

To Help or Not To Help

by Malkhaz Songulashvili

A fellow Georgian of whom we are far from being proud, Mr. Stalin, had read in the Bible that in the Messianic time the lion would live peacefully with the lamb. He decided to make this actually to happen in order to PROVE that Communism had brought salvation already in the Soviet Union. So he ordered the director of the Moscow Zoo to provide a cage in which a lamb and a lion could live together.

Of course the dictator's order was immediately carried out and the entire foreign press and all the Western diplomats were invited to witness the Messianic miracle with their own eyes.

A skeptical BBC journalist asked the director how he had achieved this supernatural miracle. The director answered:

"It is quite simple – each day we provide a new lamb for the lion."

Jesus never performed miracles to PROVE something or impress somebody. His miracles were not a matter of public relations.

Today's Gospel reading told us about Jesus' miracle of feeding thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and some small fishes. He performed this miracle out of COMPASSION to the people who had stayed with him for three days. "I have compassion on this crowd" says Jesus.

Most amazing thing of Jesus' character here and elsewhere is his considerateness. Jesus never forgets even smaller details of life and ministry. He sees larger picture along with smaller details. It seems for him every detail does matter.

Even in the painful agony on the cross he thinks of his mother. Who will take care of her when he is gone?! In today's Gospel reading he thinks of thousands of people who are tired and hungry.

If we confront Jesus with people in any kind of need his immediate instinct is TO HELP. We see this over and over again in the Gospel narratives. It happens both before and after his resurrection.

The absolute truth of the matter is that for most of us, humans, the first instinct is NOT TO HELP. We can find thousands of reasons why we should not help. In the year 2004 both Bishop Stephen Platten and I consecrated St. Luke's Chapel at the Betheli Center in Tbilisi. In this chapel we have two prominently painted frescos on either sides of the altar. One of them depicts, what we call, the return of the prodigal son and the another is the work of the Good Samaritan. Both stories are revealing these two instincts of helping and not helping. Both stories come from the Gospel of Luke. In the first story the Father is showing divine instinct to help. The older brother is showing more humane instinct which is not to help. In the second story the Samaritan is showing the instinct to help while the priest and Levite show the instinct not to help.

Helping is always about giving something out. Therefore the desire to help can come from love which is ontological reality of humanity. The instinct not to help seems to be imposed on us. It should not be natural.

Consequently if we want to be human we must help: help the poor and destitute, hungry and abused, refugees and the internally displaced, the lonely and sidelined, depressed and underprivileged... We should also help not only fellow humans but the rest of God's creation: the nature, animals, vegetation...Anything visible that has been created by the Invisible.

Helping is always a challenge. It is a challenge for us and it was a challenge for Jesus. When he decided to help the people with food, the disciples promptly pointed out the practical difficulty for which the idea to help in their understanding had to be immediately abandoned. Those excuses were pretty realistic: they were in the desert, there was no food, there was no Sainsbury, no supermarket, no...no...no. But Jesus does not give in and does not give up. (What a stubborn master!) He is flashing the question back to the No-No disciples. "What have you got wherewith you may help?" Jesus' compassion does not accept no for an answer. He says take what you have and give it! Give it now! And the miracle takes a place.

It seems it is through our reactions and responses to challenges to help that we can grow into full humanity. Through the responses that originate from love and compassion.

It is also important to know that our instinct to help should not depend on longing to be praised for helping or gaining something out of helping. We should also be ready to help whether we are applauded for it or not.

In Lenten period I try do something I had never done before. This year I was in Rome. And I remembered Bishop Stephen telling me a story about the Community of St Egidio in Rome. I decided to go there and experience their ministry to the poor and underprivileged. I was given a waiter's job which I had never had before.

The Community in Rome has a special approach to the philosophy of soup kitchens. In recognition of people's human dignity the poor are served by waiters at the table. I was given two tables to serve, each of them sitting eight people. I was instructed as to how to serve the tables: "First you place forks, knives and glasses on the tables and serve two courses and the desert..." I tried to do my job as diligently as possibly. But there were too many people to serve. I did not have enough time to clean and prepare the table before next group came. People would take places at the table before it was ready. I felt I was getting little bit irritated by that but I would not express it.

But very soon something really upset me. I served the first course to a drunk oriental man. That was the soup. Than I brought for him the second course which was spaghetti. As soon as I placed the plate in front of the man he jump out of place shouting at me. I did not understand his language. But you do not need to speak the language to understand that you are being mocked and cursed. I was very embarrassed. I did not know what to do. The man would look at the place first and than continue shouting and waving hands. Everybody was looking at us. I thought he was telling me that there was not enough spaghetti on the plate. I rushed back to the kitchen and brought another place full of spaghetti. When he saw me coming back with the plate jumped again and shouted at me even louder. Everybody turned to us giggling and shouting. Suddenly an interpreter came to rescue the poor bishop. "He says" the interpreter said, "there is no cheese on the top of the spaghetti". When learnt the reason of his shouting I started inflaming in anger. I have a plate full of spaghetti in my right hand and here stands the man shouting at me. For a minute I thought should I splash this plate with spaghetti into his face or should not I...

The instinct to help seems to be always about sacrificing something: your patience, your resources, your time, your emotions and nerves but it is always, always, always worthwhile. We should help not to prove anybody that we are Christians but doing it because we are Christians and can not help otherwise.

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