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Freedom in Biblical Perspective

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Man is a pilgrim of Freedom. This pilgrimage is so deep as to measure the whole life and personality of man. In other words it is his quest for freedom which serves as the criterion to measure his whole personality, enabling us to say that man is man in so far as he is the pilgrim of Freedom. That is why our ancestors here in India spoke of Moksha or liberation as the chief of the four great ends of life. (*Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha*: Righteousness, Wealth, Enjoyment, Liberation). 'When will be slaked this thirst for freedom?' asked the religio-philosophical and nationalist Tamil poet Subramania Bharati. But this thirst is by no means confined to Indian humanity. Three instances will suffice to show the universality of this quest in time and space. The first is from a bard of Palestine who sang some 3000 years ago, 'O had I the wings of a dove I would fly away and be at rest' (Ps. 55:6.) The second is from the African philosopher-saint, Augustine, who wrote 1500 years ago, 'Thou hast made our hearts for thee, O Lord; and they are restless until they find their rest in thee'. The third instance is modern man in every quarter of the globe today, in the chambers of whose heart echoes the question: When will be slaked this thirst for freedom?

This thirst, this quest, this question shows that, even at the end of the 20th century, man has not found his freedom, and that even as he tries to grasp it, freedom slips between his fingers. If this is true, then the famous saying of Rousseau that man is born free, but is everywhere in chains needs to be taken to mean something like: The bond slave is born; the liberated man is still to be born, or: though man is meant to be free, he has not realised his freedom. In the same line runs the thought of St. Paul though it transcends human history and comprehends the cosmic as well, when he says that not only we but the whole creation itself groans with eager expectation for its liberation from the bondage to decay and the revelation of the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21-23).

One can examine from different angles this freedom for which we are destined with a destiny that is not yet ours. One can look at it from the national socio-political set up, from the philosophical view point and from the religious perspective. I propose to consider it in this essay from the Biblical perspective.

I

The Biblical perspective, be it recalled, is, like that of all our life which is bounded by the past and the future, a historical one. With history therefore the Biblical perspective, too, shares in the growing

character and varying fortune of all experience, including the knowledge of freedom. If all knowledge is historical knowledge, then it is only natural that the knowledge of freedom must contain within itself the history of freedom. Therefore the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, in so far as they depict the respective people's experience of freedom, implicitly contain also their respective histories of freedom. Now the first basic Biblical history of the Jewish people is the book of Exodus. Between the first appearance of the Exodus story (not its final redaction) and that of the New Testament books, there elapses a period of a thousand years. If we want to know the freedom experience or freedom adventure of the Jews in these thousand years, we must compare the freedom consciousness in the book of Exodus with that found in the books of the New Testament.

Freedom in the book of Exodus stands for socio-economic justice rather than political independence, or for that matter the spiritual freedom of the individual. The lack of an individual and political content to freedom in the Exodus story, strange as it is to us, can be very well explained in terms of the absence of a national consciousness among the Jews of the exodus time-event. There was a social consciousness rather than a national one. They looked upon themselves rather as a part (the labour section, however despised and ill-treated) of the Egyptian social order than a nation enslaved to foreign dominance. They did not even look upon Egypt as an alien land. It was the land of their adoption, where they had gone not merely to earn a livelihood, but to live and to settle down for good. After all, the poor, the vagrant and the destitute possess the whole earth as theirs, do they not?

Even when they had left Egypt, conquered Palestine, established self-government and acquired national status and consciousness, they do not seem to have treasured or made much of their political freedom. The probable explanation is that they saw their free, sovereign political self-government only as an instrument to secure a just social order both from within and without. Political power then was a part not above, but subordinated to, the whole social structure. They treasured the wisdom (laws) of the just social order more than political independence (Sir. 10.25). This reflects their perception at that time that it is the observances of the laws and traditions of a society which gives unity and cohesion to it, rather than its political institutions. So they did not have as their ideal a stable political institution. Their stable ideal was the just and equitable social order. All else was a means to this end. It was only in so far as this end was realised, only in so far as one worked to realise this end that man was free. Their ideal was thus a this-earthly one.

