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The Ideal State in Jesus' Ministry and Contemporary Nigeria

by Patrick U. Nwosu

Abstract:

The issues that led to the execution of Jesus of Nazareth revolved around political, social, economic and religious ideals. He wanted his people to be liberated from unjust structures, whether from within or from outside. In the light of this understanding, the paper seeks to draw a link between the socio-political atmosphere of Jesus' time and 21st century Nigeria. The argument advanced is that the solutions that Jesus recommended for a better Israel will effectively suit present day Nigerian society. It seems obvious that the present political, social, economic and religious ills of Nigeria are similar to those of Jesus' time despite the time gap. What link has Jesus of Nazareth with Nigeria? What does his teaching on the ideal state portend for 21st century Nigeria? The paper explores these important concerns, using historical and analytical methods. The paper concludes with suggestions for a better Nigeria.

Introduction

Clearly Jesus of Nazareth was arrested, sentenced and executed by the Roman authorities on a charge of political treason. Jesus was found guilty of being involved in some sort of conspiracy; he challenged the status quo of the time. Luke's gospel leaves no one in doubt about the charge that was brought against Jesus. *And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king"* (Lk. 23:2 NIV).¹ In this regard, Tesfai, with deep insight, states that:

Jesus was crucified because he challenged the structures of power. His crucifixion is tied intimately with the kind of life he lived and the message he proclaimed within the context of a specific situation of injustice. His death on the cross was caused by specific political and social structures that were opposed to the kind of person Jesus was and to his message. This cross is thus the definite consequence of a life committed to the dregs of society and in favour of their liberation.²

In other words, the shameful execution of Jesus of Nazareth was a result of a commitment and a praxis that threatened the status quo of the time. The

¹ The African Bible (Nairobi: Paulines, 1999), using the text of the New American Bible reads, *They brought charges against him, saying, "We found this man misleading our people; he opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and maintains that he is the Messiah, a king"*. The accompanying comment says, "The charge against Jesus is that he is revolutionary, forbids taxes to Caesar, and claims to be king." pp. 1775-1776.

² Yacob Tesfai, (ed.), *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspective on the Cross and Suffering*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 6-7.

cross followed a subversive life that confronted the powers that be and proposed an ideal socio-economic framework that would benefit the majority.

Jesus wanted his people to be liberated from Roman imperialism since a typical Jew made no distinction between political stability and religion. The issues at stake during the time of Jesus public ministry were political, social, economic and religious; and they were all thought of from the prism of God and His law. Jesus, being deeply involved in the politics of the time, started a religio-political movement not unlike that of the Zealots.³

In the light of this understanding, this article seeks to draw a link between the socio-political atmosphere of Jesus' Israel and 21st century Nigeria. The argument is advanced that Jesus' core teaching recommended for the socio-political and religious challenges of the Israelite society of his time will also apply to contemporary Nigerian society. It is very clear that the present political, social and economic ills of Nigeria are similar to those of Jesus time despite the time gap.

What link has Jesus of Nazareth with Nigeria? What does his teaching on the ideal state have to do with 21st century Nigeria? This paper is aimed at exploring these questions, using historical and analytical methods. Suggestions for a better Nigeria will be generated from this exploration.

Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus of Nazareth was born in a period of turbulent political, social, religious and economic crisis; one giving way to another. He was born at the time Caesar Augustus ordered a census of the entire Roman world; for all the nations of the known world were subject to Rome. Describing vividly the nature of Caesar Augustus' order, at the time Jesus was born, Sheen writes:

To every outpost, to every satrap and governor, the order went out: every Roman subject must be enrolled in his own city. On the fringe of the empire, in the little village of Nazareth, soldiers tacked up on walls the order for all the citizens to register in the town of their family origins. In accordance with the edict, Mary and Joseph set out from the village of Nazareth for the village of Bethlehem, which lies about five miles on the other side of Jerusalem.⁴

In the light of the above circumstance, Jesus was born into a carpenter's family in a troubled area of the Roman Empire.

