rampant inequalities and poverty — material and spiritual — in their social contexts. They feel anger and jump into political action fully assured that they are engaged in the Good Old Cause. They soon find that political action is full of ambiguities. They find on the same bench or picket line, conscientized men who are prepared to resort to evil,

human ways in the struggle. Motivations vary. Self-pride or publicity-seeking guide some. Idealogues shout loudly; humanistic philosophies rage as others urge paranoic resort to violence. The last line of Exodus 14:4 is quite instructive as a guide to Christians: "The Israelites did as they were told."

The stress is on *obedience* to the word of God in the fight against injustice. The yardstick in the heat of involvement is this: am I doing what the Lord told me? As the serpent wisely queried Eve — What did God say? Exodus 13:21 stresses the same fact. Christians involved in the struggle for social injustice must have the Lord in front of them. The pillar of cloud must always be in front of you by day and the pillar of fire by night. We must fight injustice but must be aware of the danger of self-glorification which comes very easily to human beings.

The story says more. Other ambiguities exist: those we fight for may not want rescue. Sometimes we may be aware of our weakness but may not have the will to the extent that the people cried out, "We told you to leave us alone and let us go on being slaves" (14:12).

Variations of this could be found in people who are always complaining, moaning, murmuring but never able to lift a finger to rescue themselves or allow others to intervene. Ignorance in our rural populations also breeds resistance. Thus, the foe is sometimes without and often within. The lack of will to resist the tyrant is perhaps the strongest succor to unjust wielders of powers. As my people say, count your teeth with your tongue: remember your reasons for not fighting back, however urbane. What does this passage say to you? The penchant to murmur without the will to resist is often the pastime of Christian people. We murmur from inside our homes and among friends and cautiously couch our murmurs from the pulpit while ensuring that no feathers are ruffled and that people are not instigated to fight back. Some churches douse themselves with conservative theology as an opium — an enervating substance that dulls the senses. It helps innocuous murmuring.

But amidst our murmuring and weakness, in spite of ourselves, God acts

decisively. He provides a vanguard armed with the breastplate of faith. We, thus, hear Moses calling out, v. 13 "Don't be afraid! Stand your ground. You will see what the Lord will do to save you *today*. The Lord will fight for you. All you have to do is keep still."

These two powerful verses say quite a lot: it is God who in his mercy seeks us and saves us. He does so at our weakest moments. So, there is no place for boasting and no mistaking of the source of our salvation. In the "holy wars," Gideon is an example of many instances when the agent is put in the back seat so that the face of God will be clear, so that we could sing with Moses, "The Lord is my strong defender; *He is the one who has saved me*. He is my God, and I will praise Him" (15:2).

Equally intriguing is the timing which heightens the level of faith: the people watched on the one side as the best of Egyptian military swooped on them. They turned to the other side and saw the water — especially if the scene was around the Suez and Gulf of Aquaba. They found themselves stuck between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea. Even Moses faltered as the Lord rebuked him, "why are you crying for help? Tell the people to move forward!"

What? Where to?! You could feel the emotional intensity, incredulity and hopelessness. In our personal lives and in the experiences of our communities, we have experienced such moments of despair.

I am sure that at such moments, we could not predict *how* salvation would come; some may even doubt whether salvation would come. You may have wished to repeat the advice to Job: curse the Lord and die. The children of Israel could not decipher God's mysterious ways. But God acted decisively. The water parted, the Israelites crossed and Pharaoh's whole army drowned. As Moses sang, "Your right hand, Lord, is awesome in power" (15:16), it was a power encounter in which God confronted the forces of injustice. It is political dynamite, a manifesto which stokes the fire of hope among those living under oppression. They can always look up and say:

“Lord, who among the gods is like you? (15:11) Who is like you, wonderful in holiness? Who can work miracles and mighty acts like yours?”

God still performs miracles *today*. He still hears and sees our sufferings, anxieties and dilemmas. Fear less, doubt less and you will be liberated to see the *awesome power* of God. We believe that the growing strength of unjust powers is a phase of hardening of heart before their crash. We *know* that: “You, Lord, will be king forever and ever.” And, therefore, the shadow shall never overtake us! (15:18).

Cameo II: The Discordant Voice In The Bazaar. Micah 6:6—7:9.

