

God of Dialogue and Reconciliation

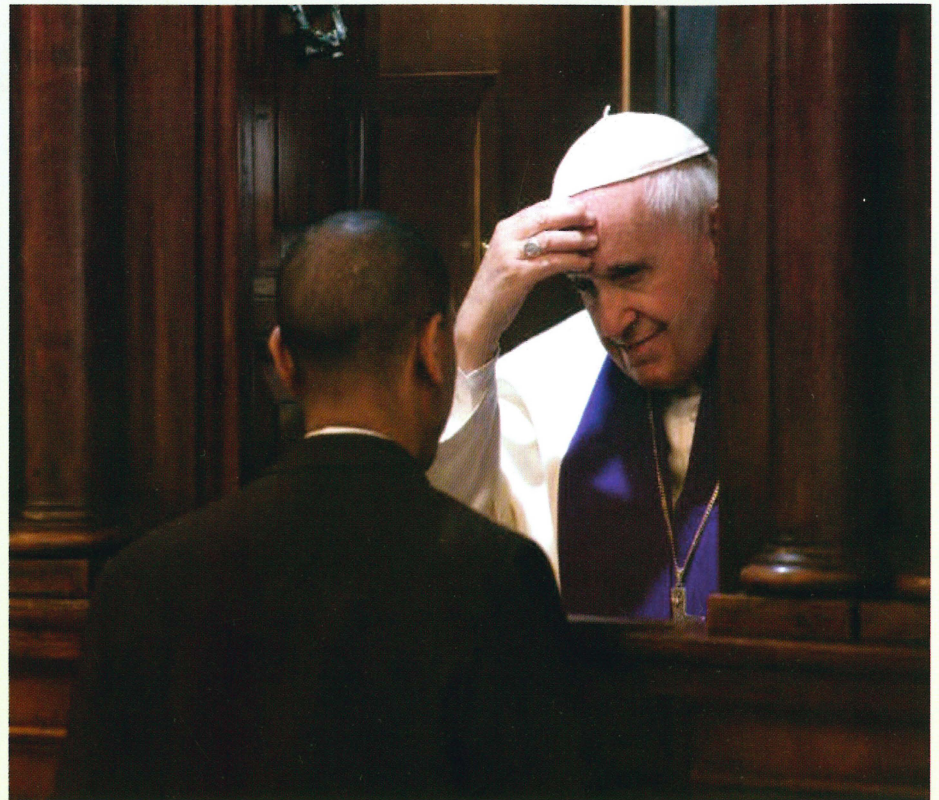
Fr Joseph Mugara

In this article I want to suggest some lessons that we can draw from the Old Testament in our quest for dialogue and reconciliation in Zimbabwe. The crisis in Zimbabwe is deeply rooted in a long history of conflicts and violence. In the Old Covenant, Scripture portrays the divine economy as dialogue between the Creator and humanity that culminates in reconciliation through Christ. The plan of God revealed in the Old Covenant is salvific obtained through dialogue.

God's reason for dialogue with humanity is salvation

The people of Israel encountered their God in the midst of the great events of the exodus. For them the God who intervened in their history to bring about their liberation from Egyptian slavery is the same God who had entered into dialogue with their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the same God who created all things. Creation manifests the dialogue through which God enters into initial communion with his people: "The heavens proclaim the glory of God, the firmament shows forth the work of his hands..." Psalm 19:1. Above all, God made the human person in his image and likeness. In this he communicates himself since the invisible God, from the fullness of his love addresses humanity as friends, inviting and receive them into his own company.

After the fall, God engaged humanity in dialogue to re-establish the broken relationship



between him and creation. God, the one against whom humanity sinned, is the one who came to look for the lost Covenant partner and offer him reconciliation. This has been understood as God's offer of salvation. Salvation is a restored relationship with God. Salvation is the final end, the ultimate accomplishment of God's purpose for all creation.

According to Klaus Berger, the Hebrew expressions corresponding to the English word "salvation" show that the Old Testament concept of salvation had its roots in concrete experiences and situations perhaps similar to our own today. Salvation is deliverance from mortal danger, healing from sickness, liberation from captivity, ransom from slavery, help in a law-suit, victory in battle and peace after political negotiations (Ps 7:11; 18:28; 22:22; 34:7, 19; 55:17; 69:2; 86:2; 107:13,19,28). Gerald

O'Collins provides a list of Hebrew words for salvation, the main ones of which include nasal (deliver) palat (bring to safety) padah (redeem) and malat (deliver).

