

Know This Woman?

by Valsan Thampu

True worship is a celebration of life that liberates and empowers, rather than hiding and burdening us.

Scripture: Matthew 5:23, Matthew 9:36, Luke 7:44, Luke 13:16, John 4:24

Topics: "True Worship", "Women Empowerment"

Description

Valsan Thampu preaches on the importance of true worship, emphasizing the need to come out of hiding and engage in genuine fellowship with God and others. He highlights the hypocrisy of worship that excludes true connection and challenges the congregation to seek empowerment and liberation for all members. Thampu draws attention to the spiritual duty of discovering and affirming the worth of every individual, especially women, encouraging them to stand upright in dignity and fulfill their God-given potential.

Transcript

"Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" [St. Luke 13: 16]

Let us, first, take note of the irony in this thought-provoking incident. The woman in question had been a part of her congregation, presumably, for quite a while. But none knew her as she should have been known. Only Jesus did. To them she was only a "bent-over" woman; nothing more. She was a tolerated thing in their midst: a shadowy presence on the sidelines of their churchianity.

But she is not the focal point of the story, and it is important to note this. She is only a pointer to the central issue, which is the spirituality of worship. That issue continues to be crucially relevant to this day. We worship routinely. But do we know what true worship is?

Or, put it this way: why should we worship at all? If Sabbath is only a day of rest, surely we need not come to church to rest. It is better done at home. Why, then, should we come together to worship? What, indeed, is the purpose of worship?

The need to worship is universal. That is why freedom of religion is acknowledged as an inalienable right. If so, worship bears on the need to be human. Why such a need? What is wrong with our predicament?

True worship, or worship that Jesus describes as "worship in Spirit and in truth" (Jn 4: 24) is marked by 'seeking,' not hiding. Worship of the hiding kind is hypocrisy because it excludes true fellowship. It stands

on the self-deception that fellowship with God can exclude fellowship with neighbours. That is why 'hypocrisy' is debated in the present text. The so-called 'bent-over woman' is, by definition, an exile from fellowship. Her plight is a silent commentary on the ethos of the church. There is worship, but there is no fellowship. The spiritual mandate is to stop 'hiding' and start living. We emerge from hiding into fellowship. Indeed, the very purpose of worship is to train us for fellowship. For that reason, we cannot dispense with or devalue the congregational aspect of worship. Fellowship transforms life into a celebration. It must necessarily include and involve others. Neighbour is integral to the feast of life. Not even the most bewildering assemblage of cuisines comprises a banquet. The presence of 'the other' is the defining element. To hide from neighbour is, hence, to exclude oneself from the banquet of life.

Worship is much more than Sunday liturgy! Worship must, therefore, eradicate the mindset of hiding. The fundamental purpose of worship is to enable us to come out of hiding in respect of life as a whole. It was alienation from God that drove us into hiding, in the first place. Only being reconciled with God can reverse this state. Temple or church is not a place where God is hiding! Instead, it is the place where we are to be trained. Church is not a hiding place, but a training ground. What is offered in a place of worship, as we have seen, need not necessarily amount to worship (cf. Mtt. 5: 23-24). We have to ensure that it does. If our worship does not result in our giving up the luxury of hiding, it is not worship but hypocrisy. Here we have a simple, and practical, definition of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is that which degrades worship into an exercise in hiding: hiding from God and neighbour. Hypocrisy may have a thousand expressions; but 'hiding' is its demonic essence.

All of human life, unless reoriented through a liberating and transforming relationship with Jesus, is an exercise in hiding. It is not for nothing that "hide-and-seek" has universal symbolic resonance. We have innumerable forests in which we hide ourselves: relationships, work, institutions, lifestyles, religions and addictions. Why, we hide even from our own true selves. And we hide from God even in the very act of worshipping Him! It is as a safeguard against this that Jesus exhorted his disciples, "Watch and pray". It denotes an approach to worship that is safe from the psychology and strategy of hiding.

