

Chapter VI

Prayer for the Departed during the time of Jesus

The topic is a matter of debate between the members of the traditional Churches and those of the nascent Christian groups. The Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches and the major protestant Churches like the Lutheran Church pray for their departed. But some protestant Churches and the Pentacostal groups see the prayer for the departed as non-biblical and thereby non-Christian. Mar Thoma Church, who can be considered as a protestant Church keep a via media. Late Yuhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan said in a judicial court during the dispute between the Mar Thoma Church and the Evangelical Church: “We don’t teach that the prayer for the departed is wrong; nevertheless, we are not practicing it at the moment”.

In this article we want to address the problem from a wider perspective. First and foremost we have to make clear which Bible we are referring. Then we would ask how far we can rely up on the Bible for the religious practices of today. Thirdly, we have to point out what we do in the prayer for the departed.

The Bible of the Early Christians

The debate about the contents (Canon) of the New Testament came to an end with the Easter letter of St. Athanasius of Alexandria (327 CE). His list included 27 books, which are approved by all the Christians of the world. But the case with the Old Testament is not like that. It is very difficult to trace the history of the Canon of the Old Testament. During the time of Jesus and the apostles, the Canon of the Bible was still in the process of making. The threefold division of it as Law, Prophets and Writings may reflect the three stages of its formation. For the Palestinian Jews the Hebrew Bible contained 39 books and the list of this came in to existence only at the end of the first century CE. However, there was a bigger group of Jews in the Greek speaking areas of the Roman Empire and they used the Septuaginta. It contained some other books like 1-2Maccabees, Tobit, Judit, Sirach, Wisdom and Baruch. On the one hand, these books fill the gap between the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. On the other hand, scholars who study the Old Testament quotations available in the New Testament came to the conclusion that the Early Church, especially the authors of the New Testament used the Septuaginta as their Bible. What happens today is: while the Protestants use the translations of the books of the Hebrew Old Testament for their faith affirmations, the traditional Churches take the additional books of the Septuagint, whom they call Deutero-Canonical books, in their discussion about matters of their belief. In our discussion, however, it is very much necessary to have a look in to the Deutero-Canonical books, because of its chronological proximity to the period of Jesus and the apostles. Just like we fix the canon of our

Bible it is necessary for the current debate to know what the Bible speaks about and what not.

Religious practices of Christians and the silence of Bible

Prayer for the departed is not the only topic for which the Bible speaks little. The baptism of the infants is another subject which is debated on the same basis. The problem which we face here is a naïve attitude of some people towards the Bible. For them Bible is a source book for all possible questions of today. The fourth gospel writer gives an answer to their doubts: “Jesus did many other things in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book” (Jn 20,30). That means each event of the gospel is written from a definite point of view. He does this just because he wants to give answers for the questions of his day. For this reason we may not find answers to some questions, which are important in our time. These questions were irrelevant when the biblical books were written. For example, the authenticity of the resurrection of the Lord and that of his virgin birth were the two major topics of the Early Church. So we may find a lot of material for an answer concerning these in the Bible. But these questions do not possess the centre stage today. So we have to take a biblical passage in the context of its origin.

I will illustrate this point by taking the narration of the Wedding at Cana as an example. If the event took place today, our main questions might be: Where did the marriage take place? What type of a sacrament was performed at Cana? Was Jesus the chief celebrant? What was the topic for the sermon during the wedding? These are the things which we want to know when we hear that our spiritual leader went for a wedding. Surprisingly none of these questions are answered in the second chapter of St. John’s Gospel. On the contrary the wedding feast takes the center stage. For us it is the last for which a spiritual leader can do something. What we expect from him is rather the leadership in the function within the Church. But for St. John the feast is the moment in which the Lordship of Jesus is declared.

However, the questions similar to those which are not answered at Cana are of utmost importance for our study now: Does Jesus say anywhere in the Gospels that a marriage should be blessed in a Church? Does the New Testament teach us that there should be a prayer for the wedding? If not, why do the Christians conduct their marriages at Churches or Prayer Halls? Why do the pastors make long sermons during a wedding, if Christ did not ask us to do that? From these we can conclude that the current practice of marriage ceremony, let it be of the traditional Churches or that of the New groups, is not like that of the Church of the New Testament. It has been evolved out of the last twenty centuries. The basic theological concepts about a marriage can be present in the Bible. Things like mutual responsibilities of the husband and wife or the right way of upbringing the children are discussed in the Bible. Bible interprets the nuptial relationship between the bride and bridegroom as a symbol for the union between Christ and the Church. Also it discusses the issues regarding family life like sanctity of

married life, meaning of celibacy, principles of widowhood, reasons for divorce, possibility of a second marriage etc. (1Cor 7). What happened is: Out of these theological and spiritual concepts each Church has developed a wedding ceremony of its own.

