Liberation and suffering – Biblical reflection and Christian experience

Presentation by Reverend Christer Daelander November 2017

The Christian Church lives today in the most diverse situations and under different conditions – often with freedom and growth, sometimes with freedom and decline and often in difficult situations with discrimination, suffering and sometimes persecution. This presentation will focus on the Church and the Christian experience in situation of suffering, harassment, discrimination and persecution and how the Church can understand this theologically and handle it according to the Bible and the Christian faith.

The biblical narratives

The Old Testament

The experience of suffering and liberation was already in the time of the Old Testament a reality and the people of God experienced times of hardship, sometimes caused by their own sin and transgression of God’s laws. In other times the people flourished and had success. That could be seen as a result of obedience to God (Deut 11:26-28). But sometimes the people suffered without any clear connection to their own guilt. The people and their religious leaders cried out to God and asked why (Ps 44:9-26). Sometimes the suffering and hardship was caused by the leaders. Then God send prophets to challenge them to repent and to liberate the poor and the oppressed and to turn away from their wicked ways (Ps 82:2-4; Amos 5:7-24).

The suffering Servant of God and Jesus Christ

The prophecy of the suffering servant of God - the Messiah – is focusing on the unjust and innocent suffering (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12). The suffering and death of the Messiah brings liberation to many since he is the one bearing the punishment for the sin of mankind. John the Baptist identified Jesus as this “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), a clear connection to the experience of God’s people when they were liberated from the slavery in Egypt. To overcome evil and sin the ultimate victory could only be won through suffering and death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the victory of life over death and it gives spiritual liberation to whoever believes in Him (Joh 3:16; 5:24).

The teaching and example of Jesus

In the Beatitudes Jesus teaches us that blessed are those who are meek, who hunger for righteousness, who are merciful, pure in heart, who are peacemakers and those who are persecuted. They will inherit the earth, they will themselves get mercy, they will see God and they belong to the Kingdom of heaven (Matth 5:5-10). Jesus taught his disciples the principle of love in response to evil and to turn the other cheek when somebody hits you (Matth 5:38-41). But when the servant of the High Priest struck...
Jesus in his face Jesus said “...But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me” (John 18:22-23). Jesus himself gives an example that at times you should stand up against the evil and violence and demand justification. And when he saw the desecration of the Temple and how the merchants made money out of the religious strife of the people he drove out the money-changers and overturned their tables (Matth 21:12-13).

The understanding of the promised Messiah and the Kingdom to come among the people of Israel at the time of Jesus differed from that of Jesus. The disciples also though of Jesus as a religio-politico leader who was going to restore the independence and greatness of Israel (Acts 1:6). Asked by Pilate about his Kingdom Jesus replies “My Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). This word is sometimes used by the Christians to legitimate a passive attitude towards injustice and oppression in this world. But Jesus also taught that “My Kingdom is in you” or “among you” (Luke). So even if the Kingdom is not the restoration of the military and political power of the former Israel it is a reality within the Christian Community and in and through the believers. The vision of the heavenly Kingdom and the will of God are also to be manifest on earth in the time-space we live in here and now. In the prayer Jesus taught us to pray (The Lords’ prayer) “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Math 6:10).

Jesus did come not just to suffer in order to liberate us from sin and death but also in order to liberate the people from poverty, imprisonment, sickness and oppression. This he declares during his preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). This mission is transferred to his disciples when he meets with them after the resurrection (John 20:21). Due to this encounter and to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at the day of Pentecost his discouraged and to death frightened disciples received courage and started to preach the good news of Jesus (Acts 2).

