

“Break my Body, Eat and Drink Me”: Raped and Dismembered -costly hospitality in reverse! **(Fulata L. Moyo, PhD).**

Introduction

When I was growing up, I did not look forward to Christmas celebrations. Among other things, Christmas entailed celebrating around a very special rare meal: rice and chicken! Being a communitarian people whose very essence of our life embraced hospitality at its core meant that some of us as members of the family would in turn forfeit such a looked-forward to meal in the name of taking care of the neighbor. So after some years of missing such an anticipated meal, I stopped looking forward to it. It seemed as if the neighbor was more important and his/her interests came before mine as a child in the family. How come I could so easily be sacrificed?

Though the story of the “Concubine” in Judges 19 is about costly sacrifice through dismembering and death, it always reminds me of my being sacrificed to hospitality. Whose interests and safety do we serve in our understanding of hospitality?

Judges 19 as costly hospitality in reverse

Hospitality is a form of spirituality in the practice of God’s welcome. It is reaching across difference to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis. Though as a Judeo-Christian imperative, its biblical witness is clear (Hebrew 13:2, Exo 23:9, Mat 25:31-46), nevertheless it is a difficult and challenging call of duty.

It is a call to be in solidarity with strangers, the different ‘other’ as well as the ‘naturally’ unlovable. It involves the care, provision and protection of the stranger. So the host or hostess would make sure that the guest is cared for, fed and housed securely.

Hospitality is a complex issue in this story. It begins with the Levite travelling to his estranged partner’s father’s home in Bethlehem. The couple are not married – a concubine in this context probably means effectively a second wife – and when the woman becomes angry she returns to her father. After four months apart, the man travels to Bethlehem to woo her back and is greeted joyfully by the woman’s father and wined and dined for several days. What is this hospitality about? Is the father anxious to heal the rift so that he can be rid of his daughter...since her return from ‘marriage’ jeopardised the family’s reputation and dignity? Does he believe that reconciliation is what his daughter wants? How can it be ‘reconciliation’ if no space for honest and mutual narrative has been provided? Does the father stand to benefit from a good relationship with his daughter’s partner? The level of urging the Levite to stay, and the Levite’s eventual decision not to prolong his stay but to leave late on the fifth day imply a degree of tension.

Having left so late, the couple require hospitality to break their journey home for the night. The man refuses to stop at Jebus (Jerusalem) which was a foreign city at that stage. Instead he chooses to journey on to Gilbeah or Ramah, which are Benjamite towns, supposedly allies. However, despite waiting in the town square, no hospitality

is offered until an old man who comes from the same area as the Levite and offers hospitality with these words: "Peace be to you, I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square." Then, when the men of the city demanded that the host release the Levite so that they have sexual relationship with him, the his reaction raises questions about who, between the Levite and the woman, he really considered his real guest and who deserved to be cared for and protected. Before sacrificing the 'concubine,' he was even willing to sacrifice his virgin daughter.

In the end, it is the 'concubine's' Levite partner who forces her out to provide sexual hospitality to the Benjamite men, who gang rape her until she collapses. They then abandon her at the old man's door.

This is surely one of the most horrific stories in the Bible. It is certainly not one that was read to me at my mother's knee. We can only be repulsed by the Levite's subsequent actions – taking the woman home (it is unclear whether she is dead or alive), dismembering her and distributing her body parts throughout the land with the message 'Has such a thing ever happened since the Israelites were freed from Egypt? Consider it, take counsel and speak out.'

What has happened in recent years in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where rape has been a systematic weapon of war, is similarly repulsive. The stories in this week's film 'Fighting the Silence' are heartrending. How should we consider these stories, take counsel and speak out?

The final chapters of Judges relate the lamentable stories of the battles which ensued between the Benjamites and the Israelites as the latter sought vengeance for the crime against the concubine woman. Thousands of people are slaughtered, thousands of women are raped, abducted dancers become wives for the Benjamites and there is lasting separation between the Benjamites and the Israelites. It is a story of inter-ethnic chaos, violence and revenge which sounds all too familiar in the modern world. Some Biblical scholars argue that this sorry tale is recorded as a reminder to the Israelites of why they were right to have moved from rule by judges to monarchical rule. Others have argued that such horrific tales should be excised from the canon since they hold no clue to the saving grace of a loving God.

The story of the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo is both one of geopolitical power play and of many, many individual tragedies. Like the inter-ethnic conflict in the book of Judges, the war between DRC, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and others may seem incomprehensible to those who watch from a distance. The individual tragedy of the abused concubine and of the women in the film are much more resonant and yet in both the film and the Bible narrative, the male protagonists find excuses, prejudices and political theories to keep them from accepting the basic truth of human suffering. Tragedy fuels further tragedy, as revenge and violence escalates and trauma compounds.

In both stories, it is the lack of justice for the individual women which is most painful. Their bodies are wrecked by the careless greed of men but the response from their kinsmen is one of shame, disgust and further violence. Do we ever find ourselves responding to another's pain with such violence? What motivates us to push the abused further away?

Many of us, Sunday by Sunday, and especially in the lead up to Easter, are invited to reflect on the self-giving hospitality of Jesus, who gives his body and blood for the good of creation. How do we make sense of these stories in the light of this central focus of Christian faith? A body willingly given is very different to a body taken by force. Does a God who knows rejection and violence have a special message for women who share these experiences? How do we avoid the risks of belittling or fetishising violence when we even begin to make these links?

We do not know the names of either the concubine or the woman whose story we hear in the film clip. And yet their stories have lessons to teach us. How do we honour their witness in our daily lives?

Contextual Bible Study (CBS) methodology

Since for those readers that are not familiar with the Contextual Bible Study methodology we still had to include some explanations (very much against the principle of CBS), the formulation of the questions of reflection still followed the CBS methodology.

Otherwise this methodology as a brain child of liberation theology, is an interactive study of the Bible text, which allows the context of the reader to be in dialogue with the context of the biblical text for awareness raising and transformation. The study questions are formulated guided by five key C's. These are: Interactive – *Community*, Context of the reader – *Context* (Social Location); Context of the bible – *Criticality*; Raising Awareness- *Conscientisation* ; Transformation – *Change*.

Questions for reflection

1. What themes would you identify from the story?
2. Who are the main characters and what do you know about each one of them?
3. According to the Benjamite host, who was his guest? Why? (V23)
4. What kind of a host and a father was this Benjamite old man?
5. To what extent was he, as the host, willing to go so as to ensure that his guest was protected from the violent community? (V23-25)
6. What happens when costly hospitality is forced on vulnerable women as hospitality providers? (Vv25-28).
7. What title would you give to this story?
8. Do you have vulnerable women who are forced to provide costly hospitality in your communities? Who are they?
9. What are you doing about providing and protecting such women in your communities?
10. What resources do you have for such a ministry of hospitality?

Dr Fulata Mbano-Moyo is a systematic theologian and church historian who currently works as the World Council of Churches' Programme Executive for women in church and society. Originally from reformed tradition in Malawi, she received her doctorate from the University of KwaZulu- Natal, South Africa, focusing on gender and sexual ethics with grounding from Yale University's Divinity School and Department of Public Health. She is also the continental coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians also trained in contextual Bible study methodology, conflict resolution and epidemiology.