Jesus was a Jewish peasant. He was revolutionary-like and lived under Roman occupation. He was a leader of resistance to oppression through peaceful and non-violent means. He was a teacher who drew on Jewish teachings about faith, religion, and governance. Daniel-Rops sees him as an ordinary Jew but one who challenged the system around him by daring to ask questions. He writes:

³ Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 92.

⁴ Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, (India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2009), pp. 26-27.

Jesus Christ, whom the Christians worship as God but also truly man, was a Jew, a Palestinian Jew of the time of Augustus and Herod: he was not only a Jew by his origins, the manner of his everyday life and his spiritual message had its deep roots in the Jewish soil of Israel.⁵

When Jesus of Nazareth lived, the themes that shaped the world around him revolved around occupation, religious fundamentalism, quest to control resources and misguided social values. Avoseh's observation captures the nature of Jesus' Israel. According to him, it was "a time of turmoil, with a lot of anxious moments as a result of party acrimony. Law and morality were deteriorating at a tear-away rate. There was large scale distrust, betrayal, mal-administration, disregard for essential traditional values and general moral degeneracy".⁶ Jesus of Nazareth had to deal with these themes. He spoke of freedom, economic and political values, religion and social issues as they concern human beings and nations, Nigeria inclusive.

The core of his person and message was the arrival of the kingdom of God, with a warm spirit of mercy and an unconditional sense of compassion. Compassion, fairness and justice, he insisted, were the paths to the ideal state of all things, ideas that remain as radically and challenging in Nigeria today as they were 2,000 years back. Leaving no doubts as to what He regarded as the ideal state of affairs, Jesus declared that political freedom from Caesar was not fundamental. Genuine freedom was spiritual and meant liberation from sin. To arrive in this realm, people ought to pursue fairness, justice and righteousness.⁷ In other words, Jesus' ideal state was conditioned by his history and environment. He was a man of his time and of his place.

Teaching and Works of Jesus of Nazareth and the Nigerian Situation

The focus of this section of the paper is on political and socio-economic challenges during the time of Jesus of Nazareth and not on the type of society ripe for salvation. The emphasis is that Jesus was able to identify the socio-political problems that confronted his people, and he set out to address such challenges through his teaching and example. Mark's gospel reports that, "*as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he set himself to teach them at some length*" (Mark 6:34). It is, therefore, on the similarity of the challenges in the society and the solutions to them that Jesus' time is likened to contemporary Nigerian society vis-à-vis his recommendations for an ideal state.

⁵ Henry Daniel-Rops, *Daily Life in the Time of Jesus*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1980), p. 429.

⁶ M.B.M. Avoseh, "Plato's Ideal State and Contemporary Nigeria", *Bodija Journal*, No.4, June 1992, p. 99.

⁷ Sheen, *Life of Christ*, p. 200.

Jesus did not just preach a purely spiritual and religious message. He was deeply involved in the politics of the time. In this sense, it may be said, "that the relationship of Israel to the imperial power of Rome was a political issue".⁸ Legrand rightly asserts that,

In spite of the return from captivity and the rebuilding of the temple, the situation of the Jewish community remained precarious. It was economically impoverished. Politically it was reduced to the position of a backward area on the outskirts of large imperial powers. All too often those powers turned it into their battlefield.⁹

This situation heavily underlined Jesus' teaching and his works while on earth.

The political, socio-economic and religious teaching of Jesus evolved within the society which was its context. Jesus, wanting Israel to be liberated from foreign imperialism, reminded the people of the opening verse of the "Shema", the daily prayer. "Listen, Israel, there is no God but the Lord thy God," Deut. 6:4. His central teaching is that there is but one God alone. It is this God that he proclaimed as the one to bring "liberation to his people and salvation from our enemies, from the hands of those who hate us" Lk. 1:68, 71. The enemies of Israel were without doubt the Romans who occupied Israel and the expectation expressed was that Jesus' teaching and works would be liberating.

