

Vulnerable Mission

Dr. M J Melanchthon

Nirma Rani, a Dalit girl student was slapped for saying *Namaste* to a Brahmin teacher and her father was beaten up later for questioning such an act. Caste is practiced in schools where Dalit children occupy separate seats given to them. Dhanam lost her eye when she was beaten up by her teacher for helping herself to drinking water from a pot without waiting to be served by a caste person. She had polluted the water by her touch.

Most countries list “vulnerable peoples” and then proceed to identify them as the homeless, those that are alcohol and drug addicted, victims of domestic and other forms of violence, victims of mental and intellectual disability, and to these, one adds the young, the children, women, those in minority situations, culturally and linguistically at a disadvantage and the like. Their vulnerability is raised or lowered according to their practices, beliefs and economic status. The recognition and identification of locationally or socially vulnerable sectors of populations is itself only an indicator of the *processes* that have brought about those conditions. Vulnerable peoples are the visible and tangible manifestations on the surface, so to speak, of invisible and intangible social, economic, and political undercurrents which are active, remotely and indigenously, contemporarily and historically. Policies, systems and activities imposed to control others, to deprive them of options, quality of life, all of which contribute to the overall vulnerability of an individual or community.

For about two thirds of the human family, vulnerability is a fact of life. For them there is no “life in its fullness”, because they live in poverty, in nakedness, economically, politically, religiously and socially caused impoverishment and on the brink of death. In India, the poor who are mostly women (but more particularly dalit women), the *adivasis* (the indigenous) and the dalits (rendered untouchable by the caste system) are the case in point, the most vulnerable communities. The roots of their condition across south Asia is their subordinate place in a Hindu religious and social hierarchy that ranks social groupings according to their relative degree of purity and pollution. ‘Dalits’, or ‘untouchables,’ are identified as “outcaste,” and yet they are crucial to the

maintenance of the caste structure, defined and placed at the bottom by the structure of untouchability.

“Dalits are not allowed to drink from the common wells meant for all the people, attend the same temples, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or drink from the same cup in tea stalls,” said Smita Narula, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch, and author of *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables."*

Their “impurity” has historically relegated Dalits to demeaning occupations such as collection and scavenging of raw sewage. Denied access to temples, village water resources, land, and all sources of social advancement such as education, employment, health care, and a dignified life, they exhibit a condition of powerlessness in all its many facets making them vulnerable to extreme forms of violence, degradation and oppression. Daily life for rural untouchables is one of dire poverty, humiliation, violence and a series of restrictions – on their movements, their life styles and culture. Frequent doses of violent humiliation and subjugation are constant reminders of their subordinate position in the social order. Their life of endless poverty, stigmatized identity and denial of rights, destroys wholistic life, God’s *shalom*, in which people need not worry about daily nourishment, where they are healthy, are not menaced by enemies, and enjoy a long life of dignity in family and community (Prov 3:16).

Activists speak of this dalit reality as a form of “hidden apartheid” that is crying out for justice, freedom, and respect for their basic human rights. The cry is loud and clear for the world to take notice; for a response from the international community and the church. These communities and the many other such vulnerable communities, crucified on crosses of discrimination are resisting the unjust and oppressive systems such as caste and struggling for the reclamation of their humanity, dignity, and their identity as children created in the image of God and their right to live a life of *shalom*.

A characteristic feature of all oppressed communities is their sense of ‘vulnerability’ – vulnerability to be exploited, broken, demoralized, dehumanized and subjugated. Mission in simple terms is about communicating the faith in order that the reign of God may become a reality. In other words we are called to make possible liberation and life in all its fullness for all vulnerable peoples, for all children of God irrespective of caste, race, religion or gender. The Church needs to awaken to the reality of this

oppressed and subjugated world, and respond to this imperative need—that vulnerable people be liberated from enslaving systems of caste, race, gender and class. Solidarity with the vulnerable and their liberation is the basic task of every human being, so that all may come to be human.

Does vulnerability contain the potential, the capacity and power that can be employed for the purposes for mission? How might a posture or position of vulnerability on the part of the church equip it for effective mission? Should vulnerability be recognized as enabling condition for mission? If so, what is vulnerability? These and related questions need to be reflected upon in our discussions on mission.

What is Vulnerability?

The term ‘vulnerable’ is word that crops up in various areas of study, such as disaster management that seeks to weigh the risk and susceptibility of communities, and areas to natural disasters. The potential impacts of climate change on the environment and socio-economic systems can be understood in terms of sensitivity, adaptability and vulnerability of the system. Similarly, in computer security, the term is used to refer to a weakness in a system which allows an attacker (namely a virus or bad software) to violate the integrity of that system and hence a security risk is classified as a ‘vulnerability’. Security firms maintain databases of vulnerabilities based on version number of the software. If exploited, each ‘vulnerability’, can potentially compromise the system or network. A gap in the defense system, a possible spot where an enemy could break through, is referred to as a “window of vulnerability” (Soelle: 1990: ix). Medical parlance uses the term while assessing an individual’s predilection to be infected by a bug or virus hereby rendering him/her sick or dysfunctional.

