

## **Crucifixion by Corruption: Then and Now**

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**Readings:** i) Micah 3:9-11, ii) Psalm 62:9-12, iii) Matthew 4:1-11

### **1. Then They Led Him Out to Crucify Him ... (Mark 15:20b)**

Roughly one thousand nine hundred and eighty six years ago – a 33 year old young man, probably naked, was herded like a captured animal to a place where his extraordinary but short life would end. Indeed, his life ended in the most brutal and most shameful manner available to the society of his day. As part of the humiliation and ‘death preparation’ that preceded this kind of killing, ostensibly for the sake of the victim; both his body and his spirit had to be weakened. Hence, he was flogged severely, mocked ruthlessly and forced to carry the awkward and heavy instrument of his own slaughter. In the mob that shepherded him to the notorious ‘place of skull’ was to be found priests, soldiers, state functionaries, blood thirsty spectators and those who loved a spectacle. Along the way they abducted one fellow who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, and forced him to assist the weakened and battered man carry the cross. Upon arrival at the notorious ‘place of skull’, they nailed the worn out man – wrists and feet - to the cross as they did with dozens others who were sentenced to this kind of death. And so begun the slow and torturous process of his death on the cross.

His capture was facilitated, among others, by priests and some of his own disciples. The arrest itself did not take him by surprise, except in its heavy-handedness: ‘Am I leading a rebellion that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me’? He asked his captors (Matthew 26:55a). His trial was a glorified form of mob justice. The objective to have him sentenced to death was so paramount that it had to be achieved at all costs and by any means. False and fabricated evidence was generated. A charge sheet was hastily cobbled together. Two rival governors played the roles of ‘magistrates’. The one had no backbone (Pilate) and the other (Herod) could not care less.

The following are some of the charges laid against the young man:

- Making of dangerous threats of malicious damage to property ( (Matt 26:61)
- Falsely claiming to be Christ, Son of God
- Treason and disloyalty to Caesar
- Claiming to be king of the Jews
- Incitement of people to rebellion
- Claiming to have power to forgive sin

A careful look at the ‘charge sheet’ reveals aspects of the fears and concerns of his captors. But why did they fear him so? They saw him as both a religious and political threat. Their trumped up charges can be reduced to two of the most serious ‘crimes’ of his

times, namely, blasphemy and treason. They wished to put an end to the threat posed by the 33 year old man – once and for all.

He was not just found guilty, he was framed. He did not just die, he was killed. In short, Jesus Christ was the victim of a complex and comprehensive form of corruption. Fearful of his teachings and his influence, worried about the impact of these on their own interests, his opponents moved swiftly to ‘take him out’ and to do so by any means necessary. It is in this sense that we say, Jesus Christ died of corruption.

## **1.1 On Corruption**

What is corruption? Below some of the key phrases and definitions:

- misuse of entrusted power
- abuse of public office for private gain
- abuse of all offices of trust for private gain
- abuse of entrusted power for short-term gain
- Personal Corruption (motivated by personal gain)
- Political Corruption (motivated by political gain)
- Religious corruption
- individual corruption
- institutional corruption
- bribery, nepotism and misappropriation
- deviation from the public good
- clash of values between the political and the economic (public service vs private profit)

Looking at the above list we will realize that Jesus Christ was not merely a victim of two fearful old governors (Pilate and Herod). He was not merely a victim of a bribed insider (Judas). Nor was he merely a victim of Caiaphas the High Priest. Indeed the mobbing crowd which shouted: ‘Crucify Him. Crucify Him’ was itself an important part of the problem. Similarly the strange behaviour of his disciples in the run up to the crucifixion; becoming more fearful, denying him, some going underground and colluding with the enemy all add up to the corruption that led to the death of Jesus. He was a victim of systems, institutions and structures – colluding and intersecting religious and political systems.

## **2. Our Readings**

The readings chosen for this service contain direct, hard-hitting and some places rather stinging sentiments. If we attempt to tame these words we will not succeed.

### **2.1 Micah and the Vampire Leaders**

Micah uses vivid imagery. His words are fast and furious. Indeed, the third chapter of Micah is not reading for the faint-hearted. It is a chapter whose stern words are directed at ‘leaders and prophets’ alike. In it, leaders and prophets are neither feared nor sweet-

talked. Micah skips the ‘bayete’ formalities and moves straight to into the ‘hey, listen here!’ stuff. He puts a formidable list of indictments before the leaders.