Perhaps you've watched a film or actually visited a bazaar or market in the Near East. You are at once caught in the bustle of people, bargaining, yelling and gesturing furiously. The range of wares is astounding as are the ubiquitous scales for weighing grain, meat, fruits and precious metals.

The Micah passage operates with such a background as he talks about “you people who assemble in the city” (v. 9) to trade, barter and exchange goods. Israel's fortune has now changed significantly from the days when we found her on the banks of the Red Sea. They are now an urbanized, entrepreneurial people with commercial cities. The Red Sea days are so far in the past and forgotten that we hear God's frustration: “My people, what have I done to you? How have I been a burden to you? Answer me (6:3). I brought you out of Egypt; I rescued you from slavery; I sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead you...My people...remember these things and you will realize what I did in order to save you.”

“Zaachar”— remember — this word keeps turning up like a bad coin throughout the Bible, right through to the Last Supper, because in prosperity we become forgetful; with the passage of time memory dulls and we forget and may even re-write the history of the past so as to legitimize the present. We construct values which suit our present. A jealous God watches in frustration as we forget our little beginnings or attempt to remake the the world in our image.

Commerce tends to urge men towards materialist ethics. Perhaps Marx is more accurate than Freud in identifying the main multiplier factor (to borrow from mathematicians) which governs human affairs. We equate development with industrialization and the range of attendant commercial activities: export, import, consumerism, money management and marketing strategies, advertisement and so on. A new value system emerges which begins to determine social relations, habitat structure and finally, like a virus, attacks the family system and the religious structures. The new ethos first affects our forms of religious expression or liturgical practices, then, we bend our theology and modify our doctrines.

Years ago, R. H. Tawney's *Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism* drew attention to the mechanics of the transformation. In the 1960's we witnessed panegyrics to secularism such as Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*, and *Feast of Fools* expressed some of the underlying concerns in J. T. Robinson's *Honest To God*. Admittedly, these new theologies express valuable concerns, namely, that new forms of expression should be used in conveying eternal truths as culture changes. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was thus a theologian of secularity before the fashion caught the popular imagination.

But they failed to address one other key factor, namely, that *God is frequently assassinated in the bazaar as materialist values take possession*. In the Israel of Micah's days, the death of God was expressed with the image of false scales: "They use false scales and weights" (6:10-11) and gradually, "your rich man exploit the poor." (6:10-11) lying and cheating become a marketing technique.

"Officials and judges ask for bribes. The influential man tells them what he wants and so they scheme together. Even the best and most honest of them are worthless as weeds" (7:13).

As the business competition, price-fixing and sharp practices pick up steam, people begin to wait "for a chance to commit murder. Everyone hunts down his fellow countryman" (7:2).

Life is cheapened in the midst of violence and often, the poor serve

as fodder for the rich. A close examination of the level of homicide in industrialized regions would indicate that most cases involve the poor. As the volume of business grows in the bazaar, so would the desperate forms of competition and so would the vulnerability of the poor. Check out the gang groups that infest the streets of American cities, the poor are at the receiving end of the assailant's sharp knife.

For a second example, in Nigeria it was possible some years ago, for someone to send for his folk from the village for a visit to the metropolis with neon lights and trappings of modernity. At night the rural boy who had secured a job in a big city such as Lagos, would take his visitors out for window shopping. Then, industrialization expanded, the petroleum business increased the pace of commerce, new millionaires and other "gold diggers" took the command post in the economy. Fierce competition ensued and bandits took control of streets while joy vanished as insecurity reigned supreme.

Quite often we Christians are incapable of liberating the society from the strangle-hold of corruption because we accept the basic definition of development measured in aggregate terms — income per capita, gross national product, gross domestic product, balance of trade figures, foreign exchange holding, etc. We accept the definition of development on infrastructures. We may do well to accept these because industrialization creates jobs and infrastructures bring relieving amenities. In reality, we fail to do a thoroughgoing social analysis which examines the impact of certain economic trends on the health — mental and physical — of the population, on the value systems, whether they are demonic or life-giving. We fail to see that development should mean liberation from ignorance, want and degradation and the strangle-hold of consumerism.

Hosea uses the same imagery as Micah and drew attention to another side-effect of the same disease: "The Lord says, 'The people of Israel are as dishonest as the Canaanites; they love to cheat their customers with

false scales (12:7). We are rich. We've made a fortune. And no one can accuse us of getting rich dishonestly' "(12:8).

