

The Day of Jezreel: Ecumenical Implications of Old Testament Conflict Resolution

There are numerous examples of conflict resolution in the Old Testament, and their interpretation and application should play an important role when we pray and work for the unity of the Church, while at the same time accepting this unity as a gift from God.

God constantly wants to challenge us and change our attitude towards other people and other faith communities. A peculiarity of the prophet Jonah, for example, is that throughout the whole book of his story, God deals with the people of the city of Nineveh with a profound compassion and empathy, since they are also considered people of God.

If it is true, as many texts of the Old Testament suggest, that God cares for all communities of faith, reveals Godself to them, accepts their offerings and sacrifices, appoints them to be blessings to all the world, and deals with them with profound compassion, we are called to change our attitudes towards our sisters and brothers, most of all within the Christian Church.

We chose seven important texts from the Hebrew Bible, where conflicts are resolved and people are reconciled with each other and with God. We firmly believe that these texts have profound implications for us when prophesying, building and testifying to the growing unity of God's people, and expecting its fulfilment – the day of Jezreel.

Making a Fair Deal: Noah's Sacrifice

When there is a conflict to be solved, the simplest solution (which is at the same time a highly effective one) is to act responsibly, clearly, visibly and progressively: to conduct fair play. It is to face the problem and its consequences and to create an adequate principle in order to prevent similar events in the future.

What can we learn from the sacrifice of Noah (*Genesis 8,20–9,17*) after the great flood, which came because peoples' thoughts were evil, and God's covenant response to it? The first step is to bear *suffering* as Noah did, to endure the punishment and not to evade the challenges.

Then we can move on and see the results and outcomes of our sinful or conflictive deeds. We have to face up to our brokenness, to our sins, without placing blame solely on others. Thus we confront and bear the consequences of *history* in our lives.

We have to analyse our motivations, our weak points, our temptations, our dark sides; and we should also be aware of how much we depend on other people's opinions and on the common sense of our given society, denomination and *culture*, and how far we are ready to go to follow the will of God.

We have to see reality and the positive and negative potentials of our human nature. This enables us to repent, to be ready for *penitence* in our own name and in the name of others who cannot be present anymore.

Here it is important that we are even ready to confess the sins that were committed against others and against God. And we are also ready to offer sacrifices and to offer our own goods – the little that we have after the great flood.

For even after the biggest catastrophes in our lives, we still have something left. We still have a little, a gift, a treasure that we can make a sacrifice from, and from which we can start our new and common life as well.

It is definitely not just the leftovers, but something that is genuinely ours, something that is dear to our heart. When we are offering a sacrifice, it is not the fault or sin of the others that we focus on. We do not blame them anymore.

We do not hide or falsify the past and the results it produced, but we live in the present and we look forward to the future. We start a *new relationship* with God; because it is possible in each minute of our lives.

The scent of our *sacrifice* will certainly please God. God will never again put the Earth under a curse because of what people have done, the actions often called in ecumenical circles the “non-theological factors” of our divisions.

Our human attempts are certainly not left without an answer. It seems good to God to make a covenant with us. Another world, another future is possible; with new rules, new roles, new promises and new responsibilities. The Universal Covenant with Noah is a basic narrative of God caring for all humanity.

As long as the world exists, there will be a time for planting and a time for harvest; there will always be cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night: we are indeed able to live proactively in reconciled diversity, in unity in diversity.

God blesses us and our children to have many descendants, who will live in a different world. Another world is possible, one where we do not have to inherit our old divisions and pass them on endlessly to the next generations.

Making a Fair Deal: Covenant with Moses

Whenever God covers the sky with clouds and the *rainbow* appears, God will remember God's promise and God's everlasting *covenant* between God and all living beings on Earth. This is a covenant relationship with the whole inhabited Earth (the *oikumene*), which is an eschatological sign for the whole of humanity and the whole of creation.

The offering a new covenant, the last step in this problem resolution, comes from God. It carries a special message for the whole of humankind. It conveys God's special love and care and provides us with a unique responsibility for each other.

We have to clarify our situation with God in the first instance; we have to be clear in what way we belong to God, but also how others belong to God, and to let God act according to God's unfathomable *love* for each human being.

Let us observe closely another special story (*Exodus 24,1–18*), the one on the sealing of the covenant with Moses and his pilgrimage to Mount Sinai. There the *spiritual leaders* go up to the mountain of God and bow down in worship.

And what follows is that all the people answer together that they will do everything God has said. The leaders write down all God's commandments and promises. They build an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up stones, one for each branch of God's people.

