

Invisible and In Need

-- Melissa Mergner

Moses, Jesus and Mohammad were each radical and relentless reformers of their time who rebelled against practices which they felt were corrupting the word and will of God. Driven to tell people the truth as revealed to them by God, each lived in a time where corruption and injustice was everywhere and new religious views were met with violent opposition. Although political authorities used fear, violence, and the threat of persecution to maintain the status quo, Moses, Jesus and Mohammad were zealous in stamping out corruption and refused to stand by while innocents were regularly being treated unjustly and inhumanely. Despite the adversities and hardships which were thrust upon them, all three prophets persisted in working to establish a new moral code and to model how to live one's life with compassion and love, trusting and obeying God's words. All three rejected the idolatry and hypocrisy practiced by the religious and political authorities of their time and used their words, deeds and prophecies to establish a renewed sense of moral responsibility and accountability for future generations in order to save souls, not pocketbooks. Their common message was that love of God means love of the weakest among us and that our duty is to ensure justice and overturn corrupt practices and beliefs that cause suffering and prejudice. Although centuries have passed since these messengers of Allah, God, and Yahweh challenged the corruption of their time with messages of love and compassion, the issue of corruption is just as relevant and compelling today. Nowhere is the need to fight against corruption more important than the fight for the rights and dignity of migrant farm workers who are often faceless and powerless against corporations, corrupt local authorities in the U.S. and abroad, and others who would abuse their power over these workers.

A key characteristic of approaches used by the three prophets to creatively transform the corruption of their day is that each had a strong sense of right and wrong, each fought for equality and justice for the weak and each had a vision of a world free from oppression and exploitation. As Philip Birnbaum writes in A Book of Jewish Concepts, "The disciples or followers of Abraham, we are told in the Mishnah, possess three traits: generosity, simplicity and humility" (Avoth 5:22). The story of Moses is one in which his mother is forced to abandon him because of his Jewish heritage and the ruling by the Pharaoh to kill all male infants of the Israelites. When a grown Moses steps forward to stop an Egyptian beating a Jew, he becomes an outlaw and is forced to flee to the desert. God's revelation to Moses in the form of the burning bush that he must return to Egypt to lead the Jews out of captivity is also a story of God's triumph over fear and of Moses' faith in God's purpose. In Exodus 20, God issues the Ten Commandments to Moses in order to provide spiritual and moral guidance on the proper conduct before God and one another. The covenant offered to Moses in the form of the Torah was to worship no other God and to care for one another. This idea that the people of Israel are responsible for one another is embedded in Hebrew prayers and Jewish tradition such as during the annual Day of Atonement in which each sin is confessed by the whole synagogue. In our world today, Moses' example of mutual social responsibility would inspire us to unite in making life better for migrant workers all over the world who work long hours, under horrible conditions and with little protection or thanks as they put food in our grocery stores and on our table everyday of the year.

During Jesus' time, the Romans ruled Judea and the temple bureaucracy was ruled by corrupt political and religious elites - the Scribes and Pharisees of the temple - who allowed the selling of favors and goods in the Lord's house. In addition to their greed, these religious leaders

were morally corrupt. No one was permitted in the temple if they were sick or unclean by order of the high priests who wielded power and absolute authority based on their political position rather than their religious conduct. In contrast, Jesus of Nazareth went about the countryside teaching and healing the poor, the sick and the unclean. Jesus was even kind to those who society shunned and left for dead, known throughout the land as lepers, who were forced to live separate from the towns and villages, and were greatly feared. However, when ten lepers approached Jesus and asked him to cure their ailments, Jesus did not cringe or back away as most other religious temple leaders would have done, but healed them, telling the lepers that it was their faith that had made them well. Jesus' loving acceptance of all people, whether young and beautiful, or old and scarred was a powerful example of how Jesus attacked the corrupt biases of his time by upholding the humanity of people regardless of their position or place.