It would seem that the Jews began to cherish their political independence not when they had it, but when they lost it to the Babylonian and Roman empires whose political 'prisoners' they became. Only then they seem to have experientially realised the importance of the institution of political self-government for a people to keep its social and cultural identity.

II

It was against such a background that they wanted Jesus to be their political messiah (King) and liberator from foreign political dominion and shameful national slavery. But Jesus does not seem to have appreciated political independence in the same way as they did. He does not seem to have taken the foreign dominion as tragically as perhaps most other Jews did. If we must speak of this in relation to the Jewish consciousness of freedom at different times of their history, Jesus's idea of freedom is not contemporary, rather it represents a much older phase or stage in the development of Jewish freedom-consciousness. He did not make the contemporary feeling his own. This was not fortuitous on Jesus's part. Since all the actions of Jesus and the basic self-consciousness behind them come as final, unshakeable decisions from the depth of his whole person, the fact that Jesus did not agree with his contemporaries' idea of freedom must also have been a matter of considered decision. This decision was that he would not be the political messiah. This decision clashes with the wishes and inarticulate decision of the masses. Each decision judges and condemns the other. In the conflict of decisions, the judgement which the masses meted out to Jesus was that he who had opposed their will must not live, must not be allowed to live. Both the masses and their priestly leaders judge Jesus by their own narrow criteria. His viewpoint and criteria, even though they have heard him, are not intelligible to them. How *can* they understand? At the same time his view (it is a distant view, looking far into the distance into the Future) judges and condemns their decision.

The freedom which he offers is spiritual. He does not oppose spiritual freedom to political. On the contrary, he sees spiritual freedom as the foundation and final goal of all political freedom. At the same time he realises that political freedom *could be* an obstacle or stumbling block to spiritual freedom. The kind of spiritual freedom he envisages is not the private property of any one nation or people; rather it would be the common possession of people everywhere. It is in this common possession that all mankind must be united. Whatever fosters this unity is according to the divine will. Whatever hinders this unity hinders the fulfilment of God's plan. For God's plan is his will to unite. It is by uniting hearts, by making all to be of one mind that God saves the people. He does not leave them as individuals, but makes them one kind, one people, his own people. In this plan of unity, even an evil like foreign domination which intervenes in a people's national history could be an effective instrument in that long range of divine plan. Therefore even while resisting an imperialism that is evil, it should not be forgotten that it is an instrument in God's hands. But just because it is an instrument in God's hands, one should not give up resistance to the evil of imperialism. For that would be to fail in one's duty.

Therefore it is necessary in one and the same action to resist evil and to submit to the divine will. Submission to the unitive plan of God must therefore be manifest in the manner of resisting evil. If the manner of resistance strikes at unity, then it cannot be conformed to the

will of God, rather it would be sin and evil adding to the existing evil of imperialist division and inequality.

Roman imperialism was thus an evil in so far as it usurped by force the political birthright of the Jews. But in so far as it put the two peoples in touch, it also unites them. This unity, which is good, had to be fostered. But in so far as it was a unity forced on them on unjust, unequal terms, it had to be opposed. How was this to be done? Here was a question before Jesus. Was he to become the political Messiah who must muster the whole Jewish people to throw every trace of Roman imperialism off from Palestine? Such a course of action was bound to inflame hatred and to increase disunity. The military way was therefore not the right way. But what was the right way? Jesus rejected the way of the militant political Messiah and chose the spiritual messianism that would pave the way for even political liberation. Spiritual Messianism is that prophet martyr's way that resists evil and joyfully submits to the consequences (penalty) of the resistance. It is the way of the Cross, the non-violent way, the way of love which witnesses to truth and unity, by loving the errant sinner, while hating the sin. The Jews and even Jesus's disciples were not prepared for it. They resisted it. But Jesus did not fear or hesitate in the face of the opposition. He did not give up his conviction or innermost self-consciousness of the type of Messiah he had to be, in order to fulfil God's will to unite all His scattered children. He did not go back on his word. There is but a momentary doubt and uncertainty as to whether all this is really the divine will. Fear, if any, springs from this doubt. It is to end this doubt that he prays to God his Father in the garden. And having in prayer overcome the doubt, he goes out with the strength of a serene confidence to meet the opposition, to meet the unitive will of God. This strength is reflected in every step he walks and echoed in every word he utters. He is made and he becomes the example and witness to the way of overcoming evil while strengthening and purifying the existing unity. He dies in forgiving acceptance of the consequences of his malice-free resistance. In his eyes therefore they are no longer his adversaries. As dead, he is no longer an adversary even in their eyes. The life of him whom they sought and resisted has now become one with theirs. Now therefore it is time for them to realise that his voice was the voice of their own innermost life, their own innermost self: that in killing him, they had unsuccessfully tried to suppress their own innermost Voice or WORD—time to pay heed to that voice and to come round to its way. They must integrate their conduct with the Voice, WORD or will of their life. Jesus demonstrated this not in the history of imperial Rome; rather as a token of the way the Jews, as a nation could make it real in that imperial history, he demonstrated it within Jewish history itself and in Jerusalem—ironically enough, 'under Pontius Pilate'. But what took place in Jerusalem has been seen to have an explosive spiritual and also political relevance for all human history.