They burn *sacrifices* to God as fellowship offerings. Then the leaders read aloud the book of the covenant to the people, which should be sealed in blood. The leaders see God, and they eat and drink together in God's presence.

The book contains all that God wrote for the instruction of the people. A cloud covers the mountain, and the dazzling light of God's presence comes down on the mountain. A covenant or a contract is used to clarify situations, roles, tasks, rights and responsibilities.

Contemporary examples of this might be dogmatic formulations and theological agreements, common (ecumenical) translations of the Bible, or a joint return to our common roots, to all that God has really commanded with authority.



The divisions created by the leaders shall be *healed*. A covenant can work without knowing the other; this might, however, lead to additional bureaucracy. But if it is to be kept mutually, love and *knowledge* of the other are necessary and essential conditions.

To achieve these aims we need the consensus of the faithful (*consensus fidelium*), the full agreement of all believers. So while the spiritual leaders meet God, the people down below are offering worship services.

They have to commit themselves as well; the leaders alone cannot make commitments on behalf of the whole nation, the whole people of God. God looks for a wider acceptance; otherwise the covenant would fail and be forgotten, as history shows.

Offering a Gift: Jacob meets Esau

It is important to meet and to *encounter* each other, even if there is a controversial past that keeps us apart. From our first story with Noah we have learnt that the most important thing is to re-establish our relationship with God.

And now we are ready to move on to our next story (*Genesis 33,1–11*), to the next level of reconciliation, and to re-establish our broken relationship with our neighbour. Our neighbours are our sisters and brothers in the fullest sense of the words, for we have the same Father, the Creator of all.

The more blessings we inherited, the bigger responsibility we have and the *stronger* we are. Then we are in the position to make the first step. It should always be the strongest who initiates the reconciliation – a rule rarely followed in our culture.

You cannot expect the weaker to initiate confrontation without creating an atmosphere of humiliation, pride, inequality and subjugation. And the strongest should not go with empty hands, but take *gifts* from what she or he has earned in the meantime, showing respect and appreciation to the weaker through these.

We are inherently endowed with gifts, but we are further endowed through our conflicts. We were formed and led and developed by and through them. God was kind to us even during the times when we were separated and lived without each other.

God has given us everything we needed and even more. God has given us humility; God has kept us and others as the precious image and icon of God; God has been caring for all our communities; God has blessed us with family and riches and the well-being of all.

A gift is not a gift until it is shared. We are to *contribute* with them, and not to keep them only for ourselves. Everyone has collected different treasures and we should learn how to offer our own gifts and how to accept the gifts of others.

And in the case that the other runs to meet and to embrace us, we should be fully prepared to offer our arms to the other, in order to find them and to reconstruct the intimate relationship we once had.

Offering various gifts to each other, for example building churches for the other, before we actually discuss our difficulties, helps to *prevent* the anger or hurt of the other being poured upon us when we finally face each other. We can use bravely the positive and creative *surprises* of the Holy Spirit.

When we want to reconcile, one of the basic elements is to show goodwill and respect already from the very beginning, offering the *first love*. Unless we are able to feel and show happiness when we meet, we cannot make an honest reconciliation.

We can let our gifts talk first. In the beginning, when the air is still full of pain and suspicion, we can let our deeds and our attitude define the honesty and the strength of our reconciling concerns.

First comes the experience that we do something, and we do it together and for each other. Then we can go home, sit down and discuss them thoroughly in that atmosphere, which already radiates that we are dear to each other, we care for each other and we are each other's sisters and brothers.

Praying for the Other: Abraham Pleads for Sodom

Once Abraham received the divine *promise* that his descendants would become a great and mighty nation, and through them God would bless all the nations. God chose us, the descendants of Abraham, in order that we may lead our descendants to love God and to become light and salt for the world.

If we do so, God will do everything for us that God has promised. Our next story (*Genesis 18,20–33*), however, tells of terrible accusations against each other and a heavy burden of sin. Even God had to come down to find out whether or not the accusations, which could be heard in the heavens, were true.

Did Christians really forget to love and really create hatred against one another; can they really not welcome and handle the newcomers, the strangers, the others? Are we really going to destroy ourselves and the others, the innocent with the guilty? Along with the city where we live together?

Did we really forget to pray? Did we forget to pray for one another? Let us remember that God is ready to spare the others, in order to save the fifty ... forty-five ... forty ... thirty ... twenty ... ten innocents even in Sodom.