Two major salvific terms are gaal, which means "redeem," "buy back," "restore," "vindicate" or "deliver" and yaša, which means "save," "help in time of distress," "rescue," "deliver" or "set free" (G. O'COLLINS, "Salvation", 908). The nouns suggest a change from one status to another; from hostility to friendship. How did God accomplish the salvific project to which the above words mainly apply? Through dialogue.

The Divine dialogue initiatives that lead to Reconciliation

Israel developed the sacrificial system and rituals to deal with both vertical and horizontal relationships, which became embedded in their social, religious and political

consciousness as a nation. There were rituals to make peace; there were practices to settle quarrels and to deal with errant behaviour. There were deeds and words, sacrifices and rituals that could reconcile both vertically and horizontally. For the vertical reconciliation with Yahweh which influenced social reconciliation, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament helped people to admit their sense of guilt, atone for their sins and obtain peace with God. They had categories of offerings such as “peace offerings” (Num 29:39; 1 Chron 21:26), “sin offerings” (Lev 4:24, 33; 5:12; 6:18; Num 7:87); and “communion offerings” (Exod 20:24; 24:5; 32:6; Lev 4:10,) which dealt with the removal of sins. Atonement for sin which Israel tried to achieve with these rituals assumes that human faults broke the relationship with God and this relationship can only be restored through removal of sin by the power of rituals (2 Sam 14:7). Here admission is essential. Humility before historical faults is key to reconciliation, including Zimbabwe. The means of doing this included payment of compensation for wrongs, sacrifices, rituals, intercessory prayers (Gen 18:23-32), offerings, acceptance of suffering, and repentance. Sorrow for wrongdoing and sin was also demonstrated through wearing of sackcloth and fasting (Jonah 3:7-10). In all this we can observe that there were indeed external manifestations of a genuine desire for a brighter future.

Another lesson is how God took the initiative in searching for the lost Covenant partner for “with the Lord is found forgiveness and plentiful redemption” (Psalm 130:3-7). He

does not desire the death of the sinner but that the sinner turns away from sin and live (Ezek 33:11). Yahweh pardons all sins for he is compassionate. Thus, the whole story of the Israelites in the history of the economy of reconciliation is one of constant infidelities to the Covenant which Yahweh had made with them, but it is also a story of fidelity and forgiveness on the part of Yahweh.

Social reconciliation was part and parcel of the Covenant relationship and dialogue not just between Yahweh and the individual, but collectively, governing the inter-personal relationships as divine justice demanded. Yahweh demanded social cohesion. After the murder of Abel by Cain, he demanded responsibility; “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground” (Gen 4:10). The Old Testament was concerned about peace in the family, in the tribes and nation as a whole.

The Old Testament economy of dialogue and reconciliation teaches us that we must accept and adhere to our constitution and respect the rule of law. The Decalogue, together with numerous prescriptions of the Mosaic Law prescribed good relationship with one’s neighbour and with foreigners and slaves (Exod 20:13-17; Deut 5:6-21). According to Exodus 18:13-26, Moses instituted a system of the administration of social justice in Israel to restore peace amongst people who quarrelled with each other. He taught them the statutes and laws to follow, directed them on how to behave, and chose capable and God-fearing men, trustworthy and

incorruptible to lead thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (Exod 18:13-26).

For the prophets, the word of Yahweh stands out more and more as the expression of the divine invitation to inter-personal relationship. Amos called for the just treatment of the poor whom the rich sold for a pair of sandals. Isaiah on his part denounced Israel for a system of worship that was in discord with justice, thus calling on Israel to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes; to share food with the hungry, and shelter the homeless poor; to clothe the naked him, and not to turn away from their own kin (Isa 58:6-7).

For Zimbabwe to return to prosperity it is required that true justice and repentance take root; to turn completely from the darkness of hostility to the light or dialogue and reconciliation: “Learn to do good, search for justice, discipline the violent, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:17). Zimbabwe needs sincere dialogue partners to achieve reconciliation and we must be willing to take the required steps for a brighter future. Political expediency must not override the irreplaceable worth of human life, which so much depends on sound politics. The birth of Jesus Christ is clear testimony that human life is fundamentally important. That is why he became one of us, in order to be one with us in Zimbabwe and throughout the world. Therefore we need to dialogue with him and with one another for our commonwealth.