He accuses them of (Micah 3:2ff):

- Tearing/stripping the skin of ‘my people’
- Tearing the flesh from their bones
- Eating the flesh of the people
- Breaking the bones of the people
- Chopping the people up like meat

He also accused the leaders of:

- Despising justice
- Distortion of all that is right
- Building cities with bloodshed and wickedness
- Being prone to bribery

This is very strong language. These are serious and dangerous allegations. From Micah’s point of view, the leaders are not satisfied in rendering the people naked; they tear the people to the bone, daily, they chop the people up and eat them up. The leaders of whom he speaks are vampire leaders. Worse still they are cannibalistic leaders. Instead of providing service, such leaders feed on the blood and sweat of the people. They take and take and take and give little or nothing back. Elected by God to serve the people they nevertheless make people serve them and their narrow interests.

Look around you and observe the shenanigans of our leaders, in politics, in the private sector and even in the religious sector. The vampire and cannibalistic tendencies are there for all to see. To many of these leaders human lives have become a necessary collateral damage in the military and economic wars being waged. Violence has since been elevated into the organizing principle of human coexistence. While there may be differences as to how to tackle the present global economic recession, there is not much difference about the fact that it has been caused by long term corruption and greed of the highest order by some of society’s key institutions and their leaders. The huge gap in salaries between executives and ordinary workers is a case in point. But the scary thing is that so advanced and so innovative have been the corrupt practices that the very notion of ‘corruption’ has not been able to keep up.

Normal society – if such a thing still exists – is so far behind the innovations and machinations of corruption and corruptors that it seems as if corruption leads and we follow. The pressures on us to conform to corrupt tendencies and practices rather than us challenging these are great. When our leaders are caught with their hands in the cookie jar and when our politicians are caught with their pants down – society is no longer shocked. Instead we make excuses for them. When women are battered, violated and killed we are prone to blame them for asking for it – in all sorts of ways. Such is the power and threat of corruption that we seem to have given up on speaking and acting against it.

Nor does Micah spare the prophets. He speaks strongly against the crowd pleasing prophets whose message is designed to make their benefactors happy (Micah 3:5). Oh how such prophets are multiplying all around us! He is hard on the ‘don’t worry be happy’ preachers of his day. Micah is intolerant of priests whose bottom line is money and power - describing them as those who ‘teach for a price’ and ‘tell fortunes for money’ (Micah 3:11). Their prophesy is a self-serving rather than a God-serving tool! He proclaims a terrible judgment against such priests and prophets. Vision and insight will be taken away from them. The ‘network’ of communication between them and God will be cut off (Micah 3:7 & 8). They will be exposed for who they really are – preachers and prophets whose message emanates from their own selfish interests! What a frightful prospect for priests and prophets! What a worrying prospect for religion and religious leaders! Is that where we are heading as churches and as religions in this country and in this world?

## **2.2 Humans and What they Have Amount to Nothing! (Psalm 62:9-12)**

Whereas the writer of Psalm 8 regards human beings as being better than the heavens, the moon and the stars; elevating humans to the position of being ‘a little lower than angels’; the writer of Psalm 62 is soberingly brutal in cutting humans down to size. In Psalm 62 no distinction is made between lowborns and highborns; no distinction is made between upper caste and lower caste; no distinction made between upper class humans and lower class humans; no distinction is made between men and women. Here, humans are NOT qualitatively better than other creatures. In Psalm 62, humans are a species among other species on earth. They are not worth more than mountains, rivers, the stars and the animals. They have no automatic right of dominion. The earth and its inhabitants were not made just for human pleasure! If we knew only half of this truth we would be more respectful not only of one another, but of the environment as well.

All humans – says the Psalmist – are but a ‘breath’ and they amount to ‘nothing’! But the Psalmist is not finished. Not only are humans ‘nothing’, they must not delude themselves about what they think they have and possess. That too amounts to nothing. What a dressing down! What a sobering if also stinging message the Psalmist has for us!

