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Gn 32.1-33 "What's your name?"

Gn 32 is a story of a reconciliation in progress. Reconciliation is the central message of the biblical teaching. Nobody can live in isolation. When a relationship between individuals or between groups is strained or seriously damaged, something needs to be done. I would like to share with you what I think we can learn from this text. There are six points I would like to highlight.

1) Humility on the part of perpetrators, wrongdoers, victimisers is an absolutely necessary precondition for successful reconciliation. Otherwise no reconciliation can be achieved. We see here the humility of Jacob. More than once he calls his brother 'my lord, my master' instead of 'you', and he calls himself 'your servant' instead of 'I, my, me.' This continues in the next chapter, that is, after the brothers made it up with each other. This is a remarkable stance on the part of Jacob. When he was still in his mother's womb, she was told by God: "the elder boy will serve his junior" (25:23), and Esau the senior was told by his father "You shall serve your younger brother" (27:40). Jacob's humility is displayed not only towards his brother. He confesses to his God: "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only one staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups." (10) Although he had half-boasted to his brother "I have been staying with Laban .. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants" (4f.), Jacob is nonetheless aware that he owes all this to the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac.

This humility was a spiritual price Jacob had to pay before he could settle back in the land which he had wished so long to return to and the land where he could further build up his family with a peace of mind free from fear of possible attacks and retaliation by his aggrieved elder brother.

2) Reconciliation entails sometimes a material price. In the case of Jacob the price tag is a pretty stiff one: an assortment of live stock totalling 550 heads. By the end of 2005 Germany had paid out a staggering amount of € 63,224 milliard as a compensation for Nazi crimes. She is still paying pensions to surviving victims. The payment is financed out of taxes paid by all German citizens. They must have reckoned that peace and harmony with their neighbouring nations and moral integrity in relation to the Jewish nation were worth this still ongoing financial cost.

Your sense of guilt and remorse can be effectively communicated to the aggrieved party in a material way, by what you do, through your deeds, not only through your words, what you say by way of apologies.

3) Another absolutely necessary precondition for reconciliation is the sense of guilt and remorse on the part of the perpetrator.

When it was getting light and Jacob's opponent begged him to be released, Jacob insisted that he wouldn't let go of him unless his opponent blessed him. The anonymous opponent asked: "What's your name?" A very simple and obvious question. The opponent surely knew who he had been wrestling with all night, didn't he? He knew that Jacob had asked God to rescue him from Esau; he was scared of his elder brother. The opponent also knew that Jacob was very desirous of reconciliation and peace with Esau. By putting him this seemingly obvious question the opponent was trying to make Jacob see why he had had to spend 20 long years away from home and his doting mother in the first place and why he found himself still cornered, fearful of his only brother. The opponent is whispering to Jacob: "Jacob", O yes, that is the answer you should have given when your father asked you 20 years ago "What's your name, my son?". But you lied and said: "I am Esau, your firstborn." On hearing Jacob's honest, straight answer with no excuses attached, the opponent blessed him straightaway then and there, renaming him Israel. The explanation the Scripture gives of this name may be paraphrased like this: Through your humility, honesty and moral integrity you have come out a winner, you have won peace with God, and you are on the way to achieving peace and reconciliation with your brother.

The name a person bears is not "just a name." When Esau discovered that he had been tricked and fraudulently robbed of the blessing which was due to him, he uttered a heart-wrenching cry: "Jacob—that name is a perfect reflection of what he is." A name embodies the bearer's past and present, what he or she was and did, what he or she now is and does. Your future will also be associated with your name.

4) Although Jacob couldn't elicit the name of the opponent, he named the memorable place Peniel, which means 'the face of God.' Though it may not be apparent in your Thai translation, the Hebrew word /panim/ meaning 'face' appears to be the key-word of this story. It occurs as often as 10 times in this chapter. A literal translation of vss. 21 and 22 would read something like this: "You should say, 'Look, sir, your servant, Jacob, is also behind us. For he had thought: {With this gift going before my face I would like to cleanse his dreadful face of anger and hate, and then later I might be able to look him straight in the face, perhaps he may say, 'Look me up in the face'} and the gift proceeded before his face and that night he lodged in the camp.' In the next chapter we see Jacob in his brother's arms, saying "As I look you in the face, it looks like God's face." At Peniel Jacob saw God's face; it was not an angry, terrifying, vengeful face, but a forgiving, accepting face. Our Peniel is Calvary; there, every time we realise we have committed a sin, we face the son of God, as we listen to Jesus asking us "What's your name?"