The narrative of the early Christians

The disciples themselves experienced both liberation and suffering when they took on the Mission left by Jesus. Here are some of the narratives of the Apostles and the early disciples:

- At the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out and thousands of people converted and became followers of Christ and stayed together in joy (Acts 2:1-13, 40-47)
- Sick people were healed (Acts 3:1-10; 4:12-16; 19:11)
- The Apostles were persecuted by the religious leaders and were ordered not to preach any more (Acts 5:17-40). But the Apostles stood up against them and said “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29). When they then were flogged before the leaders the Apostles rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:31).
- Stephen were arrested and executed because of his preaching of the truth (Acts 6:8 – 7:60)
- The Apostle James were decapitated by King Herod (Acts 12:2)
• The whole Church in Jerusalem was persecuted and scattered but did not give up the preaching wherever they went and they experienced that many people were liberated (Acts 8:1-3; 11:19-21)
• The arrest and the miraculous escape of Peter (Acts 12:1-19)
• When the mob and the society mobilized against Paul and the new believers in Thessalonica Paul and his party escaped to Berea (Acts 17:5-10)
• In Ephesus merchants mobilized a riot against Paul because his preaching caused economic backdrop for those who sold idols (Acts 19:23-41)
• When Paul was arrested in Jerusalem initiated by the Jewish leaders Paul spoke up against them with religious arguments (Acts 21:1 – 22:22; 23:1-10)
• When the Roman Commander wanted to flog Paul he claimed his rights as a Roman Citizen (Acts 22:23-29)
• God told Paul in a dream that he should take courage and that through arrest and persecution he was meant to testify the good news even in Rome (Acts 23:11)
• During his arrest Paul gets the chance to defend his case and at the same time share the Good News with at least three Roman authorities – Felix, Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 24 – 26)

The teaching on suffering and liberation in the Epistles and Revelation

Paul

• Paul in his letters confirms and underlines the importance of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus as a redemptive act for our salvation and the salvation of the world (Rom 3:23-25; 5:8-10,18; 1 Cor 15:20-26)
• Paul follows the teaching of Jesus and states that we must respond to hatred and evil with love and goodness (Rom 12:9-21). Love and goodness are effective weapons that can neutralize evil (Rom 12:20). This is summarized in the words “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21).
• In Philippians Paul writes that it is a privilege to suffer for Christ and that he himself wishes to suffer and die in the same way as Christ died (Phil 1:21-23,29)
• Paul and the apostles underline that suffering is a reality that Christian will encounter if they follow Jesus with all their hearts (Phil 1:27-30). It is illustrated with Paul’s own life. God is not removing the suffering but give strength to endure the suffering (1 Chor 6:3-10; Phil 4:12-13))
• In the letter to the Romans Paul also underlines the importance of being obedient to the authorities in society since they are, as an institution, installed by God to keep order (Rom 13:1-10).
• In the letter to his disciple Timothy he writes that it is important to pray for the authorities so that we can live in peace (1 Tim 2:1-2).
• Paul warns the Christians to take part in deeds of darkness and he urge them even to expose evil acts (Eph 5:11) – in other words – to make these acts visible so that they can be condemned and changed.
• During the time of Paul there were smaller outbreaks of persecution against the Christians especially by the Jewish leaders and merchants who feared that their business might be threatened by the Christian revival.
But the Roman authorities did not persecute them. Sometimes the authorities actually supported Paul when he was accused (Acts 19:35-40; 23:12, 23-35).

**The letter to the Hebrews**
- The author of the letter to the Hebrews knew them well and the suffering they experienced. He encourages them to be bold and not to give up. He also writes to those who stood by their side and supported them when they suffered (Hebr 10:32-36).