For this reason humans are counseled against consumerism and materialism. The Psalmists counsels against the delusions we suffer when we trust wealth and possessions. If Micah illustrates the power of corruption and the corruption of power; Psalm 62 probes the roots and causes of corruption. At the root of corruption, lies the false sense of human self-importance; the mistaken sense of human supremacy over against other creatures; consumerism and materialism. These are the fountains from which the rivers of corruption flow. Hence the message of the Psalmist is a short and brutally honest one: Humans, what they have and what they desire all amount to NOTHING. The antidote of corruption, according to Psalm 62 therefore, is fourfold:

- Getting rid of our inflated, misplaced and mistaken sense of self-importance.
- Not placing faith in and on ourselves.
- Disabusing ourselves of delusions about the value of our possessions and dominion.
- And placing our faith and trust in God.

## 2.5 The Weapons of Corruption (Matthew 4:1-11)

### 2.5.1 Impeccable Timing and Resilience

The timing of the tempter is almost impeccable.

The tempter arrives right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and he arrives at the moment when Jesus is most vulnerable. He wants to insert his influence at the formative stages. Indeed, he wishes to thwart the project before it even starts. That is the tempter's timing! While our leaders were sitting at CODESA in the early 1990s – the tempter was there already with them! When our first democratic parliament convened, the tempter was already hard at work. The tempter was at work then and he is still at work now. He stalks the leaders. He sneaks up on the prophets. He is relentless. He wears many masks and comes in many forms. He carries a bag full of tricks. He constantly revises his tactics. He may retreat from time to time but he never goes away permanently! Always scheming and always looking for an occasion, an opportunity and a weak link – that is the tempter for you! In Matthew 4:1-11 we see the tempter using at least four of the most powerful weapons in the corruption of human beings; namely, hunger, entitlement, piety and power (political and economical).

### 2.5.2 Hunger

The tempter comes in a form to which Jesus is most likely to succumb - he comes in a form most irresistible to human beings. He comes in the form of hunger. Hunger! That great ravager of human bodies and human spirits. Hunger! That choicest of tool of dictators and despots! It is used to 'make people talk'; it is the most effective tool to 'turn' people! Hunger! That great softener of human resolve! In its wake human principles are thrown out the window. Hunger! One of the greatest causers of war between humans! Ravaged by it, humans will eat the flesh of fellow humans. Under its grip, men and women will sell their bodies – whole or in part. Indeed the very thought of hunger and the very fear of it is enough to make humans throw the rule book away. It reduces humans to their most basic instincts. No wonder the tempter chose to come to Jesus in this form. Hunger – real or artificial, current or envisaged, threatened or already experienced – makes humans susceptible to corruption. In this sense we could say that it is the stomach that makes the world go round!

Should we then be surprised at the alarming rise of the politics of the stomach? What was the arms deal that our new democratic government signed if not a codification of the politics and the economics of the stomach? What was floor crossing about if it was not about stomachs, big and small? Should we be surprised at the mushrooming of gospels of the stomach right in the midst of the church of God? Michela Wrong, a Belgian journalist has dubbed the corrupt reign of Daniel Arap Moi in Kenya as 'A time to eat'. In our own country we have heard some say: 'Its our time to eat'. Is this not the logic of what some have called 'operation *dedel'abanye*' (make way for others to eat too)? Indeed have we not reached a stage where our politics, ruling and opposition, have becoming the politics of stomach?

### 2.5.3 Entitlement

Knowing how softened and pliable a hungry human is, the tempter complicates things further; appealing (selectively) to scripture and urging Jesus to use his 'overdraft' and his special entitlement. 'If you are the son of God, tell these stones to become bread'. He dares Jesus by weaving two things together, the authority of scripture and the menace of hunger (and its twin brother, death). The taunt is clear. If you are a son of God, you should not suffer. If you are the son of God you should not lack. If you are a Son of God you should command not beg. If you are a son of God you should not go hungry. If you are the Son of God you should be entitled to all these things. Do something! Anything! That then is the genesis of corruption.

Though hungry Jesus refuses to worship food. Though hungry Jesus refuses to abuse the power entrusted to him for the pleasure of the tempter! Though Jesus is indeed the Son of God he refuses to make that title an entitlement. Being the Son of God is no entitlement to a life devoid of pain hunger and suffering. Is this not where our churches and our theologies get it wrong? Don't we preach that God's children should not suffer? Don't we preach theologies of entitlement? Jesus' brutal crucifixion is a permanent reminder that Jesus whereas those who killed Jesus abused power, Jesus would himself not abuse his power. He would not take short cuts – even in the face of suffering and death. Jesus would not be corrupted.

