

~Other Speakers S-Z: Valsan Thampu:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the manifesto of a spiritual revolution. While the revolutions of the world seek to effect changes by force in the external world, the spiritual revolution of Jesus effects a paradigm shift in human nature with the power of love. Human nature, since the Fall, is driven by covetousness: the craving to get, complemented by the unwillingness to share. Out of this predatory mindset arise the mounting hostilities of the world. Hostility is innate in a sinful orientation of life. God's healing response to this is the inauguration of a caring culture through Jesus Christ. Spirituality, in other words, is a re-orientation of human nature and culture from hostility to hospitality.

Hospitality marks the nature of God. God is love. The cultures of the world, however, are driven by power-orientation. So they abound in cruelty, injustice and oppression. History is the story of man's cruelty to man, to which the Cross is a stark pointer. The mission of Jesus is rooted in divine hospitality. Jesus came as Emmanuel, which means "God with us". He came to gather us to himself (Mtt. 11: 28-30; Jn. 15:4). He came to be with us. Hospitality is a celebration of this "being with," which overcomes alienation. Indeed, hospitality is a spiritual engagement with alienation. It is a key strategy for nurturing a caring culture. Family is the universal and God-ordained means to safeguard our species against alienation and to orient us to hospitality. The Lord's Supper is the foremost sacrament of hospitality.

"It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often," said Patrick Henry, one of the Founding Fathers of America, "that this great nation was founded not by religionists but by Christians, not on religions but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ." A convincing proof of the foundational impact of the Gospel on American social and national consciousness is the fact that the people of America remain to this day the most generous givers in the world. Indeed, hospitality in its two-fold dimension of giving and accepting is the secret of America's greatness. It was this Christian virtue, given effect through national policy, which transformed America into a glorious melting pot of humanity over the decades. Great thinkers and scientists from around the world sought and found refuge in this hospitable nation. In contrast, societies that remained self-enclosed inflicted intellectual and cultural bankruptcy on themselves. The readiness to give and the willingness to receive mark the genius and vitality of America.

It is not only material and financial resources that Americans shared with the rest of the world. America has shared some of its finest daughters and sons "authentic ambassadors of its Christian culture- with people around the globe. A young American lady, Ida Sophia Scudder, planted the Christian Medical College in Vellore (South India) a century ago. It is today the foremost institution of health care and medical education in Asia. "We are not building a medical college and hospital here," declared Ida. "We are building the Kingdom of God."

Today the Gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is not the only force that shapes the American society. Secularism plays an increasingly dominant and dogmatic role in defining the American outlook. Christians, especially the immigrant Christians in America, need to pay heed to this on-going dialogue between Gospel and culture. The duty to engage the secular scenario from the standpoint of biblical spirituality needs to be seen as an integral part of our Christian vocation at the present time. It needs to be asked, for instance, if American hospitality in its myriad expressions is adequately rooted today in a spiritual understanding and is informed by a concern to globalize the Kingdom culture of care and compassion.

What should it mean, to take an example at random, to wage war on terror? The epidemic of terror, gradually assuming pandemic proportions, needs to be seen as a spiritual danger signal. It implies and denotes a willful rejection of the spiritual way of life and the values on which it stands: love, compassion, truth and justice. Can the war on terror be solely a militaristic enterprise? It is a crucial challenge that needs to be engaged with all the resources at our command. The technological-militaristic resources are only a part of the resources available to us. The resources of spirituality are not any less relevant, as is implied in the intention to "win the hearts and minds" of the people of Iraq. But from an objective perspective, there doesn't seem to be a good enough effort made to integrate the two: the campaign to secure the land from the hands of insurrectionists and the effort to win the hearts and minds of the people. The ethos, resources and strategies of hospitality are central to "winning the hearts and minds" of the people and eradicating the epidemic of terrorism. But how are we to blend these two approaches in a holistic campaign against global terror? Are Christians relevant to this campaign of the century, or are they to remain silent spectators, called upon to pray, from time to time, for peace in a world order from which God is willfully excluded?