The form of hiding on which the spotlight falls in this episode is 'hiding from neighbour'. We do so by entertaining a superficial view of others. We stereotype them. This blinds us to, or we hide from, their worth and scope. The generic identity of all people is that they are 'children of God'. If so, the scope of every person is truly unlimited. It is vastly greater than what is obvious on the surface at first sight. The congregation to which the woman 'belonged' was, in effect, hiding from her by branding her as the 'bent-over woman'. It took a Jesus to bring out her true identity. The truth about her is that she is 'a daughter of Abraham'. The proof of our spiritual blindness is that we see others in terms of whether or not they conform to our norms and ways. This means, in effect, that we see others in terms of prevailing stereotypes, or in terms of the opinions and evaluations of others.

That makes it a solemn spiritual duty to 'discover' neighbours, to reach out to them in order to know who they really are, lest we remain blind. Seeing others in terms of their so-called defects and weakness is a form of blindness. Because of this blindness we do not see that, seeing only the weaknesses of others keeps us blind to our own strengths and talents as well.

Jesus is, in this context, raising yet again the question he posed to Simon, the Pharisee. "Simon, do you see this woman?" (Lk.7:44). That way, Jesus alerts the congregation to the irreligion of their priorities. True worship reforms our value system. The hallmark of a godly value system is the priority it ascribes to human worth. Jesus, by laying down his life for us, imparted an enduring humane orientation to values. As

a prelude to this, Jesus makes the worshippers on this particular Sabbath day realize that for them animals, or material wealth, mattered far more than a fellow worshipper did. They would not let their zeal for Sabbath stand in the way of helping their animals. But they have no qualms in overlooking the miserable plight of a woman.

True worship carries a mandate: liberate, untie and enable her stand upright. Let nothing stand in the way. A congregation that has not done it in eighteen years is truly a 'bent-over' congregation. It is 'bent-over' with hypocrisy. The mark of a spiritually dynamic congregation is its seeking attitude. It seeks to empower all members. They have to be empowered to be agents of empowerment for those beyond the walls of the church.

This episode alerts us to our assumptions about church life: its practices and priorities. Are we losing the godly focus on people? Are cows and donkeys (profit and assets) our priority? Are congregations today, in real terms, as Jesus found the people two thousand years ago, "sheep without a shepherd" (Mtt. 9: 36)?

Jesus saw the spiritual plight of the whole congregation reflected in the physical plight of the woman. He saw, not only a bent-over woman, but also a "bent-over" congregation. This state of being 'bent-over' is a resonant symbol of the state in which we do not have the backbone to bear any responsibility.

But this is not only a reflection on church life but also, even more importantly, on family life. The woman in question did not become 'bent-over' in the church. That happened at home. Not only the members of her congregation, even her husband and children, very likely, saw her only as 'the bent-over woman'. It is the aggregation of this mentality that degrades a congregation into a spiritually bent-over group. If she were seen and cherished as a 'daughter of Abraham' at home, she would have had a different identity in church life too. None at home cared to meet her as a human being or address her need to be discovered and affirmed. She was a coin lost, first, at home. Ironically, we do not realize even to this day that it is in homes that coins are lost, routinely.

Women are not only daughters of Abraham but also of God. And it is not merely the duty of men to recognize this; women, too, need to appropriate and celebrate this spiritual truth. To do that, they need to come out of their hiding. Or, they need to assume responsibility for themselves. What this implies is that, rather than wait for their worth, scope and rights to be recognized by the world of men, they need to explore and exemplify their true worth and scope as children of God. In Christ, there is neither male nor female. This is a matter of faith, which needs to be believed in, applied and affirmed. As long as this is not done, women will remain 'bent-over' in churches and homes.

Virgin Mary, the blessed mother of our Lord, needs to be the role model for women. At the point of being greeted by Gabriel, she had the option either to go into hiding or to come out and claim her role in the plan of God. She chose the latter. Otherwise, she too would have been on the long list of bent-over women. God has given to every person, including every woman, the right to stand upright. Nay, it is a duty we owe to God to stand and walk upright, both physically and morally. It is a duty implied in biblical spirituality -which teaches us that we are created in God's own image- to safeguard our personal dignity and not live or function like caricatures. No system that deprives any person of dignity can stand spiritual scrutiny, and no person who lends herself to oppression and exploitation can do justice to herself, much less to others.