**Peter**
- Peter considers the suffering as a necessary part of the Christian life and that the suffering is a tool that God uses to foster the faith of the Christians (1 Peter 1:6-7)
- Even unjust suffering is something the Christians are asked to endure (1 Peter 2:19-21)
- The Christians are commended to respond to evil by blessing (1 Peter 3:8-18)
- The Christians are commended to rejoice in the suffering they will meet due to their testimony and life (1 Peter 4:12-19)

**Revelation**
- During the time of Paul the Christians were considered a sect within the Jewish religion and the Jews were exempted from the obligation to sacrifice to the Roman gods and the Emperor. The first major attack by the State on the Christians happened in year 64 when the Emperor Nero accused the Christians of causing the big fire in Rome. Later the Christian started to be considered a religion in its’ own capacity without the coverage of the Jewish exemption from idolatry. Most Christians refused to worship the Roman gods and they were persecuted. The worst persecution with massive executions took place during the reign of Diocletian (year 284-311). The Book of Revelation is the recorded revelation John had when he was imprisoned because of his faith in Christ (Rev 1:9). The revelations show another kind of authorities than during the time of Paul. In these visions, rooted in John’s own experience of persecution but also in the prophetic vision of the times to come, we see the worldly authorities described as “the beast” and the “Anti-Christ” in direct opposition to the believers, the Kingdom of God and to everything that is good and right. The authorities are here the enemy (Rev 13:1-18; 17:7-18)
- In the revelation the message to the Christians is that there will be a time when the evil powers will be defeated and God’s reign and Kingdom will come. The first victory has already taken place when Satan, described as the “Dragon”, attacks the people of God, but through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to heaven, the dragon is defeated and thrown out of heaven down to the earth. Now the dragon is trying to attack the Church and the Christians on earth (Rev 12). This gives
the theological explanation to the persecution that the Christians experienced and will experience according to Revelation.

- The message to the Christians and to the seven Churches, to which the book of Revelation is addressed, is to persevere and to stand firm in their faith and not to give up and they are exhorted to repent back to Christ and the faithfulness whenever they have gone astray (Rev 2:1 - 3:22)
- This is not just a passive acceptance of the persecution but good examples taken from the seven Churches show an active faith with hard work, good deeds and love (Rev 2:2a,19). Obviously their clear standing against wicked men is also seen as an example (Rev 2:2b).

**The Christian experience of today**

About 75% of the people of the world live in a situation with hard or very hard violations of Freedom of Religion or belief. Sometimes the persecution, harassment or discrimination is caused by the authorities, sometimes by the society in which the believers live and very often by family or relatives not accepting that members of the family choose another religion than their own. Often there is a combination of all of this. The European Baptist Federation (EBF) as well as the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) work actively to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief for all. The Christians are the most targeted group today.

The question is how the Christians in different parts of the world respond to the discrimination, harassment and persecution. In open conflict and persecution often the persecuted persons are forced to leave and to become refugees as is the case in many places in the Middle East and in Nigeria. In other places the Christians try to stand up for their rights as in Pakistan and India or as some local Churches are doing in Azerbaijan. Many chose to go underground and be as invisible as possible, meeting in secret. Some do not directly evangelize outside of the family as is the situation for the Christians in North Korea. Others evangelize but mostly through personal contacts and with friends or colleagues.

**Testimonies of the power of love**

In many situations were Christians are persecuted or discriminated in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, in Central Asia and in Europe many can testify of the power of love. When they show love and bless those who persecute them sometimes the perpetrators change. In other cases the Christians need to flee in order to come out of the difficult situation or death. In other cases the Christians are killed, some in despair but others with steadfast faith.