### 2.5.4 False Piety

The tempter does not give up. He recruits Jesus to join him in his business of tempting. He suggests that Jesus should tempt God by taking a reckless and thoughtless risk. Once again he ties this up not only with a wicked misreading of the scripture but situates his next temptation on top of God's holy temple! If it is in the Bible, it cannot be wrong, he says. If it is done by, from and in the name of the temple ... it cannot be wrong he urges! If it is pious it cannot be wrong! 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down ...' and surely God will protect you.

Oh, the reckless risks and dares that we take from the false comfort of our churches, our pulpits, our pews and from our selective reading scriptures! Oh, the risks we take when we reduce the church of God into a playground rather than a place of change and conversion for corruptors of all sorts! Oh how we 'throw ourselves down' as we take when our pulpits become cheap and available! Oh the risks we take when we abandon preaching the gospel of salvation to all, without fear or favour! Oh the risks we take when we do not challenge the abuse and misreading of scripture by the powerful, whether they be merchants, priests or politicians. We take chances when we allow our young to tempt God daily by not telling them about the equal importance of each of the ABC principles of the fight against HIV and AIDS. When we do these things, we succumb to the tempter when he says: 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down'

Jesus does not fall for this temptation. He is not deceived by the use of the temple as launching pad for recklessness. He does not buy the clever and deliberate misreading of the Bible. He rebuts and rebukes the tempter.

#### **2.5.4 The Allure of Power**

However Jesus' sharpest rebuke is reserved for the most daring of all the tempter's dares. 'All these I will give you ...'. There is almost a tone of indignation in Jesus' reaction to this one: 'Away from me Satan!' In a sense this is the climax of the tempter's dares. The tempter has dangled the ultimate carrot. The carrot of power, money and influence. That sweet smell of power, the taste of money and influence – we humans struggle to resist these. If we have a little, we want more. And more. And more. With economic and political power in the bag, we can take care of all the other things, right?

This particular aspect of the reading dovetails with the reading in Psalm 92. Human thirst for power, materialism and consumerisms are the fountains of corrupt acts. But the tempter's alluring promise comes with a catch – a very big catch. All these things I shall give you; if you bow down and worship me! That is the catch. The tempter does not just promise Jesus that 'all these I shall give to you', he wants Jesus to worship 'all these things' and through the worship of 'all these things' to 'worship the tempter'. This is the ultimate aim of the tempter. This is the desire and prize the tempter is after. But is the price worth the prize? For Jesus the answer is 'no way'! Yet for us, power, money and influence are prized so highly that for these things, we shall do anything! For this reason the tempter dangles the carrot of power and money before us daily. In boardrooms where decisions are made, in legislature chambers where laws are made, in the places where judges meet, on golf courses where CEOs meet at church boards, councils and consistories; the tempter dangles the carrot of power and money. This is the reason corruption found almost at every level of society, governance and business.

#### **2.6 How did Jesus do it?**

Jesus is able to deal with the four temptations because he refuses to split and dichotomize matters of the stomach from matters of the spirit; matters of the mind from matters of matter! He refuses to split ethics from service, he refuses to divorce values from methods, he refuses to separate means from ends, and he refuses to fall into binary thinking. Jesus refuses the ultimate corruption, to reduce life into a game and to reduce God into a thing.

### **3. Concluding Thoughts: A Crucified People?**

By way of conclusion, allow me a contemporary digression so that together we check whether our society is not turning deathwards.

On Monday the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2009, I joined millions of South Africans whose eyes were glued to their television sets and whose ears were glued to their transistor radios. It was shortly after 11h00 when Mokotedi Mpshe, the National Director for Public Prosecutions took the podium to address the nation. This was yet another, in the series of roller coaster moments, that our young nation has been through over the past years. Mpshe's speech

will take its place among the important speeches this nation has listened to in the past twelve months.

The lady who introduced Mpshe promised that Mpshe was about to ‘put us out of our misery’. Are we as a nation, out of our misery? Terminally ill patients are often put out of their misery when the plug is pulled. Similarly, in the midst of war, near-fatally wounded soldiers are often ‘finished off’ by their own comrades. It is called mercy killing. Is that what will happen to us as a nation? Is it already happening?

