

The Holy Mumble (Deuteronomy 15: 1-15; Matthew 6: 9-14)
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A newspaper article called it, *The Holy Mumble*. It is something I think most of us have experienced or at times may have felt. It usually happens in the midst of a mixed gathering of Christians from either different traditions or practices. During worship, at funerals, weddings or some other solemn occasion, the leader at some point of the service invites the people gathered, *Let us pray together* And many if not most of the folk join together in unison. Then it comes. *Give us this day our daily bread, ... And forgive us our mumble, mumble, mumble, mumble.*

This happens time and time again. Why? This is because there are actually three competing versions of the Lord's Prayer that are approved and acceptable in most of the languages in the world today. I think most of you gathered here today know, have heard or prayed each version: *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

What I find interesting is not that there are different versions, but they differ at one particular point at a specific word: debts, trespasses or sins. What could cause such a difference of opinion? It also turns out that there are three different versions of the Lord's Prayer in the earliest Christian traditions too. There is another in Luke's Gospel. There is another in an early Christian document called, *The Didache* that seems independent from the other two. All three versions agree that when Jesus spoke about what needed to be forgiven, He said, "*debts.*" Only Luke is a little different. In Greek it is clearer on, *forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is in debt to us.* So it starts with sins and ends with debts. There is remarkable unity in the early Christian documents. All agree that Jesus spoke specifically about forgiveness of debts, but down through the centuries, Christians have looked at this prayer and have made remarks: -

- *This is what I think Jesus meant!*
- *When He said that we should ask God to forgive our debts like we forgive people who are indebted to us, He actually meant that God would forgive our sins and that we should forgive other people when they do bad things to us.*

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 Of course this is correct. Jesus was talking about our need for forgiveness of sins by God and our need to forgive others in the same way. But I personally believe that was not all that He was talking about. If Jesus had been recorded as teaching, *forgive sins that* would have been easy. But He didn't do that. I believe that there must be a reason why His followers remembered specifically that He said, *debts.*

I believe that He said, *debts*, because there was a very important tradition in the Hebrew culture concerning the cancellation of financial debt. I am led to suggest that Deuteronomy 15 is an important and often overlooked passage, especially the first 15 verses. It outlines the conditions under which debts were to be cancelled in Israel. Moses made it very clear, all the Hebrew people were to cancel debts every seven years. This was not a suggestion. It was a "must" type of order.

Moses explained why this must be done, giving two reasons. First, in verse 4, he says that it must be done because *there should be no poor among you*. And then in verse 11, he said it must be done because, *there will always be poor people in the land*.

After coming back to this passage many times I believe these two contradictory reasons are actually the same reason. They understood the struggle against poverty was continual and difficult. They understood there would be continuous gains and losses but the problem will never go away. I also believe they had a social and community understanding of the loss of freedom and the situation of servitude that comes from debt. Moses' teaching was that the people, who includes us, you and me, must take steps to ensure that such servitude does not become permanent. It is clear there was to be no permanent slave class amongst the Hebrews. We may take many things from people but we too must not rob them permanently of hope. Moses proposed the best way to ensure that this does not happen is to forgive debts every seven years.

The second reason Moses gave sounds familiar because Jesus quoted this in the Gospel, *the poor will be with you always*. Jesus said this when he was defending a woman for wasting oil by anointing him. If Jesus did indeed quote from the Deuteronomy passage, it is certainly another indication that the tradition of debt relief was important to him.

I do not want to suggest or give you the impression that the cancellation of debts was an easy thing for the Ancient Israelites. It clearly caused them no end of problems. One can quickly see that it caused problems even within the passage that commands it. Obviously it made some people reluctant to loan anyone money in the first place. In our world and in our society you too can understand why. But the ancient people of Israel committed themselves to work through these problems.

Jesus was a part of the debt-cancellation tradition. It came out of His sayings in the parables that came out of the issues of indebtedness. And it came out when He taught his disciples to pray. Jesus seemed to have been concerned about it for the same reasons as Moses. Jesus was very clear about his concern for the plight of the poorest of the poor. He was concerned about their working conditions and how they were treated by the social, economic and religious world.

We tend to either forget or overlook this aspect of Jesus' ministry. We talk about His concern about slavery as to those who are in *slavery to sin*. But He was also concerned about how the economic and social system made literal slaves out of God's the people. Jesus was interested in seeing that sins were forgiven because he came to proclaim God's forgiveness of our sins. He also came to proclaim and call for the forgiveness of all that would enslave a person physically, socially or financially.

For us as Christians, when it comes to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus' instruction, sometimes we can only mumble. Jesus was concerned for what we call, *the holistic person*, the physical and the spiritual. When we allow ourselves to only express or see one side of His ministry we are not living out the full Gospel of Christ.

The tradition of forgiveness of encumbrance and indebtedness is strong throughout Scripture. It stretches from Moses through to Jesus and all the way through to us. Seventeen years ago in 2000, the Christian Church celebrated, Jubilee. This is part of our Christian heritage. It is part of our Christian story. I hope we do not restrict ourselves or confine ourselves to Jubilee. Every year and every day we need to celebrate the nation in which we are privileged to live. Jubilee 2000 was a key part of the cancellation of certain debts owed by developing countries all over the world. The sad part was and is that many of them had already paid back the value of the principle 25 or more times. And now beyond the Year of Jubilee, the Church must continue to speak out about the divide that separates sufficiency and hardship and poverty.

I admit I believe we are often caught between our religious directives and the values of the global village in which we live. Yes, there are many well-stated positions concerning economy and corruption. Yes, it is surrounded by well thought out hesitations. But that does not make them any less difficult neither does it make them any less of concern to Christians who are called to pick up their cross and follow Jesus.

Moses expressed the problem and the big picture long ago: *There will always be poor people in the land.* The problem of poverty does not promise to go away. We cannot eliminate poverty but we can reduce those things that destroy hope.

Canada as a political power along with the persuasion of the Canadian Council of Churches has indicated with the United Nations, our country will seriously look at the debts of some of the third world countries. This co-operative approach began in 2000 and remarkably continues somewhat to this day. The request of the churches was not “forgiveness,” but “cancellation,” because in reality the debts have been paid. The original concern was and continues to be, not to support in many instances a corrupt leadership but to try and find a way or ways to reach the citizens of those countries who never had the benefit of the debts, but have been victims of those debts. From the instruction of Moses, it was and is an opportunity to give to the least of these who are our brothers and sisters, a fresh start. I do not expect everyone to get excited and suddenly support that which I have shared with you today as outlined in the Book of Deuteronomy. But as Christians we cannot allow hope to die for the poorest of the poor.

The global debt crisis has killed and is killing hope for millions of people. As you think and meditate on these things, I invite you to pray about these things. Don't give up hope for a solution, and I hope that together, we don't just mumble. Amen.