Abraham: the exemplar of spiritual hospitality:

God called Abraham into a journey from the known to the unknown. In the land he had never seen before, Abraham had only one certainty: the God who called him being the God of love, could be trusted to the uttermost. To the extent that Abraham was with this God, he would not be a stranger even in a strange land. The authentic proof that Abraham was in communion with God was the winsome positivity of his spirit. God, says the Bible, is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. Light is a symbol of pure positivity, which is the forerunner to creation itself. "God said, let there be light; and there was light!" Light denotes an orientation, which expresses itself through all that a person does. Faith, as expressed through obedience, is an expression of this positivity. The alternative to this is negativity, which erects walls of division or revels in inventing excuses as in the parable of the Great Banquet (Lk. 14: 15-24). In that parable, there is a striking contrast between the positivity of the host and the negativity of the would-be guests. Negativity is the essence of sin. It is the principle of death. The business of spirituality is to liberate us from this dark dungeon and to lead us to the green pastures of positivity. It is in this sense that Jesus is the light of the world (Jn. 9:5).

It is not to secure some material advantages that we must turn to God. It not even, primarily, to secure our berth in heaven that we must abide in Jesus. It is to imbibe the mind of Christ and to be baptized by his Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of pure positivity. The foremost practical expression of spiritual positivity is a caring culture.

The insignia of a caring culture is the willingness to give; whereas the world is driven by the lust to get and, if need be, to grab by force. The wolf, rather than the lamb, is the emblem of the world (Mtt. 10: 16). That is why, as Jesus said, "the poor will be with you always." (Jn 12: 8). The priority of a caring culture is to meet needs. Sin leads us to a quicksand of unending desires and blinds us to needs: our needs as well as the needs of others. From a spiritual perspective, there are only two possible approaches to life: (a) the one based on needs, which is the spiritual approach and (b) the one based on desires, which is the worldly approach. Covetousness is incompatible with the spiritual practice of hospitality. In covetousness too we may practice hospitality. Hospitality then becomes a sort of motivated transaction. We must not confuse the hospitality of covetousness with spiritual hospitality, of which Abraham is the earliest exemplar and the greatest, prior to Jesus. Hospitality of this kind is an integral part of the Kingdom culture: the culture of caring.

What are the pillars on which the caring culture rests, as seen from Abraham's practice of hospitality?

The first and foremost value in such a culture is the primacy of human beings. This is the Kingdom priority. The ultimate and unparalleled value statement in the Gospel is that God died for the sake of human beings. Care is informed by value. We do not care for what we deem to be valueless. On the other hand, we care extraordinarily for what is of sentimental value for us, even if the item concerned does not have any commercial value. A caring culture perforce stands on respecting the worth of human beings. It is this that makes Abraham rush to the service of the strangers. His eagerness to serve them and to meet their needs does not depend on their socio-economic status. It is strikingly free from the profit-motive. Hospitality, understood and practised from a spiritual perspective is untainted by considerations of profit or loss. As far as Abraham is concerned, it is enough that they are human beings in need. In contrast to this, the systems and strategies of the world deny any intrinsic worth to human beings. This is done by locating human worth in the variables of life, such as affluence, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. Hospitality is a statement of worth we ascribe to the people we receive and serve at home.

The second pillar of the culture of caring, as reflected in the spiritual practice of hospitality, is the priority of human needs. A caring culture, by definition, is a culture that is focused on needs. A callous and uncaring culture, on the contrary, is obsessed with desires. The world, said Gandhi, has enough to meet everyone's needs; but it does not have enough to meet even one man's greed. Those who are obsessed with their own desires have no time or inclination to respond to the needs of others. Abraham had both; not because he was rich but because he was caring by nature. Abraham not only addressed needs, but also had a spontaneous understanding of needs.

It was a hot day and three men would have come from afar. So, the very first thing Abraham did was to fetch water for them to wash their feet. This, apart from freshening them, was necessary to make them feel at home. He then went on to organize food for them; gave them the best he could offer.