5) When his opponent was gone, the sun shone for him (not “above him”: [how is this in your Thai translation?]) He was now out of a long, pitch-dark tunnel of fear, anxiety, uncertainty and guilty conscience. He was marching on happily in the broad daylight. But, wait, he was limping along. In the rest of the book of Genesis we don’t read of Jacob being cured of this handicap. For the rest of his life, whenever he needed to hurry, “Ouch,” he would be reminded of that incident at Peniel and all that it implied.

Last year we had a Korean missionary staying with us a few days. During the breakfast one morning he told us an interesting story. It’s about a naughty boy. One day his father said to him, “Listen, if you misbehave next time, I shall hammer an iron peg in the wooden wall of our living room.” Pegs kept increasing. After some time there were 20! The boy’s heart sank. Then he had an idea: “Dad, every time I do a really good thing for you, would you pull out one of the pegs?” The pegs kept disappearing, and after some time there was none left. The boy was overjoyed. However, when he took a close look at the wall, he saw 20 holes in the wall still remaining, but he didn’t ask his father to fill them in.

6) Coming back to Gen 32, this episode would remain engraved not only in Jacob’s memory, but also become part of the national memory. Even hundreds of years later, when the book of Genesis was written, his descendants wouldn’t eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip of any animal. They needed to be reminded from time to time that, although they were named after this forefather as “children of Israel,” although they had been chosen by their God for a special blessing and a unique mission for the mankind, it was not because of their forefather, but in spite of him when he was still named Jacob. This applies to us also, the New Israel.

A name is borne not only by an individual person, but also by a group of individuals, a family, a church, a seminary, a company or a nation. That the name embodies its bearer applies to groups as well. There is no group which does not have dark pages in its history. It is very much necessary for us to remember and learn from our history, both personal and collective, and both bright and dark sides of it. I would even say that this is necessary not only for perpetrators, but also for victims. We are all fallible humans. Victims of yesterday could degenerate into victimisers tomorrow.

Here is an example of what could follow if we fail to learn from the past.

When

the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6.8.1945, and another one on Nagasaki 3 days later, we Japanese became the first victims in the world of this modern mass destruction weapon. About a dozen years later a Japanese fishing-boat unwittingly strayed into an area of the Pacific Ocean where Americans were testing a hydrogen bomb. A couple of fishermen returned home dead, and more are still suffering. The latest tsunami and the subsequent disaster at a nuclear power station in Fukushima clearly show that we Japanese have not

learned hard lessons from these tragedies. On March 11 last year there were more than 50 nuclear power stations operating in Japan. As the first victims of nuclear energy we should not have built even one such power station.