The most well known example of how Jesus fought against the idolatry and hypocrisy of his time is found in John 2: 12-22 - the story of the cleansing of the temple - where he makes a whip out of cord, overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple and breaks open the cages of the animals which were to be sacrificed. While many at the time thought that these actions were blasphemous, they were merely revolutionary, a display of how Jesus the reformer who had no official authority, used his moral authority to challenge practices and priests who were leading people astray. As Jesus said, "The time approaches, indeed it is already here, when those who are real worshippers will worship God in spirit and in truth. This is what God wants."

Throughout Christianity's history there are examples of leaders of the Christian church hiding behind the authority of the church to cover misdeeds and of church officials acting more like Caesar. However in the Old Testament Jeremiah asks what knowledge of the Lord is and answers that [It is to know] "that I am the Lord who exercises mercy, justice, and righteousness

in the earth, for in these things I delight (Jeremiah 9:22). Jesus' example shows us that we must always work for justice - that we cannot find peace or true fulfillment of God's word as long as there are other people living in misery. The popular phrase, "What Would Jesus Do?" for migrant workers who are exploited every step of their journey to pick crops in the agricultural fields of the U.S. and the world is that he would lift up their plight, gather them in dignified but massive groups and travel the country and the world until each worker made a living wage and was treated with dignity. He would remind us of our own power to boycott exploitative growers and governments - to cause pain and suffering to the rich and powerful in order to create positive change for the poor.

Muhammad was another revolutionary reformer of his time period, changing the views and practices of many Arabs in order to eat away at the corruption which existed in Arab society. Cheating and the mistreatment of women was commonplace, but the spread of Islam caused the Jahiliyah, or state of ignorance to move forward into a time of knowledge and understanding of the moral codes which should be followed. Muhammad taught his people that, while it is easy for those in power to become corrupted and sources of injustice, oppression and stagnation, people must strive to stay on the correct and moral path as stated in this hadith: "The noblest of you in sight of Allah is the best of you in conduct" (49:13). As a result, Islam rejected cheating and the love of money, which had previously been an important part of the commercial life in Mecca, as well as the killing of infant girls, which fathers had previously taken part in order to mitigate the shame they felt by having a daughter. While the highest authority is that of Allah and His Messenger, mutual responsibility is also emphasized as in this hadith: "Every one of you is a ruler and every one of you shall be questioned about those under rule; the king is a ruler and he shall be questioned about his subjects; and the man is a ruler in his family and he shall be

questioned about those under his care; and the woman is a ruler in the house of her husband, and she shall be questioned about those under her care; and the servant is a ruler so far as the property of his master is concerned, and he shall be questioned about that which is entrusted to him” (B.11:11). By inviting people to goodness, the Qur’an talks about nations who were destroyed because they were steeped in corruption instead of following a moral path and obeying Allah’s laws. Muhammad would have championed the rights and dignity of the migrant workers of today because of his belief that Islamic law is founded on justice, mutual consultation and the moral obligation of protecting the welfare of the people against crime, corruption and immorality. As reported by Al-Bukhari, this hadith states: “If one of you sees something wrong, let him change it with his hand; if he cannot, then with his tongue; if he cannot, then with his heart and this is the weakest faith.”

Faith in action ... faith works wonders - these words can seem inadequate in the face of the overwhelming odds faced by the weak and poor to fight against the corruption that stands in the way of a decent wage and life for their families. But, as Al Gore said at the Global Forum on Fighting Corruption in 1999, “. . . corruption in one country can make its impact felt around the world. No one country can seal itself off from the impact of corruption beyond its borders, and therefore every nation must work with every other nation to fight corruption wherever it is in the world.” Every day, close to 200 million agricultural workers from various other countries around the world move from place to place including to the U.S. in the hopes of getting a job and sending money back to their homes. However, most of them are met with the “dirty jobs,” the leftovers in the working world. Earning much less than minimum wage, sometimes only \$6500 a year or less, certainly not enough to live off of, they are being taken advantage of by the brokers who recruit them and the corporations and industries which they work for, hired as low