Variations on the definition of vulnerability exist. Derived from the Latin term, *vulnerabilis*, which means “to wound”, vulnerability is a measure of the extent to which an individual, a community, structure, service or geographical area is likely to be damaged or disrupted, on account of its nature or location, by the impact of a particular disaster hazard/oppressive system (political, social, religious or economic). This measurement results from a combination of physical, social, economic, political,

psychological and environmental factors or processes. Vulnerability is susceptibility to disaster, pain suffering, as degree of loss, or the tendency to be damaged. It is the human “capacity to be wounded” (Davis: 2003: 278).

Vulnerability

That quality in a man [sic] that enables him [sic] to be defenceless
Unfettered by ties of fear
Unchained by ideologies
Lacking the will to impose or manipulate

Gate-less, wall-less, reachable,
Unlocked, unblocked,
Open armed, growing,
In constant process of definition.
Wanton
Foolishly exposed to life
 And its crashing impact,
Free.

(Riem 1994: 21)

Vulnerability can be decreased through actions that lower the propensity to incur harm, or it can be increased through actions that increase that propensity. Resilience is therefore the opposite of vulnerability and refers to the ability of an entity to resist or overcome damage. Resilience and vulnerability are therefore considered to be the two sides of the same coin.

‘Vulnerability’: a Divine Condition

Whatever we might read or think about vulnerability, and no matter how much we might admire others who work in vulnerable situations, few of us find it easy or want to be vulnerable. It is not easy to be open to hurt, disappointment, rejection, violence or abuse—and this is the danger of vulnerability (Riem: 1994: 3). Admitting vulnerability and powerlessness is a scary business, especially since we want to be in control over everything that affects our lives. It is definitely a condition most of us would rather avoid. The temptation is always to avoid the pain, to protect ourselves from others who might cause us pain. Many of us prefer not to take risks and ensure that our defenses are up most of the time in our dealings with others and the world and as Riem points out, with God as well (1994:3). We call it survival. Yet, as human beings we are vulnerable and vulnerability is a human condition.

Shutting ourselves off and shutting others out is a long term recipe for despair and isolation. It is impossible to truly love anything without running the risk of being hurt. So, in life we are often caught between our instincts to play safe and our desire for a greater wholeness for all that we love (Riem 1994: 3).

But vulnerability is also a divine condition. In her treatment and interpretation of Genesis 22, Davis speaks of the total vulnerability of everyone involved—Abraham, God and the child Isaac (Davis: 2003: 277-293). God who has been hurt by human disobedience calls Abraham so not to be alone in the world (Gen 17:1). God requires and depends on human cooperation and help to address the ills of the world. But God needed to be sure that Abraham trusted God and vice versa and hence as a God in pain, asks Abraham to sacrifice his son (Gen 22: 2).

Far from demonstrating God's tyranny, Gen 22 shows us a divine vulnerability so profound it staggers the religious imagination... God is powerful yet also sick at heart (6:6)—wounded, over and over again, by acts of unfaithfulness, from... disobedience... The world is a cruel ...lonely place for God (Davis: 2003: 282).

By agreeing to do God's bidding, Abraham declares his total, excruciating vulnerability to God and by requesting Abraham to offer his son as burnt offering God exhibits vulnerability and risk. Abraham could have said no and by so doing expose the ineffectiveness of God. By being vulnerable to each other Abraham and God become intimates, grow into knowledge of each other. They have chosen to live life together, for better, or worse (Davis: 2003: 280). The Christian Scriptures are replete with images of the vulnerable God (Isa 53: 4-5, 12); of the God who identifies with the most vulnerable in society, thereby setting this God apart from all other Gods. Hence Israel asks, "Who is like you among the gods?" (Exod 15: 11). This God is both transcendent and immanent, enmeshed in God's creation, open to being hurt and bruised by God's own creation, who suffers insults and humiliation, rejection and derision and enduring in suffering love. In Christianity, this vulnerability of God is driven to the limit: in Christ God makes Godself vulnerable. The patriarchal ideal of invulnerability is opposed, in fact distorted by the crucified, who was and is experienced by his friends as the son of God, Jesus.

Jesus in a sense is both of them, Abraham and God—those two old-covenant partners now mystically one, wholly indistinguishable in the God-man who dies on the cross. Here is Jesus: a vulnerable human being, trusting wholly in God

against all the evidence, even against his own will; and at the very same time, here, in Jesus, is our vulnerable God, terribly insulted in the midst of the world (Davis: 2003: 285).