**Testimony of Ibrahim**

Ibrahim comes from the city of Vahdad in Tajikistan. In 1996 a good friend of him became a Christian and wanted to convert Ibrahim. But Ibrahim was upset and tried instead to convert his friend back to Islam. But his friend repeatedly said “Jesus is Lord and Savior”. After six month Ibrahim had a vision and he heard Jesus talking to him saying “I’m Jesus the Lord and Savior”. Jesus talked with him for 40 minutes and showed him how his life was. Ibrahim asked a lot of questions from his Muslim faith and Jesus replied. Jesus said: “I’m the God of love – I died and rose from the dead for you and I will come back”. Ibrahim received Jesus
and became a fervent follower. He gave his testimony openly and they tried to kick him out of the village. Some people tried to kill him. At that time the country was in civil war between government troops and extreme Muslims wanting to make Tajikistan an Islamic State with Sharia laws. The Islamic rebels, Mujahidin, came to the Church where Ibrahim were, and they were shouting and threatening them. They wanted to stop the worship and the Church, but the Christians continued to pray. One man came to Ibrahim and pointed the gun to his head, but Ibrahim told him that Jesus loves him and wanted him to receive him. Since Ibrahim didn’t stop and the whole group continued to pray in the Church the man tried three times to push the trigger of the gun but it failed all three times. Then the man left. The Christians could feel how the Church was filled with the Holy Spirit and the believers were filled with joy. The same evening the Mujahidin returned and threatened to kill all in the Church if they didn’t stop within a week. Every day during that week they came and beat them. Some of the believers gave up. Every time they came and beat Ibrahim his praised the Lord and blessed them and told them that Jesus is the way for them. Thursday night the officer said: “Don’t beat him he will only say that Jesus is the way”. “I already felt I was ready to die” Ibrahim said. On the following Sunday eight men came with machine guns and knives. They said to the believers: “Welcome to your death”. They arrested Ibrahim in his home. The men took Ibrahim to the garbage fit and they said. “You say that Jesus is your savior but now he will not be able to save you”. The guy took his knife to the throat of Ibrahim and told him to deny Jesus. But Ibrahim said that he found the truth in Jesus. The man said to him to pray his last prayer. He prayed loud: “You are the creator of heaven and earth ... you are above all religion and you are the truth. Reveal yourselves for these my brothers, protect them and their families and bless their children so that the war will end and receive my soul, amen”. They now said: “You’re crazy! I’m about to kill you and you are blessing me and my children!” Then Ibrahim said: “Jesus wants you to become his”. They then let Ibrahim go.

These events gave him trust in God boldness to continue to witness his faith to others.

The power of love is greater than weapons. This can encourage us to persevere. But we also have those members in Ibrahim’s Church who couldn’t resist the threats from the rebels. They fell back. But I think there is grace also for them as it was for Peter, who failed Jesus three times. They can also be restored in their faith and life (cf. John 18:15-27; 21:15-19).

**How to respond to discrimination, harassment and persecution**

In this study I am trying to apply the biblical teaching and the Christian experience of today to practical strategies on how Christians in different situations can respond to discrimination, harassment and persecution.

In the biblical teaching and narratives we find that the people of God and the Christians respond differently to different situations. In both the Old and the New Testament suffering is a part of life for anyone who wants to follow God. The Messiah himself had to suffer in order to save the people (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12). Both Jesus and Paul teach about love and that we should “turn the other cheek” and do good things as means to overcome evil (Matth 5:38-41; Rom 21:21). But at the same time Jesus himself violently overturned the table of the unjust money changers in the Temple (Math 21:12f) and he rebuked the official who hit
Liberation and suffering - Biblical and Christian Experience - C. Daelander

him in front of the High Priest (John 18:22f). The disciples rejoiced when they were imprisoned and flogged in front of the Jewish leaders, but at the same time they stood up against them and told them they were acting against the will of God (Act 5:17-31). In Pauls’ teaching the authorities are seen as a guarantee for order and stability and as installed by God (Rom 13). But in times of severe persecution described in the Book of Revelation the authorities are seen as Satan, Anti-Christ and the Beast standing against the people of God and everything that is good (Rev 13).

What we need is a theology that is flexible and can be applied differently to different situations.

The Bible is clear that God wants to act in favor of those who are suffering, poor and persecuted and he wants to mobilize us in this Mission, while we as Christians should not be surprised, nor in despair when we face persecution and problems.

Finally I will finish with passages from the Old and New Testament:

“How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 82:2-4)

Jesus described his Mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19) and Jesus spoke to his disciples after the resurrection: “…As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21)

The author of the letter to the Hebrews writes: “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (Hebr 10:32-36)

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