

Radical Integrity

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37, Psalm 119:1-8

Intro

What a weeks we have had! Three weeks ago, all was quiet here in Maadi. None of us could have predicted that Egypt would explode so enormously.

I am sure we have all had moments of great worry and fear. But thank God, he has been with this land and with us.

Is it not amazing how people are now openly speaking about corruption and the need for change? No longer will Egyptians be intimidated by the security forces in this land. Amazing how the common will of a united people has been able to force the government of this land to take steps that we could not dream off just a month ago.

But what will happen in the days and weeks ahead? Today is the 18th day of the general rebellion against the government, and if anything, it promises to draw millions into the streets again. It seems this land stands on the threshold of a new time. How that new time will be is not sure at all yet.

1 Choose life

This morning we have read part of the last speech of Moses to his nation when stood on the edge of a new time. For 40 years they had been in the desert, but now Israel was in Moab, east of the Jordan River, at the borderline of the Promised Land; it was a matter of time only; in a few days they would be there.

What do you say to a nation on the edge of entering into a completely new phase? A new time?

Moses invites his people to make up their mind in this defining moment for the nation. They had decades of desert behind them. Not all was bad in the past, but people were desperate for a new life. They needed change.

In this defining moment, Moses holds a free choice before the people. They were completely free to make up their minds, just as we, today, have real choices to make.

Storms may rage, problems may occur, the economy may be against us, people may oppose us, electricity may be turned off, police may not do its duties, the army may be in the streets, but these problems do not change our responsibility and our duty to choose what is good.

Moses holds before us the choice; go left, go right, make up your mind. And he pleads with his nation to make the right choice, to choose life.

Bishop Caesarius of Arles, one of the greatest early bishops of France in the fifth century AD, gave this rendering of these words of Moses in one of his sermons:

Behold man, you have before you water and fire, life and death, good and evil, heaven and hell, the legitimate king and the cruel tyrant, the false sweetness of the world and the true blessedness of paradise. Power is given to you through the grace of Christ: Stretch forth your hand to whichever you choose. Choose life, that you may live. (Sermon 151.5)

Moses pleads with his people to choose life, because that is the basis for Gods blessings on the land. The choice is free, but depending on whether the people are faithful or faithless, it will be blessed or punished by the Lord, is what Moses says.

We also have real choices to make; we are also summoned to choose life. Moses summarizes what that means. It means:

- “loving the LORD your God,
- listening to Him,
- and holding fast to him”.

At the moment when Israel is about to enter into a new era, these three things are mentioned as crucial: Love for God, obedience to his will, and holding fast to him.

Holding fast to him seems to mean steadfastness in this love for God and obedience to Him.

Choosing life, according to Moses, means choosing the Lord – for the Lord is your life, is what he underlines. “JHWH is your life.”

Those words also echo in the New Testament, when our Lord Jesus Christ says: “I am the Life... obey me.” He equated himself fully with the Creator of heaven and earth; to know him is to live.

With these words, Jesus point to himself as the real definition of life and all we may desire from God.

2 People of integrity

In the New Testament, our Lord Jesus calls his followers to love God and to obey his laws. We have read part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus explained to his followers how those laws of God must be interpreted.

Through centuries of oral tradition and interpretation, the legal scholars of Israel had created layer upon layer of interpretations on top of the original laws of Israel and their meaning. They had developed an absolute *sharia* of rules and regulations.

These religious leaders had made religion into a matter of nitpicking with the most complex rules for behavior in all matters of life, just as many people in this land of Egypt have done. But these theologians of Israel had forgotten the original intention of the laws of God.

Our Lord Jesus brings people back to the core of what God desires. God's law is to love God and to love our fellow man. Love for God and for all human beings is, I believe, the best and the only durable basis for our personal life, and also for the life of society.

Take what Jesus says about the words: "Though shall not murder". Most of you have probably never killed someone, just as most people here in Egypt have never murdered someone. Great, so we are fulfilling the laws of God? We please him?

No, Jesus says. It does not fulfill the perfect will of God. It is just the starting point. Does it make our families, our societies, our Church a prettier community? Hardly so, if we in fact think of others as idiots, as fools, as people of a lower kind.

In the past weeks in this land, many have sinned against these words of Jesus; I confess my own sin. People are pitched against each other; they vilify each other.

In communities of people under duress it is so easy to lose track of the fact that we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are all *Bani Adam*, of the 'tribe of Adam' and Eve.

