

THE RABBI'S FOREST, FIRE AND PRAYER

Based on a Hasidic Story. By P.Ribes, s.j)

Intent of this Story

- ✓ *Relative value of religious rituals, sacred places and prayer- formulae*
- ✓ *God has to be worshipped in spirit and in truth*
- ✓ *Let us be cautious of the dangers of exaggerated ritualism.*
- ✓ *The effectiveness of our prayer is not to be placed on, or conditioned to outside "places of worship", to "external rites" or to fixed sets of "prayer-formulae"*
- ✓ *With the passage of time we make too much of "holy places", "rites", and "prayer-formulae We end by investing them with a power they have not.*
- ✓ *Places of pilgrimage are good, yet they have a relative value*
- ✓ *Personal and fortuitous formulations of someone's past religious experience have become "special" prayers for many others*
- ✓ *There are "no "Powerful prayers", but "prayer is really powerful"*

THE STORY

An old Jewish story tells us that when some calamity was threatening his people, Rabbi Israel Bell Shem-Tov, used to get to a certain "**Holy Place**" in the forest, light a "**Sacred Fire**" and say a "**Special Prayer**". Thus, every time the calamity was averted.

Many days later, in the time of Nagid of Mezritch, when such threat arose again, he went into the forest and said: "God, Lord of the universe, I do not know how to light the "**Sacred Fire**", but I still remember the "**Holy Place**" in the forest, and I still know that "**Special Prayer**". Then, he said the special prayer in the holy place. When he returned home, the calamity had been averted also.

Some years later, when Rabbi Moshed-Leib of Sasov found himself in trouble, he went again into that "**Holy Place**" in the forest and said: "God, Lord of the universe, I still know the "**Holy Place**", in this forest, but I do not know how to light the "**Sacred Fire**" and forgot that "**Special Prayer**". Yet, Oh, Lord, have pity on us and save your people." This time too the tragedy was averted.

Finally, In the days of Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn it was his turn to avert the calamity of his people. Sitting at home, he prayed to God from the depth of his heart: "Sorry, Lord, I do not know that "**Holy Place**" in the forest, I cannot light. The "**Sacred Fire**", and worst of all, I even forgot that "**Special, Prayer**". Yet O God, have pity on us and deliver us from danger." And God listened to him and the calamity was averted again.

QUESTIONS CLAMOURING FOR AN ANSWER

1. Why did all the holy Rabbis of the story obtain the same blessings from God, although they had progressively forgotten the "holy place", how to light the "sacred fire", and that "special prayer"?

2. In the story what was the value of: that “Holy place” of that “Sacred fire” and of that “Special prayer”.
3. How did the place, the fire and the prayer come to be special and holy?
4. Can God be found outside such “holy things”?
5. Are they, however, helpful to people to find God? Why?
6. Essentially and strictly, what is prayer?

THOUGHTS FOR REFLECTION

- Prayer actually is within our hearts, not outside elsewhere
- The quality and effectiveness of our prayer is not to be placed on, or conditioned to outside "places of worship", to “external rites” or to fixed sets of “prayer-formulae”
- The worthiness of our prayer depends on our "faith", and in our “love for God
- God knows our needs even before we may ask Him.
- With the passage of time we make too much of "holy places", “rites” , and “prayer-formulae”
- We end by investing them with a power they have not.
- Places of pilgrimage are good, yet they have a relative value.
- God is not in this place or in that other, God is everywhere
- Actually speaking, God is not confined to places, but he dwells in the depth of our hearts
- Wherever there is a human heart, God is there.
- Jesus told to the Samaritan woman, God wants to be worshipped in spirit and in truth, not in mount Jarizim or in mount Zion.
- Through sheer practice and routine, we end "sacralizing” places, rituals and special prayers.
- We think – rather believe - that the fire, the water and other elements are “sacred”.
- Those rites - good in themselves - are only outer signs that help us to externalize internal realities, like our faith, our love and worship.
- They are means, not ends in themselves; they are accidental and changeable in accordance to circumstances of time, place and culture.
- Personal and fortuitous formulations of someone's past personal prayer experiences have become “special” prayers for many who never enjoyed a prayer experience.
- Prayer formulae do not have any power in themselves independently from the faith of the person who recites them
- There are “no “Powerful prayers”, but “prayer is really powerful”

APPENDIX

Excerpts from Some Notes on Rites and Rituals from the book: TO BE LIKE JESUS of Fr. P. Ribes, s.j., published by the Gujarat Sahitya Prakash.

Nature and Function of Rites and Rituals

- We, human beings are in need of Rites, Rituals and “external” expressions of “internal” realities experienced or intuited deep within us.