Beyond that "and this is important- he gave them fellowship (Gen 18: 3-8).

In all this, what strikes us most is the enthusiasm or positivity that Abraham evinces in practicing hospitality. He does not practise hospitality like a grudging compliance with a burdensome duty. He transforms hospitality into a sacrament of oneness and a celebration of the goodness of life. Hospitality implies a duty to understand needs aright. To do so, it is necessary to know the guest. Indeed, hospitality is a medium for knowing, and for

deepening our knowledge, of each other. It is impossible to practise hospitality or to practise it aright, and remain strangers to each other. Consider the contrast between the approaches of Martha and Mary to hospitality. Martha approaches hospitality in a stereotypical way. At the centre of Mary's approach to hospitality is her understanding of who Jesus is and her eagerness to know him more deeply. Jesus is the Word. He is the Bread of Eternal Life. If so, Jesus came not to assuage his hunger, but to feed his hosts with the Word of life. His hosts could not have practised greater hospitality than listening to him. The Word is received by listening, and not by running around in frenetic activity. Without listening to him, how would they understand him or know to serve him? The duty to listen is obvious in respect of our hospitality to God. It is not any less significant in playing host to each other. From the beginning of biblical history this is what God requires from people: "Hear, O Israel". On the Mountain of Transfiguration God settles the issue once and for all, "This is my beloved son, listen to him."

To see and to respond to human needs, it is essential that we imbibe the "giving" orientation. The giving orientation excludes profit motive. What makes the difference between the spiritual approach and the worldly outlook is the ability to rise above considerations of profit and loss in responding to human needs. It is this distinction that Jesus elaborates through the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mtt. 25: 31 ff). Those who had the eyes to see human needs "especially the needs of the poor" were free from the profit motive. Spiritually valid giving is possible only in this way. Every other way of giving is tainted with expectations of one kind or another. Abraham is pure in his motive and that proves the spiritual authenticity of his hospitality. The key motive that is spiritually valid in practising hospitality is to overcome alienation and to celebrate our oneness as children of God. Out of this kinship arise responses of compassion and care. We have a Father in Heaven who cares.

Third, hospitality implies not only the readiness to give but also the humility to receive. The two together make hospitality a sacrament of sharing. Abraham receives in faith the prediction of the three men that a son will be born to him, even though he is old and his wife is past the age of childbearing. This humility to receive is quite different from practising hospitality to profit from it. In the first instance, the guest is all-important. In the second, the guest is only a means to an end. To be truly hospitable, we need to remain humble and open to what our guests may wish to bring "both in terms who they are and what they have" into the festive sacrament of life that we celebrate together. Hospitality implies a harmony between giving and receiving. But what is it that we give or receive? It is not some food or time that we give. It is ourselves, nothing less, that we give. Correspondingly, it is the other that we receive, not just what that person has or brings. The material things offered must be accepted as symbolically accepting the other. Not to do so would be to reduce hospitality to a one-way traffic and to degrade it into an exercise in self-exaltation. Hospitality helps to consolidate our spiritual kinship. It is a parable on the truth that we are brothers and sisters, because we have a caring Father in Heaven. This grace to receive was the forte of Mary of Bethany. True hospitality is as much about receiving as it is about giving. Primarily, it is about receiving "the other".

This is of crucial importance in defining and sustaining a spiritual family culture. Without this, a home could remain an aggregation of virtual strangers who live together only for convenience. They may stay together without developing a sense of belonging, sharing and caring. The essence of a hospitable family culture is receiving and cherishing each other. Family is founded on the primacy of relationships, not of acquisitions. It must be marked not so much by hard work as by loving service, not by the extravaganza of "burning one's body" but by the stability of loving each other. Abraham is an early pointer to the spirit that must animate every family. His tireless efforts to overcome alienation, to turn strangers into guests and brothers, comprise a unique example that looks forward to its fulfillment in Jesus who came to call all people to himself. This leaves us with an awesome responsibility to transform the global village into a universal and God-centred family aptly described by Jesus as "one flock and one Shepherd".