But if it is asked whether the Jews took Jesus's vision and strategy to of unity with the Romans, the answer must be an ambiguous 'Yes and

No'. For not all the Jews understood or accepted Jesus's vision and strategy. So they challenged Rome the military way with disastrous consequences: the total sack of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and the total expulsion of Jews from Judea in 132 A.D. By the first quarter of the fifth century A.D., about 20 centuries after their inception, there was no trace whatever of the Jews as political reality. The political and historical wisdom of Jesus's spiritual doctrine had been lost to them. But it was not lost on all. For those who put their faith in Jesus as the religious Messiah created a new unity, a new society called the Church not only with the Roman but with practically the whole gentile or non-Jewish world. This Church came into existence as the community of Jews and gentiles reconciled by the blood of Christ on the Cross. Among them therefore there was no more the inequality of Jews and gentile, but the new-found unity in and with Christ (Acts. 10:34-36; Eph. 2:11-22; I Cor. 7:19; Phil. 3:3; I Pet. 2:10). The blood of Christ had gathered together these scattered children of God (Jn. 11.52).

The freedom which Jesus offers is, as we have seen, spiritual freedom. In the Gospels, political freedom is not opposed to spiritual freedom. What is opposed is sin. We may give two evidences from the Gospel to substantiate this. The first is Matthew 22:21 which reads, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'. The second is Jn. 8:31-45 where we read, 'Everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin;' and 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'. The truth here is the truth about freedom, the liberating truth itself. Since liberation makes sense only in a context of the absence of freedom, the truth about freedom is the truth in acknowledging that one is not yet free. Only the person who knows and acknowledges his unfree condition can come to freedom. If he denies his unfree state, he can never hope to be free. To deny and reject the truth is sin. So the man who sins against his truth (slavery or bondage is his truth) cannot be liberated unless and until he acknowledges that sin; rather he would continue to remain a slave to that sin of untruth. That was the sin of the Jews who did not believe Jesus's words.

They did not accept the truth of their condition by themselves; they did not believe it when Jesus told them. Thus they committed the double sin of untruth and unbelief. The sin of untruth was the basis of the sin of unbelief. To overcome unbelief therefore, they had to overcome their basic untruth. Only he who knows the truth can remove the untruth or show the untruth for what it is. Only he who is free from the sin of untruth or wilful ignorance of the truth can know and show as sin the unfree state which precedes freedom. Only he who is beyond sin can truly judge sin as sin. Those who are in sin cannot come to this realisation of sin. For the realisation of sin is beyond sin itself. When a person is beyond sin, sin is no longer in him. This will become clear if we remember that sin is basically untruth. When untruth is seen and accepted as untruth, it becomes a thing of the past; it is no longer present. The truth (acknowledgement of sin) has taken its place—the place of untruth (unacknowledgement

