

Courage and Vulnerability in Christian Discipleship

Receptive Learning in the Midst of Covid-19 Pandemic and the Need For Social Distancing

The Case of Matthew 18: 16-20/11:25-30

By

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For Matthew, courage and vulnerability are recipes for Christian discipleship. It is only when one is aware of his or her own vulnerability that one may be able to learn how to become courageous. The disciples' fear and vulnerability in Matthew's gospel does not imply a dark side of discipleship, for it is in the context of fear and vulnerability where one's strength of faith is found. What we normally see in the gospels is that it is in the realm of doubt and hesitation that Christ comes to the aid of his disciples.¹ Christian discipleship happens at the turning point, when less is expected, when the disciples seem to have lost their way; when fear and courage seem overwhelming, and risky choices requiring to be made. It happens at a point of crisis where danger and opportunity come as avenues for grace. Though in the worldly formula we may assume that we become courageous by practicing acts of courage, it may not be so in Christian discipleship. In the gospel we are told that after the resurrection when the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Despite their doubting, Jesus came to them for commissioning (Matthew 28:16-18). Jesus' reencounter with the disciples was a moment of reassurance, reaffirmation, and encouragement. The good news, in the gospel of Matthew, is that even 'among those that worship there are some that doubt. The faith of those that are sincere may yet be very weak and wavering.'² The disciples stood in suspense as if not knowing which way to go. Their doubts were afterwards removed as Christ drew near to their encounter for commissioning and their faith grew up to full assurance.

Scholars insist that it was proper that the disciples doubted before they could believe, they were entitled to question and prove all things before they could hold towards that which they found to be true. Jesus' abiding presence dispels the disciples' fears, doubting, and vulnerability and strengthens their weak and wavering faith. Doubt and worship are part of the receptive learning process. In Christ, our vulnerability turns into a crack through which the ray of grace may filter in. For Matthew, to be a disciple is to stand in the dialectical tension between courage and vulnerability, between faith and fear, between worship and doubt: 'Jesus' abiding presence is intimately linked to his followers' engagement in mission. It is as they make disciples, baptize them, and teach them, that Jesus remains with those followers.'³ What are we to make of this gospel, today, as we battle with the Covid-19 pandemic? As we try to learn receptively, Matthew's message is a source of strength and encouragement, for it inspires us to realise that Christian discipleship never takes place in self-confidence but in the knowledge and recognition of our own weaknesses and vulnerability. As we face the present challenges, our consolation comes from the fact that Matthew does not portray the *great commission* as the community of the saved, but as a community that survives by relying on God's grace alone. For Matthew, it is out of irony to divorce the Christian life of love and justice from being a disciple.⁴ Discipleship involves a commitment to God's reign, to justice and love, and to obedience to the entire will of God.

1 Bosch, David J: Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1991, p. 68.

2 Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible. Completed and Unabridged. Hendrickson Publishers, New York 1997, p. 1775

3 Bosch, David J: Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1991, p. 77

4 Op. cit., p. 77

1. Learning and Social Distancing in the Realm of Covid-19 Pandemic

In the realm of the Covid-19 pandemic, social distancing strengthens receptive learning by placing its stress on social solidarity and individual responsibility. Social solidarity and individual responsibility as a praxis sees social distancing as a breaking of boundaries rather than the perpetuation of exclusion. Hence, what receptive learning brings to the fore, in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic and the need for social distancing, is the fact that, in Matthew, rather than being a fellowship of the chosen, detached from the world's sorrows and agonies, the *great commission* involves, from the outset, and as a matter of course, the need to make both existing and new believers sensitive to the needs of others. Opening their eyes and hearts to the challenges and hazards of others, to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression, and the plight of those who might have fallen by the wayside.⁵ Though painful it may be, what the wounds of Covid-19 pandemic have come to highlight, both in the African continent as well as across the world, is the fact that the quest to curb Covid-19 pandemic has offered world leaders the opportunity to come face to face with structural injustices affecting many marginalized communities across the globe. It has made policymakers realize that it would be extremely hard to social distance communities across the globe in the midst of injustice, poverty, and unemployment. To ignore this painful reality may be tantamount to perpetuating further injustices. Close scrutiny on the pandemic's consequences reveals that more people might have died of covid-19 pandemic because of injustices and poverty. Current challenges in the USA and across the world, in the event of George Floyd's brutal murder, as well as the challenges that the African continent faces in quelling the alarming effect of Covid-19 pandemic articulate this position.