It needs to be recognized, though, that being bent-over may come to be seen as an advantage. It could activate pity in others and generate self-pity in the victim concerned. This is a debilitating self-deception. Entertaining this outlook is sin. Even prostitutes may enter the kingdom, as Jesus said, but not those who

hide from themselves and from God. And a church or home that remains indifferent to the bent-over state of women is a spiritual scandal. The mark of the spiritual wholeness of a congregation is that it promotes a passionate desire in women to stand upright in dignity as living witnesses to the glory of what God has made them to be.

The specious attractiveness of being bent-over is that it condones a life without responsibilities. Most preachers and interpreters of our present text assume that this woman is bent-over on account of the staggering burden of the responsibilities she carries. There is no indication at all in the text that it is so. The truth of the matter, the truth of life itself, is that people become bent-over, not because of the magnitude of responsibilities they bear, but because they dodge responsibilities, especially responsibilities towards themselves. You can't be irresponsible towards yourself and responsible towards everyone else. Very likely, the bent-over posture implies a strategic disposition that prefers to exclude oneself from responsibilities. Symbolically, it could well be a posture of self-exclusion. However, this is not something that others may judge in fairness. Only the individual concerned, in honesty before God, can know the truth of it. What is obvious in the present case is that the circumstances of the woman's life did not warrant her being bent-over. If it were otherwise, Jesus would have healed her in a way that would have cast some light on the circumstances of her exploitation, as he does in the instance of healing the demoniac in St. Mark 5: 1-20. What we know for sure is that no human being -male or female- can stand upright so long as that person is fleeing from, or dodging, responsibilities concerning oneself and others.

The less willing we are to respond to the needs of others, the weaker does our faith grow. This has two obvious and unfortunate results. (a) We get alienated from the power and scope of faith. We become a people of 'little faith' (Mtt. 8:26). We, then, come under the compulsion to express the power of faith in spurious and curious ways. People tend to resort to stock ways of expressing their spirituality: ecstatic utterances of religious epithets irrespective of the context (Mtt. 7: 21-23). Expressions of ecstasy have their place and usefulness, though, in situations of genuine spiritual bliss. Where this is lacking, the stock verbal ejaculations seem contrived and hypocritical. (b) Sterile spirituality keeps us weak, which causes even trivial afflictions to seem magnified and menacing. Then ordinary, even petty, afflictions cause us to bent-over.

To see this more clearly, let us consider the contrasting ways in which Jesus ministers to the woman and to the congregation. Jesus empowers the woman by awakening her to the power that lies dormant in her. She can stand upright if she wants to. That goes for millions of human beings. Her problem was that she entertained a wrong idea or image of herself. The problem with the members of the congregation was somewhat different. They entertained a wrong idea of what really mattered in life. They took the name of God, but their faith was in material wealth. This reduced their idea of religion to an anthology of don'ts. Religion as negative regimentation, and not as a celebration of life, is a burden. Rather than bring joy into the life of the people, it adds to their burden. So they are 'bent-over' with their religion.

Today we need to heed what Jesus is saying to us through this episode. We have lost the joy of religion. This is one of the reasons why young people are opting out. It is likely that in the future this trend could get worse. Under-nourished in faith, burdened by indulgence, de-hydrated by emotional deficit, the youth of today are bent-over already. And all that we do is to impose religion as yet another millstone upon them (Mtt. 23: 4). Is there nothing that we can do to enable them to discover who they truly are? To help them discover what worship really is? Don't we care? Do we see them, know them? Do we feel sent to them? Or, do we see them only as future milch cows (care) and donkeys (to shoulder the burden of our old age)? In this day and age, they will have none of it. The writing is there on the wall for those who dare to read it.

The resounding message of this episode is: "Untie her". This sums up the power of true worship. If worship is our date with God, it cannot but have a liberating effect. The liberating power of the Gospel is what the world is waiting for. Until this aspect of biblical spirituality is engaged and unleashed, the fact that the Gospel of Jesus is good news for all humankind will not make sense to most people. The Sunday parole of Christianity must end. The Word must be released to the world. The responsibility that the risen Christ gave to Peter is, "Tend my flock". To tend is to assume responsibility for total welfare, which is incomplete without empowerment. Empowerment involves imparting the strength to be responsible for oneself, which is a moral duty that comes in the wake of liberation. True worship is preparation for the mission to liberate and to empower. Nothing less will suffice.

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