Jesus set out to accomplish the socio-political expectation of the people. He started the liberating work by addressing the leadership of Israel. He tried to persuade the leaders and the people of Israel to change. He challenged them to be transformed and be renewed in their commitment to the one God. Describing the challenge to new life with deep in sight, Nolan says:

Without a change of heart within Israel itself, liberation from imperialism of any kind would be impossible. That had been the message of all the prophets, including John the Baptist. Jesus was a prophet and he was involved in politics in exactly the same way as all the prophets had been.¹⁰

Our central concern is the problem of an ideal state and true happiness for the people. So, the question is: what kind of change of heart did Jesus propose for the ideal state? Jesus recommended non-resentment. He told the people to read the signs of the times (Lk. 12:54-56) and to discern for themselves (Lk. 12:57) instead of taking to violence, revolt and terrorism. As Jesus implies, the only way to guarantee progress towards an ideal state and true happiness was to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, to pray for those who treat you badly (Lk. 6:27-28).

This brings out the issue and concept of compassion and dialogue. Jesus proposed a change that would affect every aspect of life. He saw what no one

⁸ Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, p. 93.

⁹ Lucien Legrand, *The Bible on Culture*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 44.

¹⁰ Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, p. 95.

else had been able to see; "that there was more oppression and economic exploitation from within than from without".¹¹ To confirm the validity of Jesus' proposal, Ellsberg submits that, "the essential message was to be found in the law of love, the absolute rejection of violence in all its forms".¹²

The middle-class or Jewish leaders who were in revolt against Rome were themselves oppressors of the poor masses. The ethics of the Scribes and Pharisees did not reflect the highest good and well-being of the majority. The governance they rendered over the people was not anchored in God's compassion and justice. For, as Segundo explains:

The political life, the civic organization of the Jewish multitudes, their burdens, and their oppression...depended much less on the Roman Empire and much more on the theology ruling in the groups of Scribes and Pharisees. They, and not the Empire, imposed intolerable burdens on the weak... so establishing the true socio - political structure of Israel. To that extent, the counter theology of Jesus was much more political than... acts against the Rome Empire would have been.¹³

In other words, true liberation from social, political, and religious challenges means taking up the cause of human beings as such. To love your enemies is to live in solidarity with all people and to stand by human beings as beings created by one true God. Jesus of Nazareth portrayed all these ideal values in words and deeds.

Like the Israel of Jesus time, Nigeria, since the post-colonial era, has always had a high degree of political and social-economic challenges. It is no longer breaking news to hear that Nigerians are killing one another in the name of God or that those elected to serve the people are looting the public treasury.¹⁴ For this same reason, the radical Muslim feels threatened by a Christian as the head of state. Thus, there is a push for an Islamic style of governance. Political assassination is the common denominator in Nigerian polity. The situation is complicated; it is a web of intrigues, sectarian revolts, corruption and selfishness. In the light of the foregoing Zaggá laments that:

Today's leaders, however, seek relevance by accentuating or playing up our differences for their selfish gains. Publicly, these leaders present the face of patriots but, privately, they are deadly champions of ethnic and religious bigotry.¹⁵

¹¹ Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, p. 94.

¹² Robert Ellsberg, (ed.), *Gandhi on Christianity*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), p. xi.

¹³ Segundo Montes, "Capitalism-Socialism: A Theological Crux" in *Concilium*, January 1975, p. 118.

¹⁴ See *The Guardian*, editorial "London Jamboree", Sunday, July 29, 2012, p. 16, and *The Guardian*, Friday, July 6, 2012, p. 1ff.

¹⁵ Mohammad Zaggá, "The Descent into Savagery", *The Guardian*, Sunday, August 5, 2012, p. 15

The reports above reveal the corruptive tendencies of Nigerian leaders, especially their lack of kindness towards their fellow beings – those they claim to govern or represent.