This is true of the prayer for the departed also. We may find neither the burial service nor the prayers for the departed as such in the Bible. But we have enough texts to prove a theology regarding the life after death of the believers. Their resurrection is one of the most important themes of the New Testament, especially in the books which are written at first like the first Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians or 1 Corinthians. Out of these texts the Church has developed a burial service and the Prayer for the Departed.

Prayer for the Departed: Jesus and his socio-religious context

The Israelites gave an honorable burial to their dead ones. Jacob was very particular in the fact that he should be buried where his parents and grand parents were laid to rest (Gen 49,29ff.). For him the cave of Mackpelah, which Abraham bought from the Hittites as a burial place, was the best place where he could join his forefathers. Sons of Joseph buried him just like the Egyptians do; they embalmed him and placed in a coffin (Gen 50,26). However, when the Israelites left Egypt after centuries they did not forget to take his bones out of Egypt, which was the last wish of Joseph (Gen 50,25).

The belief in a life after death was also characteristic of the Israelites. They believed that the dead ones would go to Sheol, which is parallel to the New Testament idea of Hades. Sheol is a place where the dead one joins his people (Gen 25,8; 2Sam 12,23; 1Kgs 2,10). Its inhabitants are termed as “shades” (Job 26,5; Is 14,9) and are shadows of their former existence. Anyway Sheol was considered as a place of consciousness; the dead meet and greet each other there (Ez 32,21-31). Because of this belief in the active existence of the dead Jesus calls Yahweh as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; for “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mtt 22,32). The Israelites believed also in the resurrection of the body which is decayed and torn apart. Prophet Ezekiel uses this image when he wanted to convey the theme of the death and resurrection of Israel as a nation (Ez 37,1-14).

Now let us turn our attention to the Deutero-Canonical books. As we have seen above, these books are important for us because they had a proximity to time of the Church of the New Testament. If whatever is told in the Torah or Prophetic Books are chronologically very far from the New Testament Church, the Deutero-canonical books were written in one or two centuries prior to the birth of Christ.

The Book of Sirach underlines the fact that death is a moment of truth, which we can not overcome. It is “Lord’s decree” and “the will of the Most High” (Sir 41,4).

Tears and grief are due for the dead and the mourning should be done as per the worth of the departed, for one or two days (Sir 38, 16-17). However, we find the best example for the prayer for the departed in 2 Maccabees 12,38-45. When Judas Maccabeus sees that his soldiers were murdered because of their dependence on idolatry, he not only asks his men to keep themselves away from such a sin but also exhorts them to make a prayer for the murdered soldiers. Moreover, he collected a fund from Israelites and sends it to Jerusalem for a sin offering. The Bible says; “In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin” (2 Macc 12,43-45). This passage gives us two important beliefs of the inter-testamental period: a) the prayer for the departed was based on the faith in the resurrection of the dead; b) people believed that it was their responsibility to pray for the forgiveness of the sins of the dead.

New Testament carries over the faith of the Old Testament and that of the Deutero-canonical literature. It gives much emphasis to the life after death of the individual. The basis for such a belief is the fact that Jesus has risen from the dead. St. Paul narrates the details about the composition of the resurrected body in his first Epistle to Corinthians (1Cor 15,35ff.). Jesus and his disciples believed that the dead ones would be transferred immediately. For example, Jesus promises the dying thief an immediate transfer to Paradise (Lk 23,43); Stephen saw his Lord in heaven waiting to receive his spirit (Acts 7,56); and Paul hoped to be “at home with the Lord” (2Cor 5,8) immediately after his death.

We have no doubt that Jesus shared the belief in the intercession for the departed. The life after death was for Jesus a life of conscious communication. In the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus Jesus explains what the future of the dead would be. The rich man sees Lazarus at the bosom of Abraham and repents. Moreover, he intercedes for his brothers there (Lk 16,27). Just like the dead ones are concerned about the living, the living ones should also care for the dead. Jesus himself becomes an example for this. When Lazarus of Bethany died, Jesus felt very sorry about it. He could not hide his emotions when he saw the bereaved sisters of Lazarus and the people of the village (Jn 11,33-35). He went to the tomb, lifted up his eyes to heaven and prayed (Jn 11,41-42).

The tradition of Jesus and its continuation today

What the Christians of the 21st century do is a continuation of what Jesus and the Early Christians did. The main aspects of the belief and practice regarding prayer for the dead are the following: One who dies remains a part of the community of the People of God. The communion between the living and the dead is an essential feature of our faith: While the living ones pray for the dead, the departed souls will make intercession for the living. Some people may still ask: Do our

prayer help the dead in any way? Is it not true that the departed ones will be judged as per the things which they did while living on this earth? Of course, all people will be judged by God according to their deeds. But do we pray only for the sinless among our relatives and friends? If so, how can we pray for anybody? Everybody commits this or that mistake. But it is our responsibility to pray for the weak and sinful people; it makes no difference whether they live or have died. Even the children of a murderer or thief may pray for their father. They know that their father is a sinner, but they ask God for His mercy. Let our prayer be like that of St. Paul for Onesiphorus: "May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day!" (2Tim 1,18).