You surely know something about the Thai-Burma railway built by the Japanese Army during the Pacific War with illegal use of POWs. Because of harsh working conditions, poor nutrition, inadequate medical supplies and physical violence some 16,000 out of about 61,000 POWs perished. I'm told that near the bridge on the River Kwai there stands a memorial built by ex-POWs who survived the hell. On the memorial are engraved the names of all their colleagues who didn't make it. An inscription at the bottom of the memorial reads: "We forgive you, but we shall never forget." One Japanese Christian minister, referring to this inscription, said: "How wonderful that we believe in a god who forgives and forgets." Three years ago, when I taught in Taiwan, I preached at a church in Taipei. The title of my sermon was "Is our God forgetful?" My answer to this rhetorical question was a resounding No. Our God isn't in the business of revising, doctoring or polishing up our spiritual c.v. [= curriculum vitae]. If we truly confess a sin and are forgiven, He will draw a line across the relevant page of our c.v., but will not tear the page off or sprinkle correction liquid over it. Only by remembering what grievous sins we have been forgiven we can be truly grateful for our God's love and mercy. I don't think the message encoded in the inscription on the memorial is at all unbiblical or anti-Christian. The death-railway wasn't built only by POWs of the allied forces, but a much greater number of labourers were forcefully or by deception brought from neighbouring Asian countries, somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000, out of whom ca. 90,000 are said to have perished. More than half of the dead are believed to be Thais: ca. 50,000, a horrid number. None of them needed to die. We are not talking about casualties of a natural disaster, an earthquake or a tsunami. All these deaths were wilfully and unjustly caused by Japanese soldiers. Even today there will be up and down Thailand more than a million people, their widows, their children, their grandchildren, brothers and sisters, cousins, and so on, still grieving over their deaths, probably and justly indignant. Unlike in the case of the Allied Forces there are no accurate statistics, which doesn't by any means diminish the scale of the tragedy and the extent of injustice. Last Saturday morning my wife and I set out for the nearest 7-11 shop, managed to make wrong turns, and ended up walking more than 90 minutes. Even in this relatively mild weather of mid-November it wasn't easy for us, a not too young couple only recently arrived from a cold Holland. Then I thought of those POWs and Asian labourers who were made to toil every day more than a year, from early morning till late in the evening, rain or shine, on empty stomachs and with little water provided to quench their burning thirst. Every day I see on the BIT campus cats lying flat, enjoying their afternoon siesta. But those people working on the death railway were denied even a moment's nap. I once read about an Indonesian forced labourer. He

survived the ordeal. However, at the end of the war he was penniless and couldn't pay for a journey home. So he decided to stay put, marrying a local Thai woman. Some years ago he was met in his village by an ex-Japanese soldier who had served as an interpreter at the railway construction site in Kanchanaburi. Some of you may have heard of him, Nagase Takash, a Japanese Buddhist. The Indonesian was just as poor as at the end of the war. Nagase offered him some money for a return air ticket. On his return home for the first time in more than half a century it was initially difficult for him and the villagers back in Java to recognise one another. One evening an old woman came up to him and asked: "Do you remember me?" Hard as he tried, he couldn't. Then she muttered: "I was your fiancée, and I still am!" Thereupon the old man broke down. He may not have been an isolated case of the kind, I fear. Four years ago, when I gave a lecture at the University of Nanjing and was introduced to the audience as Muraoka, I was fully conscious that, on 15 August 1945, my late father, Muraoka Yoshie, was there as a lieutenant colonel of the Imperial Japanese Army. At the time I was 7 years old. In December 1937, when the massacre of Nanjing took place, I was still in my mother's womb. However, I agree with Weizsäcker, a prominent German Christian statesman. On 8 May, 1985, on the 40th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, he delivered a famous speech in the German Parliament as the then President of the Federal Republic of Germany. He said: "One who closes his eyes to the past becomes also blind to the present. Most of our German citizens today were either children or not yet born during the war. They cannot confess sins which they didn't commit personally. However, guilty or innocent, young or old, we are all responsible for what we make of this historical legacy of ours and how we relate to it."

Standing this morning in this house of God in Thailand I am again conscious of my background, my name, and my nationality. My wife and I have begun to learn what was done by Japan during the Pacific War to your people here: unspeakable injustices, damages, cruelties, and pains caused. None of those horrible things should have happened. My wife and I want you to know that we are deeply ashamed and sorry about those things, and we have been doing little that we can to ensure that they are not repeated. We have been sending the message to our compatriots back in Japan and also overseas that, if we Japanese want to survive as a respectable nation, we must face facts of our history with courage and honesty and do something about them. Nine years ago I retired from my professorship in Leiden University in Holland. Since then, accompanied by my wife, I have been doing voluntary teaching in Asian countries which suffered under the Japanese militarism and aggression. Some people back in Holland who don't know why we have been doing this innocently ask: "Which country in Asia are you going to for your holiday this year?" This is our *Via dolorosa* in Asia. As we tithe out income, we tithe our

time. BIT has kindly invited us this year, which we do appreciate very much. Thailand is the tenth station on our Asian Via dolorosa. We haven't come to hurt you, wound you, work you to death or forcefully and illegally rob or destroy your property. We are here to offer you free what we have and may be useful and beneficial to you. Please do pray that my nation will learn to recall its name, admit and confess its past sins, and seek reconciliation with the Thai people and other nations of the world, especially its Asian neighbours. Thank you and Amen.