In this situation of tension, let us look at all people through the eyes of God; he created each person with pleasure and love, and he continues to love each person. He so loved each person in this world that he gave his only son to die - even for those who are not with us but against us. And how we need his atoning death for the forgiveness of our sins against God and our neighbor.

The apostle John wrote in one of his letters:

If a person does not love the brother whom he has seen he cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:20b)

Our personal life, our families, our society, our future will be brighter, if we are able to express to each other more of this self-giving love that Jesus Christ showed. Our societies would be so much kinder, gentler, if we would be prepared to serve the other.

Jesus next speaks of the need to be faithful in marriage and to not divorce. But he warns us; the issue is not just to stay physically faithful and to live with one wife in our one life. That is not enough if in our families we live as cats and dogs, or if in our heart we desire others. That is destructive for a healthy marriage.

So the Lord Jesus takes our minds past the most literal, verbal meaning of the laws of Moses; he points us to the intention of those laws. Those were given to bless us, to be good for us, to make us have better families, and a better society.

Faithfulness and wholeheartedly sticking to our commitments is glue that our societies need. Former governments of Egypt have in the past made many commitments - and many of those have not been worth the paper they were written on. But those who now protest this government suffer, to a large extent, from similar behavior.

This is what a Mina, a student at the Alexandria School of Theology where I teach, wrote to me this week:

We are always talking about the corrupt regime, but deliberately forgetting that the Egyptian society is also corrupted. If we want to do away with the system with all its symbols we also have to start now to liberate society from the corruption that is bound to the mind. Because if this revolt frees us from the system without breaking us free from societal corruption and the crisis in our mind the next regime will be worse.

Mina is right, I think. If we as individuals and as participants in society are not able to move beyond contempt for others, beyond desiring what others have, beyond the lies of society, then on what basis can we expect or demand better behavior from those who rule us?

Jesus also speaks of the need to speak the truth - let your yes be yes and your no, no. Only people who lie much and societies where lies are the norm, need to swear 'wellahi' in every sentence.

But let us not speak as if we are any better. I believe that the situation in Egypt teaches me, and all of us, the urgent need to live honest, truthful, morally upright lives that focus on love for God, and love and respect for all people. Within that, our societies fall to pieces.

3 When you remember your brother has something against you...

Our Lord Jesus is realistic and he describes the many conflicts and problems the people of God have between another. People curse one another, they hate each other, and Jesus makes clear how unacceptable all this is.

But his solution goes much further than saying: do not hate, do not curse. He invites people to even go a second mile.

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Mat 5:23-24)

So for Jesus, the issue is not only that we must not harbor hatred, negative feelings to other people; he in-

vites us to take the initiative if we know that someone else has something against us.

Jesus refers to the very common image in Israel of people going to the Temple for sacrificing a sheep, or a dove, to thank God or to plead for the forgiveness of sins.

He tells his Jewish listeners: if you are in the process of coming to the altar with your gift for God, and you remember that someone else holds a grudge or any negative feeling against you – go to that person and work towards reconciliation if possible.

Devotion to God, sacrificing to him, and at the same time being unreconciled with others, is impossible.

Stop your religious service, Jesus says, and make up with your brother. I think it is fully justified to apply this advice of Jesus to us coming to the Altar of Holy Communion. This is the place where we celebrate Jesus giving his life for us; this is where we see the heavy price God paid for reconciling us to him. Can we, when we celebrate this, live in disharmony with one another?

It would be totally wrong to say that Jesus is here suggesting that our service to one another is more important than our love for God. After all, he also says that after having made up with your brother, you have to come and offer your sacrifice to God.

It is not our Lord's intention here to give love of neighbor priority over love of God. There is an order in charity: "You shall love the Lord your God... This is the great and first commandment", Jesus said. (Mat 22:37) Love of one's neighbor, which is the second commandment in order of importance, derives its meaning from the first.

Brotherhood without parenthood is inconceivable. An offence against our brothers, against other human beings, is in the first place an offence against God –their creator and owner.

Exactly that makes it so utterly important for us to live well with one another – here in church, in our families, in society. How we think about the people we meet, how we live with them, is a defining aspect of our relationship with the God who created even your enemies.

Conclusion

So do not think that we can please God when we kneel at the altar, if we do not live at peace with our neighbor. Love your neighbor, respect each person, be reconciled with all people.

What an important building blocks for our life, and also for the society we live in. Respect one another as creatures of God; place the interest of others above your own; be trustworthy; speak the truth.

Choose life: If we live a life of radical integrity as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will also be an example for this nation on the edge of great change.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.