The Judge of all the Earth acts justly. If there are *ten innocent* people in our midst, God spares the whole community for their sake. We shall be bold in continuing to petition God for the sake of the others and not to watch their well-deserved fall with pious contentment and silent delight.

We shall be bold to pray and offer *intercessions* for the others. We shall be bold to humble ourselves for the sake of the others before God. We shall be bold to live a life for others, to use the *hermeneutics of goodwill* in our daily communication, to rejoice in the existence of others.

It is an opportunity from God that we can intercede. God is ready for a change, to change God's mind. God is ready to reconsider God's opinion, and to choose the more loving and more pro-life options.

Many times God just challenges and provokes us and waits for our intercession, thus to make a better world. That is why God calls for *repentance* continuously. We shall be a bold community, staying in front of God, crying and asking and praising.

The narrative of Abraham and Sodom has an open end in this story. In the same way, we do not know anything about the result

while we are pleading for others, but we intend to do it and continue it *unceasingly*.

We have to realize that the other is *important*: the other is important for God, and also for us. The other is important to have around, to help, to be supported by every means. The others carry the image of God; that is why they are worthy of the most intimate and powerful means of our help as well – for our prayers for them.

We shall pray for each other, in order that God would spare the others and cultivate their cities, their culture and their communities. We cannot be *happy* and blessed without them. Even if we do not live there, even if we are not part of their culture.

Only on the basis of the one God, Who is our Father, we have to continue to pray for each other. We have to find even the least good in the others. Even if there are only ten innocent and holy persons in a denomination.

We could only stop our intercession if God proclaimed God's final words. Of course, in many ways we already practice it: we constantly pray for the unity of the Church. But we have to pray for others, too, realizing all their riches, not only for our long-awaited union.

Not Without My Neighbour: Solidarity with the Punished Miriam

It is always difficult to say who makes the bigger mistake. In our next story (*Numbers 12,1–16*) we have a very humble leader. And there are his sister and brother and the other prophets, and God reveals Godself to them in *visions* and speaks to them in dreams.

Being a leader means being responsible and being *accountable* to God and to the people. As history shows, however, there are questions that query something in the one who posed it, rather than in the one to whom it was posed.

The wife of Moses can be questioned, but not his power that was given to him by God. In this story there is not a single person who is spotless. Even the leader of the community has a foreign spouse.

So, his relatives question his legitimacy. And most probably they are asking him in the name of the whole community, who also witnessed this unique right of the leader. Those who received punishment forgot only one thing, namely to *humble* themselves in front of God.

Because God accepts Moses as he is, and he is always humble before God; God speaks in a special and unique way with this *Servant of God*. The Servant, Moses, is put in charge of all God's people.

God speaks to the Servant face to face, clearly, and not in riddles: the Servant has even seen God's face. One who speaks against the Servant is shut out of the camp for a while, but after that can be brought back in.

And as it usually happens, it is one of the other leaders who speaks against Moses, and she is punished for it, even though she advocates and represents the grave concerns of several people in the community.

What is important in this story? That all the people would realise they are no better than their leaders, that they are no better than each other. All of them could have been punished for one thing or another.

So they do not look at the punishment of one of them with relief, but they share her suffering. Moses is praying for his sister and all the people are waiting for her until she is healed again, and is able to return to the group.

The *koinonia* of the Church is not the sole race of the lonely runner. We do want and need each other; *we intend to stay together*, even if the other is punished or suffering. *We offer our solidarity*.

We offer to share the suffering of the others. We offer our daily lives, not only our prayers. We intend to help and wait and not to move in our pilgrimage to God until the others are brought back in.

In Christianity we cannot feel that we won the competition if we left many others behind, but only if we all managed to get there with the mutual help of each other. We shall not want to rejoice in the Reign of God without our neighbours.

Generous Hospitality: Joseph and his Brothers Around the Table

There is nothing special in it when you welcome your own sisters and brothers. You are one family and it is natural that you welcome each other with the greatest generosity and support each other in everything you do.

It is preferable, though, to welcome strangers or poor and needy people, because they are the ones who really need our generosity and hospitality. Sharing our table is also a sign of God's solidarity with us, and a means of our solidarity with each other.

There are cases, however, and basically the whole ecumenical movement testifies this, when the most difficult thing in life is to face our own sisters and brothers, and to meet them, and to invite them to our table, and to be generous with them.

It is difficult exactly because we know them so well. Because we have a common history with them, marked with tensions and conflicts. And when we look at them, all our dreams will come back and all the sufferings we have experienced with them.