Jesus of Matthew always insisted that it is within the rough and risky of circumstances in this world that one should try to live out his or her Christian life. God's glory and reception are made real as we live our faith within the realm of the world's challenges and adversity. The fact that in Matthew the risen Lord remains present in the life and mission of his disciples articulates this position. For Matthew, the church is to be found where discipleship is nurtured in solidarity with the oppressed and the marginalized of society. In Matthew, communal life lived in solidarity with the needy is a recipe for Christian discipleship. In learning receptively, we have come to realise that in spite of its detrimental consequences, what the Covid-19 pandemic has brought along is the possibility of a church beyond the walls, that the boundary-crossing nature of Jesus' ministry in Matthew remains the foundation of the Christian Ecclesia even for today. Covid-19 pandemic has come to make us realise that true church is found at the periphery not at the centre of society. We have come to realise and learn of our own vulnerability, that picking up one's cross to follow Jesus implies amongst others, siding oneself with the excluded, the suffering, and the marginalized of society. The position taken by many health workers across the globe, some of whom have paid the price with their own lives articulate this.

With the emergence of online teaching and learning, moving centres of learning from the centre to the periphery in the context of lockdown precipitated by the covid-19 pandemic anticipates one of the highest expressions of receptive learning. Ansoc and all students find their true identity, when they are involved in mission, in communicating to others, a new way of life, 'a new normal,' to use the new vocabulary in the event of the Covid-19 pandemic, a new interpretation of reality and of God, and in committing themselves to the liberation and salvation of others. A courageous and boundary-crossing community that lives in the spirit of the *great commission* is one that understands itself as being different from and committed to its environment, more particularly, to the plight of the poor and the marginalized, a

⁵Hays, Richard B.: The Moral Vision of the New Testament. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics. Continuum, T & T Clark 1996, p. 101

community that exists within its context and a way that is both boundary-breaking and challenging.⁶ In the midst of fear, confusion, and uncertainty, this is a community that seeks to drive itself back to its roots as found in Jesus of Nazareth who fulfils God's love by helping the helpless.

2. Jesus' Yoke, Receptive Learning, and the Hermeneutics of Justice, Mercy, and Faith

Hermeneutics is a Greek term for biblical interpretation, that helps us to read and understand the biblical text in the light of its original setting and social background. As the reader engages with the text in the interpretative process, hermeneutics' central purpose is to assist the reader in making sense of the textual reception and its appropriation into his or her own present context. If we were to use hermeneutics in our reading of the biblical text and mitigation of Jesus' yoke, as part of Matthew's symbolism, we would quickly realize that one of the key qualities that Jesus seeks to inculcate in those who heed his words is the quality of *mercy*.⁷ Theologians share that in the society of Jesus' day, the yoke was 'a familiar symbol of burden bearing, oppression, and subjugation. Yokes were often placed on the necks and shoulders of animals of burden, such as oxen, and on prisoners of war and slaves. But yokes were also used metaphorically to instil prudence, self-discipline, and personal denial as avenues for wisdom. Pronouncements in Sirach 53:23-28 and Baruch 3:9-4:4 anticipate present conclusions.⁸ In his study of Matthew, Hays concludes that 'those who take upon themselves Jesus' yoke are in effect taking up the yoke of Torah as interpreted by Jesus,' but the point is to emphasise that Jesus 'yoke – in light of his hermeneutic of mercy – is not burdensome, in contrast to the systematic interpretation of the Torah being promulgated by Matthew's pharisaic rivals.'⁹ When 'this formula is applied to test cases,' Hays stresses, 'such as eating with sinners ...we see that the law is understood to bear witness to what Matthew elsewhere calls the weightier matters of the law. Justice and mercy and faith (23:23).'¹⁰ For Hays, 'Jesus teachings provides a dramatic new hermeneutical filter that necessitates a rereading of everything in light of the dominant imperative of *mercy*. In contrast to the scribes and pharisees, who are said to tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others(24:4), the wisdom taught by Jesus yields a very different reading of Torah.'¹¹

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt 11:25-30).

For Matthew, Jesus is the Torah, the yoke, for he came to fulfil and reinterpret the Torah in order to revive and strengthen the faith of the weary and the heavily burdened. The yoke of Jesus assists us in transforming our labouring into service rendered to the needy in society, and our burdens into sources of strength and encouragement. The invitation may not be easy to bear, it may be cumbersome but still, it remains life giving. To take Jesus' yoke is to side

6Bosch, David J: Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1991, p. 78

7 Hays, Richard B.: The Moral Vision of the New Testament. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics. Continuum, T & T Clark 1996, p. 100

8Op. cit. p.100

9Op. cit. p.100

10 Op. cit. p.100

11Op. cit. p.100

oneself with the excluded and the rejected of society. To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God's kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world, where the soul longs for rest who is Jesus himself. In Matthew, Jesus as the new Torah highlights Matthew's hermeneutical transformation of the law in response to the Pharisee's test cases against Jesus. Jesus as the embodiment of Torah, represents the new yoke that offers a new and liberating interpretation of the law. Jesus inaugurates a new era based on justice, mercy, and faith. Jesus inaugurates an era based on the reversal of power and authority to the interest of the weary, an era in which every letter of the law should move from a culture of authority to one of justification and explanation, where every use of power and authority ought to be justified and explained.

