

The Holodomor of 1933 - Spiritual Reflections

Justice and Mercy

*Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from deceitful and unjust men deliver me!
For thou art the God in whom I take refuge;
why hast thou cast me off?
Why go I mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy? Psalm 43:1,2*

It almost seems incongruous to speak about justice when reflecting on the Holodomor because this word becomes absurd in the light of what transpired in 1933. What justice are we talking about? The event is so horrendous that it boggles the mind trying to grasp it.

We look for justice, but there is none. Isaiah 59:11

What may help us is to realize that there are different conceptions of justice. Man's justice often appears as tit for tat, of making the punishment fit the crime. Always lurking just below the surface is the thirst for vengeance. This is quite "normal" for fallen man but what is normal for fallen man cannot be used as a guide and measure for people trying to live their faith.

Despotism, violence try to instill in us a myopic vision. They tempt us with the idea that justice means avenging and paying back injustice. The bloodied history of mankind shows what follows from this type of thinking. We do not change injustice into justice through violence and repayment in kind.

We are so enamored with the view of 'justice' as being recompense for injustice - whether perceived or actual - and yet, this is but a mere shadow of the deep meaning of the word justice. Justice incorporates many ideas: fairness, care for the needy, charity, and love, even for murderers. These are the essential ingredients for what our faith teaches about justice and the tit for tat that is often passed as the meaning of justice is that defined by a fallen world.

*you....have neglected the weightier matters of the law,
justice and mercy and faith. Matthew 23:23*

We often isolate justice as if it were sufficient unto itself - but that is a grievous error. We are told that justice is inevitably yoked to mercy for then it protects us against the temptation of vengeance for which man has such a high proclivity. David says:

*I am in great distress, let me fall into the hands of the Lord for his mercy is very great;
but let me not fall into the hands of man. 1 Chronicles 21:13*

He knows what lies in man's heart and fears that he will fall into man's 'justice' which does not include mercy. We must beware, as well of seeking man's justice as opposed to emulating God who always tempers justice with mercy. We must

..keep justice and do righteousness. Isaiah 56:1

We are often reminded that we cannot stand before God in expectation merely of justice, of retribution. We have no defence for our behavior and throw ourselves completely onto God's mercy. Justice without mercy is a caricature of what our faith teaches us.

All unjustified suffering is redemptive. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The suffering that occurred in the Holodomor was unjustified and in a deep sense it was redemptive, in the sense that it redeemed the Ukrainian people. Freedom is a beautiful word and according to Orthodox theology, one of the defining gifts for mankind.

A people who had been in bondage eventually were freed - hopelessness has been replaced by hope. Our best reply to the call for justice is to ensure that the memory of those who perished is not erased by time and their suffering continues to bring forth a harvest of goodness. It is not to point an accusing finger - oh, how easy it is to do that - at those we deem as guilty. Our main role is to ensure that good comes out of evil, that evil deeds are repaid with deeds of good.

*But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Amos 5:24*

Even during the bitterest of times we must remember that,

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercy never comes to an end. Lamentations 3:22-24*

But there is also a warning to us that justice is important, it isn't something that is secondary. We must strive to spread justice in our world but we must also have God's understanding of justice continually before us or we will descend into the maelstrom of human vengeance.

One of the lessons that we learn from the Holodomor is the futility of recompense, of vengeance. Let me illustrate this in another way. Suppose that we track down, what? - a hundred or even one thousand of the perpetrators of the Holodomor. They are brought to trial, tried, and found guilty. And we would have the self-satisfying feeling that we have brought about justice. But, underlying this is the fact that we give the impression that somehow the lives of those found guilty balance out the death of millions. This indeed would be a travesty and indicates to us the conclusion that for a crime as horrendous as the Holodomor no trial comes close, no prosecution even approaches, the possibility of compensating for the crimes that were committed in 1933.

*Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and we should leave the matter in His hands.
Deuteronomy 32:35*

There is an impression that somehow mercy betrays weakness. Mercy is not the way of the world where might dominates and is the common currency of governments and, too often, of inter-personal relations. What mercy points to is another way of seeing things - that the actions that we experience in the course of history are not as final and decisive as we may imagine them to be. By seeking for vengeance we are in fact immortalizing evil as if to say it has something of universal importance to say to us.

We learn through our faith that mercy indeed is the action through which God interacts with His creation and if this is His mode of activity, should we not, also, emulate Him? Should we not also be merciful?

*What is a merciful heart?
It is a heart which is burning with love for the whole creation;
for humans, for birds, for beasts, for demons -
for all God's creatures. St. Isaac the Syrian.*

With God, there is no limit to mercy and this comes from the fact that there is no limit to His love. This is how we are to love and this is how we are to have mercy. We have been forbidden to judge but we have been commissioned to heal and this is what we are to do in order to properly honor the Holodomor.

I discerned the face of my Lord in everything. Psalm 16:8

Of one thing we can be very sure. As the psalm above says, the face of God is everywhere, including in the killing fertile fields of Ukraine of 1933.

One of the terrible difficulties that confronts us in the Holodomor is meaninglessness. When we encounter the thought about the Holodomor of 1933, we are struck by the inherent evil present here, an evil that brings with it an attack on meaning. Our cosmos dissolves into chaos and we are bereft of the basic need that humans have for life that makes sense. This is the germ of the troubling feelings that we have when faced with senseless violence and unnecessary death. But our faith offers us a lifeline. At the heart of the Gospels is a description of a senseless death, of an innocent being murdered for no possible reason but some political schemes about having one man die in order that the nation may be saved. What Christianity does is show us that there is no longer a 'meaningless' death. All these 'meaningless deaths' have been absorbed into the death of Christ who has transfigured death from a dead-end into a passageway into meaning. Death has become Pascha and this is the ultimate justice and mercy.