We cannot forget, either, how we left each other and chose a life without the other, because we felt as if she or he was killing us. Both of us wanted nothing else but to get rid of each other as soon as possible and at whatever price.

In our next story (*Genesis 45,1-28*) there is a great outer necessity, the *famine* that brought back together the brothers. Happy are those who do not have to wait that long, but are able to make the first steps towards each other at a much earlier stage!

The most important thing is to make this first step. The most important thing is not to be content with a fair, polite, politically correct relationship, only with praying for each other (sometimes thereby preventing a closer encounter), or having *solidarity* with each other in the midst of suffering.

But rather, offering active help and a living and close relationship, and behaving with others as with our own sisters and brothers in our own house. Then we will see that it will result in no longer being able to control our feelings in front of each other.

Then we will talk about the most important things: "Please, come closer. Now do not be upset or blame yourselves. *Is our Father still alive?*" Because the most important question is not whether you or I think that we are closer to our Father or are loved more by our Father, but to live together with the Father.

Above all, we should seek to re-establish the one global household and the one family. Then we can realise that it was really God Who sent us ahead of the others to save people's lives, and to rescue the others in this amazing way, and to make sure that the others and their descendants survive.

And then we shall embrace each other, we shall give the best land of ours, and the others will have more than enough to live on, as well. Then we can also realise that we do not have to worry about emptying ourselves (in *kenosis*), leaving our possessions, our traditional family lands behind, since the best in the whole land will be ours.

Kenosis of Hosea: Unconditional Love

One of the most beautiful stories of the Old Testament is the story of the marriage of the prophet Hosea (*Hosea 1–3*). It explains the love of God and at the same time it stands as an outstanding example of it.

Hosea the prophet is asked by God to take a prostitute to be his wife. He is also asked to have children with her. When she leaves him, the prophet is asked by God to take her back again and love her, even though she will not change her ways and continues her prostitution.

So the prophet pays for her and stays with her, and loves her. He loves someone who is not his blood-relative. He loves someone who constantly brings shame onto his head and their children's heads.

He loves someone who constantly questions whether a man with this lifestyle and with this kind of wife could really be a prophet, the man of God. If Hosea had any pride, any condition or any fear in himself, he must have lost them at a very early stage of his married life.

But he lives from *faith* alone, from the *grace* of God alone, from the love of God alone. He is empty like a clay-pot; he is a humble and obedient servant of God alone. Listening to no one else, taking into consideration no one else's comments or commands but God's, in order to fulfil his vocation, in order to live his life.

That is why it is the most important question in the story of Joseph whether our Father is still alive. We should live with the Father alone. We should follow the will of God alone. Not the will of our history, culture and customs; nor the will of the scared others; because then we might end up experiencing our lives as great scandals.

In love there is absolutely no fear, and perfect love annihilates fear totally. We should firmly base our life on the will of God; onto the Father, Who would like to live together with God's children in eternity.

And who also would like to see that Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants can love each other as wife and husband, and can live together as in a marriage that represents the love of God to all people.

Is Our Father Still Alive?

We must love others just as God still loves God's people. These seven examples from the Old Testament show that another world is possible, where after centuries of endurance in suffering because of our division, we are ready to confess our sins, to humble ourselves, repent and bring sacrifices.

This will facilitate our encounter with others, coming from a parallel history and culture. The other, as an icon of God, is always important. Our gifts and contributions should come before us, as signs of our first love, even unto the point of self-emptying.

Prayer and intercession should be our constant co-pilgrims towards healing, reconciliation, happiness and conflict resolution. The purification of language is a prerequisite for dialogue; the bondages of identity are obstacles and unity in mutual understanding is the main goal.

Our dialogue is nurtured by growing knowledge of and the hermeneutics of goodwill towards the other. Through God's grace, God will save every community where there are ten innocent people of faith. We have to make sure that there are at least ten innocent and saint persons in our community.

Our spiritual leaders as servants of God, in accordance with the community, will guide us under the rainbow of promise and covenant. In solidarity with our neighbour, we intend to stay together. Is our Father still alive?

Let us conclude with the prophetic vision of Hosea (1,10–2,1) on our visible unity: "The day is coming when God will say to them: "You are the children of the living God!" The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited. They will choose for themselves a single leader, and once again they will grow and prosper in their land. Yes, the *day of Jezreel* (God sows) will be a great day! So call your fellow Israelites "God's people" and "Loved-by-the-Lord"."

Suggested Reading

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