

TOWARDS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND PROSPERITY

A Biblical Model of Decentralized Governance and Economics

(A Reflection for the 26th Sunday Yr B, 26.09.21 by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

Dear friends, the readings in today's liturgy inspire us to reflect on the theme of governance and economics. While many leaders tend to want to jealously guard their authority and influence and often constitute themselves into some sort of "gods" besides whom there are no others, the readings today show us that such a model only ends up overburdening the leader, ultimately making him or her less effective (1st and Gospel Readings).

In the same vein, while many employers of labour tend to focus on amassing more and more profit for themselves, often neglecting the wellbeing of their employees, the readings today show us the futility of such a model (2nd Reading). Therefore, the Bible proposes a model of governance and economics that considers empowering others in view of sharing authority/responsibility and prosperity.

In the 1st Reading (Num 11:25-29), Moses had rightly complained of the weight of the burden of responsibility before him (cf. 11:11-15) and the Lord responded to his genuine complaint by asking him to appoint seventy elders of the people and bring them to the Tent of Meeting which is the Lord's dwelling place. The Lord pledged to empower these select elders with some of Moses' spirit so they can share the burden of leadership with him (cf. 11:16-17).

After Moses had gathered the select men before the Lord's Tent of Meeting, the Lord came down in a cloud, drew upon the spirit that was on Moses and bestowed it upon the select seventy elders, thus prompting them to prophesy (11:24-25), including two of them (Eldad and Medad) who had remained in their camp and could not go to the Tent of meeting (11:26). In the last part of v. 25, we are told that the seventy elders who received a share in Moses' spirit "prophesied but did not continue" or "did so no more", a statement that apparently places a limit to their exercise of the prophetic ministry.

This seems to be an attempt to accommodate the view that there was to be only one legitimate prophet at a time, in this case, only Moses, after whom the Lord will appoint another like him (cf. Deut 18:15-18). It may also point to the need to affirm Moses' special status in the midst of other possible prophetic figures. Thus, Moses is portrayed as having the fullness of the prophetic spirit while the elders only participated in it in a limited way, analogous to the executive role of ministers as a limited participation in the executive role of the president in a presidential system of government.

This may have been necessitated by the danger of challenging Moses' unique status, an example of which we see in Numbers 12 where Miriam and Aaron tried to challenge Moses' authority saying, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?" (Num 12:2). It is this kind of concern that may have necessitated the young man to run out from the camp to tell Moses that "Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp" (11:27), and Joshua, Moses' special assistant, to speak up saying, "My lord Moses, restrain them!" (11:28).

While all these point to the challenges of decentralized governance and the legitimate fears about it expressed by these other characters in the exposition, the major character, Moses, who is the prophet and is credited to have both practical experience of the burden of having too

much responsibility concentrated on him, enjoys the support of the Lord in his advocacy for decentralization and has no qualms whatsoever, having others act also as prophets.

Therefore, Moses dismisses both the young man's alarm and Joshua's call to restrain those who were manifesting the prophetic vocation, saying: "hamqannē' 'attâ li'? (Are you being jealous on my behalf?). Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!" (11:29). Thus, out of his genuine desire for a more effective service to the people, Moses jettisons the temptation and the advice of his close associates to concentrate the prophetic authority on himself, and opts instead, for a system of decentralized governance and shared responsibility.

In your own sphere of leadership, what governance model do you employ? One that is obsessed with preserving control or one that prioritizes effective service delivery to the people?

While the 1st reading borders on political models, the 2nd Reading (James 5:1-6) borders on economic models, challenging the economics of exclusive possession and the concentration of wealth in the hands of executives and employers of labour at the expense of employees.

Having announced eschatological misery as the lot of the rich, for which he calls upon them to weep and wail (5:1), James attempts to make the rich understand the futility of the needless wealth they have amassed: "Your riches have rotted and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted and their rust will be evidence against you" (5:2-3).

He also reveals how such kind of immodest wealth is a result of the exploitation of employees, a fraudulent manipulation of the wage structure in a way that disregards the principle of proper compensation of the labourer to favour the accumulation of unjust profit on the part of the employers of labour. Thus we read: "Listen, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (5:4).

The 2nd reading, therefore, speaks for the many poor labourers in our time whose exploitation by the rich condemns them to life threatening conditions of working dangerously hard and often in dangerous conditions but whose wages can hardly feed them or take care of their health or those of their families, while their employers get only richer and care about nothing but their profit. It calls to question our economic models in our own sphere of economic influence. Whether we care at all that the work we provide becomes a means of sharing wealth and empowering others or we basically use our employees to satisfy our obsession with amassing more and more wealth?

In the Gospel (Mk 9:38-48), Jesus' young disciple, John, tells Jesus how they saw a man who was not part of them, casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and how they tried to stop him. This echoes the effort of the young man in the 1st reading, who runs to tell Moses about Eldad and Medad who were prophesying in the camp, and that of Joshua, who asked Moses to stop or restrain him. Jesus unequivocally asks his disciples not to behave like that: "Do not forbid him", and then goes on to explain: "for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me; whoever is not against us is for us" (9:39-40).

Clearly, Jesus shows that he is not concerned about having exclusive authority; anybody who believes in the common project can share in this authority, whether he is part of the restricted

circle of Jesus or part of a wider followership. As Jesus once taught: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (John 10:16).

And like Moses, Jesus is not jealous of those who share in his authority and he wants us his disciples to have a similar disposition, seeing those who have authority as we have and those who have influence as we have, not as competitors but as collaborators. We should pray that all be blessed by God as we have been blessed; that all be enabled as we have been enabled. As Moses put it, “would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!” (Num 11:29). This can happen only if our hearts are truly on getting the good job done, and not on some self-serving feeling of higher or even exclusive importance.

May our socio-cultural, geopolitical and ethnoreligious differences not hinder us from identifying our common aspirations and our common responsibility to build a prosperous world together for all of God’s children, not just for a few exclusive ones! Amen!