At this level in the development of the bazaar, moral concern is completely thrown overboard. Moral sense is numbed and frostbitten as would happen to a finger sticking out of a pair of mittens.

"What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him?" (Micah 6:6) Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child?" (6:7).

This last bit should not be taken seriously because it is a rhetorical question by someone who does not know the meaning, depth and consequence of sin and could not offer his child. It is a ceremonial liturgy harking back to Abraham's celebrated action.

More pertinent is that the rich man joins Christian worship and both the pastor and the people gape at his coat of many colors, display of ostentatious giving and the expensive "Thanksgiving offering." They honor him, accept his gifts, pray for him and even preach a sermon which extols his example. "God loves a generous giver," the pastor would intone "and our brother, chief so-so-and-so, has demonstrated what God requires from us. We should not keep God's money but bring it to the church to be used in spreading the work of his kingdom. So, may the Lord bless him and keep him..." The pastor would go on to announce that our dear brother has requested that we should lead him home after the service. Promptly after the service, the hungry congregation would be leaping over one another to lead the rich brother home and enjoy his rich entertainment. Incidentally, the scene at such entertainment is like a bazaar and people jostle and bargain over plates of rice and stew and meat and wine. No one questions the source of the newfangled wealth.

Imagine a scene where in the midst of the bazaar, a discordant voice rings out. "This man is a cheat! God says this man's love for him disappears as quickly as the morning mist; it is like dew that vanishes early

in the day" (Hos. 6:4). The people would wonder which God spoke to the lunatic. In anger, they may even eat him up along with the meat in the stew and wash down his bones with wine.

Christians cannot fight corruption because they fail to see the impact seeping from the bazaar into the sanctuary. Before you know it, the bazaar ethics begin to dominate Christian ethics. In the midst of this, Micah 6:8 becomes a double-edged sword pointing at both the moguls and the captive Christians. Both need liberation: "No!" yelled the Lord, "I have told you, O man, what is good. To do what is *just*; to show *constant love* and to *Live in humble fellowship with your God.*"

Hosea 6:6 puts it like this: "I want your constant love, not your animal sacrifices. I would rather have my people know me than have them burn offerings to me."

Matthew 9:13 puts a twist in the interpretation of the Hosea verse, "I have not come to call respectable people but outcasts."

God disdains the fragrance of the bazaar ethos in his sanctuary. God disdains civil religiosity because it is a cloak used by those who perpetuate injustice. God is more concerned with outcasts. The message of the church and the ethics of the church should be based on the pursuit of issues of justice, on doing acts of mercy and on showing and teaching the love of God and the love of neighbor. This passage clearly spells out the norms of Christian ethics.

It does more: it may sound like a discordant voice but it is really a sign of God's forgiving self-disclosure by providing us with a guide, a manifesto for liberation amidst the bazaar mentality which is holding many people captive in the modern world.

But note a core aspect: justice is not charity from a bleeding heart; an act of mercy is not altruism; justice and mercy are obligations predicated on the fact that God first loved us. They are based on our remembrance of "what God did in order to save you" (Micah 6:5). The love of neighbor

is linked to God's love for the whole *oikumene*.
Zaachar, Remember....!

Cameo III: Guess Who Is At The Door? Rev. 3:18-22; 21:1-7.

The interesting aspect of the Book of Revelation is that it picks up all the major themes in the Bible and gives them a final shape, exposes an underlying meaning and indicates the fulfillment of promises. Northrop Frye, the Canadian literary critic, has buttressed this observation by studying the pattern of imagery or archetypes in the Old Testament and New Testament drawn from water, animal world, vegetable and mineral world; for example, water of life, lion, tree, fruit, gold, silver and so on. The Book of Revelation uses the same archetypes to round off the messages of the prophets and our High Priest Jesus and to point to a future.

Thus, all the cameos of liberation which we have reflected upon so far are picked up in the image of the guest at the door who invites us to open so that we could taste a new heaven and a new earth and meet our *Emmanuel*, God-dwelling among people, because: "Now, God's home is with mankind! He will live with them and they shall be his people" (Rev. 21:3).