- Those inner realities are “ineffable” – namely, they cannot be expressed verbally in human language - yet they strive toward expression and communication.
- Rites and rituals are their outward and visible “symbolic” and “analogical” signs.
- In human life and society, there are all sorts of rites and rituals: social, political and religious. We restrict ourselves here only to the “religious” rites.
- Throughout the centuries we can discover religious rites and rituals in all countries, cultures, civilizations and communities. They are attempts to externalize and embody the “religious experiences” of human beings.
- In all rites and rituals we have to distinguish between “the thing signified” and the “symbol” used to signify it.
- The symbols may vary from place to place, from culture to culture, from civilization to civilization, yet the things signified are the same, they have a perennial value.
- We can say that the ‘symbolic expressions’ in religious practices are temporally and culturally conditioned.
- The reason why a particular rite or ritual was created or introduced in a particular instance, can very well be put down to fortuitous circumstances, such as chance, cultural bias, personal preferences, availability of materials, social ethos and environment.
- Specific instances are: wax, lamps, coconuts, flowers, salt, finger rings, oil, wheat, fruit, wine, bread, stones, clay, colors, animal sacrifices, etc. Even the languages used in the performance of the ritual take a symbolic character.
- All the instances mentioned above provide clear examples of the relative nature of ritualistic symbols.
- The Church has a right to prescribe the rites she deems suitable for her sacraments and worship.
- Yet, we should not make the mistake of thinking that these rites have an absolute value. They are not ends in themselves but only means, and attempts to express the ineffable.
- The church can and ought to change them when the circumstances demand it. For instance, the church can establish Indian, Chinese, Japanese or African rites to suit the needs of people living within different cultural traditions, without sacrificing the substance of her message or her mission.
- Rites and rituals, to some extent, share in the nature of “language”, the same thoughts, feelings and experiences can be expressed in different languages- English, Latin, Chinese, Sanskrit, etc.- because the things signified or expressed by verbal sounds are part and parcel of a common and unique experience of humankind.
- However, rites and rituals as much as languages, being culturally and ideologically conditioned may- consciously or unconsciously - twist, exaggerate, play down and even conceal reality. We have to be critical.

Dangers of Rites, Rituals and Sacraments

“Socialization” and “Absolutization” of our Rites and Rituals

- There is a tendency to “sacralize” and “absolutize” religious rites and rituals and prayer formulae in a way that we end by subordinating persons to rites and rituals.

- Religious rites and practices have no absolute value.
- To assign such a value to them would be a form of idol-worship.
- There is nothing absolute except God himself. Nothing that is not God can be turned into an object of worship.
- An overestimation of rites and rituals and formulae may prove to be a symptom of our lack of faith in God and of spiritual infantilism.
- We might be creating “idols” to cover up our unbelief or allay our anxiety of not fully accepting God as the only and supreme reality.
- What Jesus said about the Sabbath being meant for men, not men for the Sabbath, should equally be applied to all rites, rituals, religious practices and devotions.
- We clothe our worship with symbols and formulae, but let us remember that it is God we worship, not the symbols and the formulae.
- We tend to attribute to sacramental rites, sacramentals and religious practices a power they do not possess. We fall into a fetishist belief-system bordering on “superstition”.
- Sacramental rites and rubrics in themselves are not sacraments, they are means instituted by the church to express our relationship with God. What really matters is what they signify.
- Some good and scrupulous people, like the good Sadhu of the story are meticulous, even obsessed with the outward observances of their faith and the externals of their religious practice. Yet religion has to be practiced in spirit and in truth.
- Scrupulous Pharisees who ‘sacralized’ the law and other external practices were rebuked by Jesus for sticking to the letter of the law and forgetting its spirit. We read in the Scriptures: “The spirit vivifies, the letter kills.”
- If we have to worship God in spirit and in truth we must first do away with the “sacred cats” in the sanctuary of our religious lives. Only then will our burnt offerings be truly pleasing to God.
- Just as in our daily life, in order to convey meaning to others, we use the common language of the people, so also – in religious matters - we must use common meaningful rituals and rites in keeping with the spiritual strivings, the intellectual capacity and emotional yearnings of the common people.
- We might have to change some of the rites and symbols and the language of our liturgy to make ourselves relevant, meaningful and purposeful to the people of the 21st century.

Empty Ritualism: Substituting Inner Realities with External signs

- By their very nature rites and rituals are repetitive. There is a real danger that due to repetition, over a period of time, our religious rites become routine, mechanical and robot-like actions. In the end they may turn to be empty gestures and dead symbols.
- It’s not uncommon that rites and rituals become a “substitute” for the reality they were meant to express. For example, ordinarily we express adoration - *actually an inner inward disposition of our heart* - by external bows, genuflections, prostrations, etc. In the course of time, due to sheer repetition, we may keep performing those outward signs of adoration without a thought of the inner reality they represent.
- An external action like bowing for instance becomes a substitute for true and inner worshipping! The net result will be empty ritualism.

- It is an unfortunate fact that many of our rites have, with the passage of time, become meaningless rituals. For instance, crossing ourselves, genuflecting, the use of holy water, the rite of the sign of peace at Mass, etc.
- Even confession can become a matter of empty ritualism, sort of touchwood.
- Attendance at Mass can turn out to be a compulsive exercise in spiritual vacuity for many of the “Once- a-week Catholics”.