of the truth). When untruth is acknowledged as untruth, when sin is acknowledged as sin, when truth is acknowledged as truth, sin is there no more; it is dead; faith and freedom are born. The time when faith (Truth) and freedom are thus born, the time when the sin and slavery of untruth are broken and destroyed, is the moment of death. As a moment of transit from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light and from bondage to freedom, the moment of death is the moment of immortality or of the resurrection. It is by this moment that the whole time of life in the body is judged. It was with this moment of truth and freedom ever present before his eyes that Jesus lived and judged his whole known life. That is why the moment of the birth of his truth and freedom is able to judge our lifetime and to be the criterion to judge it with. It is in this sense that his life and teaching are and can be for us too, the immortal life, the way to it and the light on the way. Being established son of God with the son's rightful heritage of freedom and its dispensation, he is able to establish us as the children or sons of God with the sons' rightful heritage of freedom and its dispensation. In this sense he is constituted the cause of our salvation, or our saviour. It is because the truth of freedom we see in his death and life is the truth that must be present in our life and death, that his life's teaching remains truly the voice of our own life. That is how we are able and obliged to listen to it.

III

If a sinner is a slave to sin or untruth, is not a virtuous man a slave to virtue and to truth? Here comes the thought of St. Paul. According to him slavery to goodness and truth is the definition of the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 6:17-18). He says that creation itself sighs to be delivered from bondage and groans for the revelation of the liberty of the glorious children of God (Rom. 8:21-22).

In Paul, slavery and freedom and the transit from one to the other stand for two different attitudes of man towards God and for the change from the slavish to the filial attitude. The slavish attitude is that of the contracted wage-earner towards his employee transferred to the realm of man's relation with God. This is *an* attitude of utter self-reliance, reliance on created reality which forgets and denies the freedom of God and thinks to compel him to pay the wages and dividends of salvation on strict commutative justice. As an attitude contrary to the truth of God's freedom, it is a baseless or false attitude (which Hindus call *Karma samsara* or a postponement of liberation.)

The attitude of freedom is one which places its reliance on the free love of God and thereby inherits and shares in the same freedom. This is genuine faith in God, a faith of surrender. Only those who have discovered this inner freedom of faith can teach and give it to others. Jesus had this freedom through faith which enabled him to become the Christ. St. Paul learnt this freedom from Jesus Christ. Only those who have this inner freedom are Christians true to their name.

When people who had been slaves spiritually put their trust in God's free love, the first born slave dies (Gal. 4:21-31) and a son fashioned after God's own free love is born there new and fresh. On the basis of this new life and in order to spread this new life-attitude, a new community springs up. It is natural for life to increase and multiply. That is how it creates an altogether new community of life by creating a new, basic and vital relationship between man and man which links and unifies all history.

Only those see the unity of history who, like St Paul, perceive the deep vital spiritual link or unity between man and man. Not all the members of the visible Church see this unity because, even though they have this basic spiritual kinship of the new life, they do not place their trust in that new life, but rather in their observance of the commandments of the Church. This false assurance often due to a faulty teaching, hides their vision of the truth. That is why they are not able to recognise the new life found in societies other than the Church. This is also the reason why they do not accept the basic spiritual unity which exists among all. But such men are not found solely in the Church.

Not to place one's reliance on social (religious) laws and their observances does not mean violation of these laws. For the freedom of the children of God does not consist in such violations. It consists on the contrary, after having observed and fulfilled them, in not taking it that these observances give one the right to the new life of freedom. Positively it consists rather in trusting in the uncreated life and freedom of God and knowing that but for its prior presence and activity (which is grace) the very observance of the socio-religious laws would be impossible. This is the historical programme of salvation which God has manifested in the Christ-event.

To sum up all that we have said so far: Those who take the attitude of slaves towards God cannot discover their own spiritual freedom. The spiritually free—even if they are slaves in the socio-political order—do not lose their souls (Gal. 3:26-29). This does not mean that political freedom is unnecessary. Rather it means that spiritual freedom is the basis and goal of all genuine political freedom and that those who possess their spiritual freedom (those who have become that freedom) can easily achieve their political liberation. For they would have no fear of man—whom they would love. The revelation which God made in the love of Jesus Christ is *par excellence* a school of this freedom. Such, and a Gandhi-like vision of history, is the perspective which Paul (Rom. 6:18) and Peter (I Pet. 2:16) and the martyrial acts of all the apostles and the whole Bible in general and the New Testament in particular present on freedom.