

Forgiveness in the life of Father Matta El Maskeen

Let us read a few verses from the gospel according to Saint Matthew, chapter 18, verses 12 through 17:

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying?.

And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that [sheep] than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray.

Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'

And if he refuses to hear them, tell [it] to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Mt18:15-17).

Since I joined the monastery of St. Macarius, I have learnt the meaning of forgiveness. One of the most wonderful things I heard from our monastery elders, and especially from father Matta El Maskeen, is the interpretation of these words of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why did our Lord Jesus linked the lost sheep to the sinning brother?

You noticed that our Lord did not stipulate apology on the part of the offender, but on the contrary, he asked the innocent one to make the initiative of the reconciliation. If this does not work out, he suggests the help of more than one person as mediators; otherwise the church should interfere. In case all these efforts fail “*let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector*”.

In order to understand the meaning of the heathen or a tax collector, We have to refer to the life of our Lord Jesus himself, of whom it is said “*a friend of tax collectors and sinners*” (Mt 11:19); We also find him making haste to go and dine with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, at his home; the result is the repentance of Zacchaeus and his belief in Christ together with his family (Lk 19: 1-10).

When the Lord Jesus called the tax collector Matthew to follow him, he went to dine with him at home “*Now it happened, as He was dinning in Levi’s house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples ; for there were many, and they followed Him .and when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinner , they said to His disciples, How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?*”(Mr2:15-16).

We find him also praising the prayer of tax collector. *“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other”* (Lk18:14) and commends the Samaritan saying *“Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?”* (Lk17:18).

So we come to the conclusion that, if your brother does not accept your initiative for reconciliation, you should consider him as a heathen or a tax collector; that is a feeble person for whom Christ has come in order to save, and who deserves additional love on your part.

Isn't this the story of the whole creation? When the first man sinned against God, God himself sought his lost sheep: *“So the Lord God called Adam and said to him “Adam, where are you?”* (Gn 3:9). When Adam blamed Eve and then Eve blamed the serpent, then God sent prophets and apostles, that would be *“By the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter be established “*(2Co13:1). Later on, he sent the church represented in the form of sacrifices, statutes and the laws.

Finally, after the failure of these attempts to reconcile this wayward and lost creation, the Lord had to deal with it as he deals with a heathen and tax collector; that is, a feeble being, which has no power even to come back. He was therefore bound to leave the ninety nine sheep, who had not gone astray, and come to look for

that lost one.

In this vein, Fr Matta El Maskeen says “Christ did not make light of the feelings of the innocent party, nor did he make little of the treachery that has fallen on us, but his eyes are fixed on love and mercy which bear all things and endure all things, in order to resemble our Father who treats us far more softly than that, and forgives a great deal of wrongs against him. In the last analysis, Christ has his eyes fixed on the total forgiveness which will cause him sufferings, sorrows, crucifixion, bodily laceration and finally death, as a price for our exceeding heavy sins”¹.

And also he says “The law of the kingdom of heaven, in fact, is that he who survives is the one oppressed, and the vanquisher is the one who is vanquished. Things are turned topsy-turvy in an amazing manner. *“But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also”* (Mt5:39), and in other words, him who slaps me on my right cheek I answer: may God increase your bounty, and then go ahead on my way. Such is the way which leads to the kingdom of heaven. For my goal is precious, and my journey is serious, if I stopped and argued with him, that will be my end.

Another time he wrote: With my pen I could have easily vindicate myself, and persuade my audience. But in that very moment, I would have thrown off the yoke of Christ, and returned a layman.

¹ Father Matta el Maskine, *The Gospel According to St Luke* (in Arabic), 1st edition, 1998, p. 294.

But I am a monk! We were laid for persecutions and hard times. Without the word of God, man would not stop complaining, screaming and squealing. But for me it was an ointment, a headband, and like skilled doctor took me shattered as I am into his clinic, leavening it whole and pulled together. I would go out more peaceful than I had entered. The word of God was my solace day and night. Just as St. Paul says: “*Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure*” (1Co4:12).²

There is a story in the booklet with a title: *Father Matta el Maskine and the grace of enlightening by the Holy Gospel* : [The steward of the monastery had mistreated Fr. Matta and his monks, and caused their departure from the monastery. When his conscience began to prick him, and after long years of their suffering in the desert of Wady El Rayan, this steward became a bishop. He then sent a letter to Fr. Matta, in which he apologize and begged pardon for what had been shown of him, concerning his mistreatment towards them, asking them for forgiveness and pardon. He also attach amount of money as an expression of his apology. Fr. Matta, then, assembled the monks and read the letter aloud before them. There were two opinions on the table, first, to reject the letter and the money, because of his previous conduct, the second was to accept the apology and forgive him. Fr. Matta, then, told them: Hear

² *Father Matta el Maskine and the grace of enlightening by the Holy Gospel* (in Arabic), The Monastery of St Macarius, 2015, p. 49-50.

God's commandment and the gospel on that issue. He then expostulated on Love as ranking above truth. He said: Love is one of the church gifts, but we do not give it enough space in our life, because we have often being deceived by putting limits as a barrier between us and love. I would like to give you myself as an example. For instance when I see a brother doing something wrong, I find myself before two options: either I keep silent and show him my love, as a divine emotion that covers all faults and sins; or I confront him with the truth, rebuke him, show him his fault and correct him. I spent all my life following this second method, talking about truth, and putting love behind me. But only this year, I felt that I have reached a very hazardous point, which is enough to rebound into regression, thus losing all my life experience. For that love has to prevail]³.

In his commentary on the word of Jesus in the gospel of Mark, *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him” (Mk11:25)* Fr. Matta comments: “The wonder of the gospel, here, reaches its utmost rank, for Christ observes for prayer to win a response on God's part, it has to issue from a pure heart; and nothing contaminates the heart except hatred, alienation, anger, bearing grudge and condemning others.”⁴

³ Ibid. p. 60-61.

⁴ Father Matta el Maskine, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (in Arabic), 1st edition, 1996, p. 480-481.

Fr. Matta understood forgiveness from its broader side, which is to accept the other; this other could be different from me in everything—especially in faith or doctrine. Before his monastic life he had met the Sunday school leaders. There was a very controversial question on the table which is: Will Catholics or Protestants enter the kingdom of heaven (according to their view)? The answer of course was defiantly NO! Fr. Matta was deeply sorry; because that concept was common among the church leaders.

After many years Fr. Matta had to go to Cairo to have an operation in one of the hospitals. The head of the evangelical synod in Egypt came to visit him and asked him the very same question: Will Protestants enter the kingdom of heaven? Fr. Matta had an astonishing answer. Neither Catholics nor Protestants, nor even Orthodox will enter the kingdom of heaven; but only the new creation in Christ Jesus! For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation (Gal 6 : 15), Therefore, if anyone [is] in Christ, [he is] a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2Co 5 : 17).