3. Our Continental Yokes, and the Yoke of Covid-19 Pandemic, and Reception

In the African continent, particularly in Southern Africa, we are faced with countless numbers of yokes at different levels of states, ranging from their historical legacies, wars, poverty, to social displacements, and xenophobia. What might be of interest in the present challenges, as we face the covid-19 pandemic, is to prioritize the various yokes we face in order of importance. But, how can we even begin to prioritize, the yokes before us, in the context of countless challenges we face as nations and as a continent? To do so is not an easy undertaking. For how can we choose and prioritize what is equally important without neglecting the rest? A critical examination within the myriad of challenges facing Southern Africa, in the light of what each individual country faces, may be derived from Mozambique: While trying to redress the sequels of its colonial past, amid a long civil war which ravaged the country for more than 20 years after independence, and the challenges of holding a lasting peace which could offer Mozambique the opportunity to journey towards social reconstruction and nation-building, right now Mozambique is faced with a terrible insurrection in the oil rich northern province of Cabo Delgado, which makes any government's attempt to reorganize itself, in order to face the Covid-19 pandemic effectively, increasingly harder and complex. The pandemic of poverty and political unrest derails every government's effort in preparing itself in order to face the pandemic accordingly. Here at home, South Africa, we are faced with our national yokes ranging from the challenges of building a new nation out of the ruins of our difficult past to gender-based violence. How can we prioritize between complex alternatives? How can we prioritize between the yoke of our difficult past, the legacy of apartheid and the challenges of the moment? How can we prioritize between the yoke of social inequalities and the quest for economic justice? Between the yoke of reconciliation and nation-building and the yoke of democracy; between the yoke of poverty and the yoke of the rainbow nation; and now, between the yoke of covid-19 pandemic and the need to hold to the principles of ubuntu? As a continent, coronavirus exposes the bleeding wounds of our postcolonial legacy; it takes us where we avoid going. What coronavirus teaches us is that in our attempt to address the crisis constructively we should be mindful of the yet bleeding wounds of our societies and need for redress.

Hence, apart from our own social yokes weighing us down and so hard to carry and reveal as individual citizens, the present reading could not have come at a critical moment, when we are faced with the yoke of the covid-19 pandemic, in which social distancing translated in terms of lockdown is the yoke we should embrace upon ourselves as a way of facing the pandemic itself. Still, despite the lockdown, the pandemic itself with its devastating consequences is hard to bear, especially among the poor of the poorest. Massive loss of human lives across the spectrum has become a common narrative, economic downturn and unemployment are becoming part of the new normal for many families. With all these challenges before us, we can only find solace in a Jesus who invites the weary and all those

who are carrying heavy burdens to come to him in order to find rest. As the Anglican Lectionary reminds us, to do so may become part of receptive learning¹², because we may find the occasion to learn ‘to shoulder our burdens and the strength to carry each other as Christ has carried us.’¹³ Hence, receptive learning in the context of Covid-19 pandemic anticipates understanding and taking Christ’s yoke seriously. Receptive learning encourages us to identify our own wounds and see how best can we receive what the other has to offer in order to address our wounds and vulnerabilities. It encourages us to risk losing something in order to receive. Receptive learning encourages us to be mindful of our own vulnerability and rely on the wisdom and courage of our national leaders who, constantly, take the effort to assess of how things are going in order to assist us on how could we respond and move ourselves within the context of Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. Finally, our consolation, as we face the present reality and the challenge to draw a critical priority for redress, may also come from Jesus’ *Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13:1-9;18-23). Amongst other things, the Parable invites us to be mindful and aware our own intricate challenges, wounds, and adversities that may make it difficult for God’s word to settle in our uneven, rocky, and thorns riddled ground. This may also be extended to include our assessment of the Covid-19 pandemic in our surrounding communities. For we need to know and name our challenges, be mindful of structural evils and injustices that make it hard for many communities to heed and settle to the message of social distancing.

4. Conclusion

Jesus’ invitation to take the yoke is one of freedom and liberation that complies with his way of discipleship, which is not burdensome but life-giving. Hence, taking Jesus’ yoke is one of the highest examples of receptive learning. For, Jesus invites the weary to learn from him, for he is not a tyrant who lords it over his disciples, but is ‘gentle and humble in heart.’ His yoke is easy and his burden is light for it brings life. Despite its detrimental consequences, taking the pandemic as a yoke, may help us in looking beyond the rails and begin to face the future constructively, especially when we begin to see the pandemic as a lesson to be learned, a painful lesson, indeed, but one that inspires wisdom, encouragement, and strength.

12 Walking Together on the Way. Learning to Be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal. An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III). Erfurt 2017

13 Anglican Lectionary: Anglican Church of Southern Africa (Advent 2019-December 2020)