This series of complex challenges can have the most serious consequences for nations. As in Israel during the time of Jesus, so it is with Nigeria today. Daniel-Rops notes the complexities and problem thus:

Civil wars, devastating raids, the country sweated blood. This was the origin of that confusion between religious and political attitudes that is so clearly to be seen in Jesus' time.¹⁶

In such a climate of violence and various social challenges, Jesus' teaching and works fit in quite naturally for nations, Nigeria inclusive. In this regard, Adam argues that:

The humanity of Christ is here not an illusion; its purpose is not merely to make the divine visible. On the contrary, the humanity of Christ has its own distinctive form ... by which God draws near ...¹⁷

Jesus was a great social and spiritual reformer, someone in the tradition of the sages of Israel. Jesus' radical demonstration of the Kingdom of God (the ideal state) is seen in his compassionate ministry to people in need. His teaching and works were based upon a familial relationship with a God of boundless, compassionate love.¹⁸ It is this outlook and disposition of heart that are required of leaders, particularly in Nigeria, in order to achieve political stability and the greater good of the greatest number.

Suggestions and Conclusion

The social malaise that Jesus meant to cure in Israel resembles that existing in Nigeria today. If Nigeria is to survive and remain stable as a nation, she needs to borrow a leaf from Jesus' book. In this regard, the heart of mercy and the compassion of elected officials and public servants towards the masses are fundamental for the ideal Nigerian nation. Every sphere of Nigerian life - political, economic, social and religious - is to be radically questioned from the context of compassion. Unfortunately, current government policies and ideas about what is right and just in Nigeria turn out to be loveless and therefore contrary to the will of God. For instance, in some states in Nigeria, the governors will take over farmlands of the people and hand over that same land to foreign farmers. In exchange, the youth will be removed from the farms and will be given motorcycles (*Okada*) to ride. These same governors will come up after some years to ban the use of "*Okada*" in the

¹⁶ Daniel-Rops, *Daily Life in the Time of Jesus*, p. 57.

¹⁷ Karl Adam, *The Son of God*, (Princeton: Scepter Publishers, 1992), p. 2-3.

¹⁸ Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: an Ecological Theology*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 45.

states.¹⁹ The sense of “justice” of most leaders in Nigeria is like the “justice” of the Zealots and Pharisees during the time of Jesus; it is loveless. They regret God’s compassion and generosity towards the poor masses. To such elected leaders, David Bosch’s warning is cautionary and timely. He warns them that:

Love of God, in Jesus’ ministry, is interpreted by love of neighbor. This also involves new criteria for inter-human relations. They should do this by serving others rather than ruling over them. Jesus gives himself in love to others; so should they, constrained by his love.²⁰

Jesus of Nazareth made it clear to leaders and people in authority that mercy and compassion towards the people is fundamental for any ideal state. Without compassion, all politics will be oppressive and all policies and programmes of the government useless and empty.²¹ The knowledge, compassionate heart, and uprightness in character that Jesus wished should be the attributes of leaders in any nation were amongst the same criteria that traditional African societies used in selecting a ruler. Such a ruler was expected not only to know his people, land and customs, but also to have a good heart and take serious interest in the welfare of the people. A ruler who neglected this point was dethroned. This point clearly indicates that Jesus’ recommendations for an ideal state are not alien to Nigeria as an African country.

The demands upon contemporary leaders are higher today, given the challenges of globalization. To meet up with present-day social, economic and political requirements, it becomes imperative that leaders should say yes to God and promise, not only to obey the Constitution, but to obey God Himself, Matt. 21:28-31. In that regard, when challenges come and a kingdom of compassion is being offered to them, they too can join in the celebration. To a considerable level Nigeria needs to reflect God’s compassion and forgiveness arising out of “an ethical conviction about the value of life, the dignity of the human person, and the centrality of community”.²²

Finally, those in the driver’s seats of governmental affairs should acquaint themselves not only with what is ideal for Nigeria in the abstract but also with what is best relative to the circumstance of the majority. Like Jesus of Nazareth, they should concentrate on making life more abundant and happy for the people.

¹⁹ This kind of heartless policy led to a violent protest by commercial motorcyclists in some parts of Kwara State recently. See *The Guardian*, Sunday, August 5, 2012, p. 8.

²⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 36.

²¹ Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, p. 98.

²² John Heagle, *Justice Rising: The Emerging Biblical Vision*, (New York: Orbits Books, 2010), p. 96.

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