This certainly reminds us of the exodus event in which God in his infinite mercy declared for the oppressed and, therefore, rejected bazaar ethics. It reminds us of the new covenant which ushers in and sustains a new relationship as "the one who sits on the throne declares, 'And now I make all things new' " (Rev. 21:5). Thus, the lady who was arraigned for adultery was forgiven under the new dispensation, not because she did not sin but because God was reconciling a fallen world unto himself through Jesus. The meaning of the Cross now became palpable.

However, except for some Pentecostals who have been rifling the Book of Revelation as auguries do to the sky, identifying the symbols, computing dates and numbers and applying visions to world events, many Christians avoid this book. The heavy dosage of symbols and the thick apocalypticism deter. Some question the level of reality in the prophecies.

Indeed, a pie-in-the-sky religiosity emerged based on the promise: "He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain."

So, "swing low, swing high, sweet chariot and carry me home." The Black Americans are accused of having composed ballads of this nature as a survival strategy in the dark days of slavery. Such Christianity becomes truly a religion of the oppressed, unwilling to challenge their condition of bondage. In Alex Haley's novel and film, *Roots*, we see a dramatization of the level of degradation and terrorism which can produce an inertia as deadly as among the plantation workers in Garcia Marquez's novel, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. In *Roots*, the protagonist of the early phase, Kunta Kinte, refuses to yield to the fact of slavery. He invokes the powers of his past, a Mandinka warrior tradition. But in his new surroundings, the past proves powerless and unreal. Only those who submitted appeared realistic and their realism produced an other-worldly survival ideology.

This is a misunderstanding of the resources in Revelation. The guest knocking at the door wields judgment and mercy. He comes down heavily on the exploiters who control the means of production and cozily brag that they are rich, and well-off and have all they need. The guest laughs them to scorn:

"You do not know how miserable and pitiful you are. You are poor, naked and blind. I advise you, then, to buy gold from me, pure gold, in order to be rich. Buy also white clothing to dress yourself and cover up your shameful nakedness. Buy also some ointment to put on your eyes, so that you may see" (Rev. 3:17-18).

Revelation declares the intrusion of the not-yet period into the here-and-now period, transforming the latter, providing a foretaste of the banquet in heaven and opening the present towards the future. Jesus was not proclaiming a dream but a promise fulfilled in history., "The time has come" to fulfill all that God has promised.

The ethical implications are immense. Christians live in the waiting period as the present aeon moves to an end while the immensity of the future opens. It is a dynamic present with tasted promises and loaded responsibilities.

It means that we should perceive our existential situations differently. The old structures — political and socio-economic — are under judgment: power, material greed, corrosive covetousness, anxiety are shown to be demonic forces against righteousness, justice and creative caring.

This glance into the future, thanks to the presence of the guest, brings hope and support in the midst of domination and defeat. It saves people from losing faith, from perishing as the demonic powers grow stronger. If you could imagine how a Black South African Christian would feel in the face of the growing militarism of apartheid aided by American corporate resources; if you could see the swimming pool and sedate habitat structure of white Johannesburg while blacks live in Soweto, you would understand the power of the guest's invitation for maintaining some hope in a hopeless situation. If you could witness the dishevelled diving for cover in Gaborone, under a South African air raid and in spite of the national sovereignty of Botswana, you would understand why the promise of a new heaven and a new earth inspires resistance and a new vision which gives life in the midst of the risk of death.

III. Conclusion

The core of the cameos has been the old Luther/Barth emphasis on salvation by grace alone. The exodus event was by grace, so was the guiding light provided in the midst of bazaar activities; grace restored those who were short of this essential quality; the covenant was given and renewed by grace alone. The Cross was the ultimate grace crowned by the final renewal when all things were made new.

This carries enormous implications. Liberation comes, therefore, by grace alone. We *wait* to see the glory of the Lord. But this emphasizes the theology

of the Cross, the theology of suffering. Could it also lead into indolence, apolitical attitudes, inertia and unwillingness to fight back? What does the love of the enemy in the midst of oppression mean?

Some responses: the Cross was never a static solution. Much was said and much happened in a brief period. Death was wrestled with and defeated and we were thus saved from inertia and energized to be God's instruments in ushering in hope and the new aeon. We, therefore, must pursue the task without hatred, without compromising with demonic strategies, without the sin of self-glorification, but with God's word as a lamp for our feet, his spirit as our energizer and faith in his new covenant as our guide. With this mind of Christ in us we should love our enemies because Christ in us will be fighting for us. The theology of the Cross carries with it the theology of glory writ large.