Jesus Christ is God's wound in the world (Soelle: 1990: xi). In the suffering Jesus, God embraces the suffering of the world for the sake of humanity. Christ suffers when we suffer. The pain people suffer is the pain of Christ himself (Bosch: 1994: 79). We need to be vulnerable if we want to live in an intimate relationship with one another, with God and Jesus Christ.

'Vulnerability' as the enabling Condition for Mission

The language of divine vulnerability is important in giving substance to Christian mission. If vulnerability is the capacity to be wounded, then what does this mean for us who claim to be the body of Christ in the world? We have been called to be wounded for the sake of the world. We are marked with the sign of the Cross which identifies us as having been placed in the world to be wounded. Where are the wounds of the church? What type or kinds of wounds are we willing to bear and endure in and through our participation in God's mission of liberation?

There are agencies that admit to being engaged in 'vulnerable mission.' The *Alliance for Vulnerable Mission*, for example, understands vulnerable mission as "the use of local languages in ministry combined with 'missionary poverty'" as the tools required for vulnerable mission since they enforce "humility and operation on a 'level playing field' with local people" (<http://www.vulnerablemission.com:80/>). Yet, one needs to be cognizant of the difference between choosing to be vulnerable which allows you to find ways to exploit your vulnerability and the vulnerability of those without the choice to exploit it (Riem: 1994: 8). We have the choice to choose vulnerability out of love and solidarity with those who are vulnerable without the choice to exploit it

We are called into a covenant relationship with God and vulnerability is paradoxically the strength of this covenant relationship (Davis: 2003: 278). The same condition of vulnerability needs to also be at the basis of relationships between human beings. This vulnerable God also calls us—the church into mission—to liberate the vulnerable ones and heal the pain in/of the world. Our identity as Church and our existence as Church, finds meaning in the prolongation of God's vulnerability in service to all

women and men, particularly to the despised, the humiliated, the discriminated and the rejected of our history. If we hold back anything at all in our mission, if we do keep that window of vulnerability open, then the light of our liberating mission cannot pass through to heal and reconcile the world. Our half hearted participation in the mission of God will not engender wholistic life for those we seek to serve. The vulnerability of the church that is engaged in mission is a sign of relationship, receptivity, and communication.

In a 1994 article, David Bosch discusses this vulnerable nature of mission by recalling the history of the many missionaries who became martyrs for the sake of their faith in mission fields far from home. With their deaths these missionaries entered the process of a communication process not as 'models' but as 'victims' says Bosch. Their total identification with their mission resulted in martyrdom, which became "the seed of the church" (Bosch: 1994: 75). This is vulnerable mission, mission that involves being victimized, the laying down of life for the sake of the Gospel. Such a missionary model that embraces sacrifice for the sake of others leads people to freedom and community and is sustained by the belief that God suffers along with the suffering peoples of this world. "It is this dimension, more than any other that distinguishes the Christian faith from other faiths. The distinctiveness of Christianity is to "be looked for in its weakness, in its ability to prove itself or to force its way" (Bosch: 1994: 77).

Vulnerability can be painful – but there is rescue in God as was evident in Abraham's experience (Gen 22). Vulnerability as a capacity is a positive thing, a strength that enables one to take risks. Those who are vulnerable have little to lose and are therefore prone to take more risks and be more open to others and other conditions. There is therefore a certain power in vulnerability. By keeping windows of vulnerability we might experience new things, gain new insights for our lives and our understanding of God, the world and humanity. Our vulnerability is also particularly powerful when we allow God to take hold of it. As disciples of Jesus we have the power to enter into hopeless situations and so transform them. We have the power to confer dignity, worth and personhood on those whom society rejects and calls victim. It is an extraordinary power for good, for life, that stands against all that is evil, life-denigrating and dehumanizing. "We experience it as the courage to step out from

behind our defenses, to give ourselves in vulnerability to the corpses, even if we are wounded by our own or others' human frailty in the process" (Riem: 1994:20).

When someone who has no need to be vulnerable becomes vulnerable in order to identify with those that are and together with them struggles to be resilient against all death dealing forces, structures and systems, and thus together with them moves towards a society transformed—of justice, and communion, then he or she participates in the vulnerable mission of God. The kind of mission that is required here is not of contemplative theologizing but liberative action in solidarity with the oppressed. It is a solidarity that is built on a relationship of complete vulnerability and identification with the oppressed community; sustained by a process of mutual giving and receiving, and nurtured by seeing in the other the ethical demand of responsibility.

⁶ ...to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
... to break every yoke?

⁷ ...to share your bread with the hungry,
...bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
... not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard...

... ¹² you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in
(Isaiah 58: 6-8, 12).

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Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon
monixm@gmail.com