wage workers, not as hardworking people. While agriculture depends on this steady flow of mobile labor to work the seasonal harvests, most labor protections in the U.S. and abroad exclude these very same workers. In a speech to the Rotary Club in Cleveland, Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers said, “All my life, I have been driven by one dream, one goal, one vision: to overthrow a farm labor system in this nation that treats farm workers as if they were not important human beings. Farm workers are not agricultural implements; they are not beasts of burden, to be used and discarded.” However, organizations such as the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) and the United Farm Workers (UFW) are attempting to better the wages and working conditions of the farmworkers. Their efforts reflect the teachings of the three prophets.

Just as in the time of Moses, the Egyptians chose to make the Israelites their slaves and used them as a source of cheap labor. After Moses lead the Hebrews out of captivity in Egypt and God showed his power over the Pharaoh, Moses still had the task of caring for the men, women and children wandering in the desert. In this same way, the organizers and leaders of FLOC, such as Baldemar Valesquez use Moses’ example to minister to migrant workers living in labor camps in the midwest and the south - helping to make sure that the bodies of men who die in the fields are returned to their families for proper burial and that working and living conditions are improved. As emphasized in the Ten Commandments, compassion for the poor, the stranger, widow and orphan remind those in power of God’s words to “not mistreat or oppress the alien” (Exodus 22:21).

Whether it is Malaysians working in Indonesia or Mexicans working in the U.S., migrant workers face hazardous working conditions, substandard housing, isolation and exposure to pesticides. Just as Jesus preached the good news of the gospel to the poor, healed the sick,

caused the lame to walk and the blind to see with his ministry, so too does FLOC call each of us to bear witness to “battle not against flesh and blood but against power and principalities” (Ephesians 6:12) so that the “cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts” (James 5:4). Using a combination of marches, boycotts and public opinion to win three-way agreements between the corporations, the growers and the workers, FLOC is using Jesus’ example to push for social justice for the weak and oppressed so that the meek can truly inherit the earth.

FLOC is also engaging in an ongoing battle to fight against corruption by public officials in the recruitment system in which brokers are paid large fees to guarantee passage and a job across the border. In 2007, a FLOC worker was beaten to death in their Mexican office and to this day there has been no official investigation launched despite 100,000 letters. Just as the Qur’an called all Muslims who make up the community of the umma to good conduct, justice, equity and righteousness following Muhammad’s example, so too does FLOC’s leaders champion the voices of the powerless as an example of impeccable moral conduct.

All three prophets of Abraham - Moses, Jesus and Muhammad - lived among everyday people to show that moral conduct and means finding the courage to change “can’t” to “can” and “won’t” to “will” and to overcome doubt and fear to combat moral and political corruption which keeps each of us from following a path to social justice for all. There is no substitute for high moral values and conduct which each of the messengers of God embodied and there is no better organization to support than the Farmwork Labor Organizing Committee which is relentless in its zeal to fight for reforms on behalf of the invisible migrant workers who are in desperate need of our prayers, our presence and our support.

Bibliography

- Adair, John. *The Leadership of Jesus: And Its Legacy Today*. New Jersey: Pilgrim Press, 2002.
- "At the Global Forum on Fighting Corruption." *News from the USIA Washington File*. 24 Feb. 1999. 28 Jan. 2008 <http://www.fas.org/irp/news/1999/02/99022401_clt.htm>.
- Birnbaum, Philip. *A Book of Jewish Concepts*. New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1964.
- The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*. Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1962.
- A Manual of Hadith*. Ed. Maulana Muhammad Ali. Lahore: The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 1941.
- Peters, F.E. *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- The Monotheists: Jews, Christians and Muslims Volumes I and II*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- "Use of Power and Its Relation to Corruption in Islam." *IslamOnline*. 5 Sept. 2002. 28 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.islamonline.net>>.