As Mpshe spoke, I battled to frame his words, ascertain his capacity and to fully comprehend the overall meaning of the moment. Three images jostled for prominence in my mind. There was something of a prosecutor in his demeanor. But strangely enough he did not quite sound like one. Then as he started quoting legal precedents with increased legalese, he started sounding like a judge. But I was being silly, everybody knows that Mpshe is not a judge. Then suddenly I saw him as something of a cross between an announcer of death and a funeral orator.

Behind and beyond his words I heard and saw that this man was announcing a death imminent or already here. Could it be that the death of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) was imminent or had it already occurred? Was he now reading out an obituary? But Mpshe himself, did not seem conscious of any of these. His speech did not include many recommendations regarding how the imminent death could be postponed or prevented. Though I could not put my finger on it, I knew that something had died and Mpshe was here to announce it – whether he realized in or not. Could it be that what he was announcing was the imminent death of the nation’s faith in political process and even in democracy itself?

Some of the questions kindled in me as I listened to the speech appeared to find answers in the divergent reactions to his announcement afterwards. Eight years after the first set of charges were made against Mr Jacob Zuma, the nation remained ever so divided and ever so polarized. Some celebrated Mpshe’s announcement joyously. Others were seething with anger and disappointment. Many others were thrown into a sense of numbed silence and unfeeling.

Of concern to me is how, almost all parties concerned see almost everything else, but not the trauma and anguish of the torn apart nation. If Mpshe seemed oblivious of the gravity and implications of his words for the integrity of the NPA and related institutions; the other three parties ((the political victors, the political losers and Jacob Zuma himself) have displayed similar kinds of oblivion. The political ‘victors’ have hived off into a righteous and ominous private celebration of ‘their’ victory and vindication. The political ‘losers’ appear to be stuck in a permanent finger-wagging pose; righteously determined to pursue Jacob Zuma at all costs by all means. In his own statement after the formal withdrawal of charges Mr Jacob Zuma spent, in my view, too much time speaking as a victim rather than as a possible future president of the country. The reactions of all four actors in the latest national tragedy; i) Mokotedi Mpshe, ii) the political victors, iii) the political losers and iv) Mr Jacob Zuma himself, have struck me as mostly narrow, shortsighted and self-serving.

Instead of celebrating a private and narrowly conceived victory, the political victors should waste no time in tackling the problem of a citizenry that is increasingly distrustful of judicial and political processes. One hopes revenge does not feature at all in their strategies in the aftermath of the NPA announcement of the dropping of charges. The route, witch-hunting and finger-pointing of revenge will be disastrous.

Instead of getting stuck in an all consuming, almost irrational disdain and pursuit for the individual called Jacob Zuma, the opposition parties should get back to the drawing board and start the neglected work of political mobilization. They must provide South Africans with a credible alternative to the ANC. They must bid farewell to shortcuts. The criminal justice system will not solve their political problem for them.

Instead of posing continually as a victim of conspiracy Mr Jacob Zuma must wake up to the fact that, should he become president of this country, he will become president of both those who like him very much and those who dislike him immensely. Instead of merely and continually proclaiming his innocence; instead of taking us back to the past of his victimhood we need him to take us to the future united nationhood. He needs to devise appropriate strategies of dealing with those who may continue to doubt his innocence. Ridiculing or dismissing them (as ‘counter revolutionaries’) will not suffice. Mr Zuma needs to start the arduous task of earning the trust of such as those who might continue to doubt his *bona fides* and his innocence.

But my real and urgent concern is this: While our leaders scrum and scuffle, while some of them celebrate and others seethe with anger; who will attend to the anguish of a nation torn apart and polarized? While our leaders lick their own wounds and settle scores; who will heal our land and people? Who will save us from corruption when its taint appears to have not left a single institution untouched?

A few years ago, the Congolese philosopher Ka Mana wrote a book which was provocatively titled: *‘L’Afrique, va-t-elle mourir?’* ‘Will Africa die?’ Perhaps the time has come for us to broach the same subject with respect to our own country: *L’Afrique du Sud, Va-t-elle mourir?* Is South Africa going to die? Will we watch South Africa die? Will South Africa die in our hands? Will we watch as South Africans are crucified all over again – whereas Jesus Christ has already died for them? Will God not intervene?

Allow me one call: Let me call on all people of faith to pray fervently for our country and to work for its healing. South Africa need not die. In the same way that Jesus rose from the dead, this country can rise again. The route of corruption is not the only one available to us as a nation. It is not too late for us to change our ways.