

There are two things that dictate the behaviors of people: religion and economic interest. I've seen a TV program that showed a cut scene of Tibetans burning their blankets and clothes made of animal skins. The Dalai Lama preached that people should not wear animal skins, in his speech against hunting rare animals. Then the whole population, *with* glee, dumped all kinds of fur products, and set them on fire.

This kind of behavior is a difficult one for the western mind to understand. The westerners would deem such an action headlong, irrational, or down right stupid. How could a whole nation voluntarily participate in burning of the animal skin products, because of one man's message? Unheard of, but it did happen.

As for the economic interest that dictates the behaviors of people, tax is one of the big motivators. If you thought the modern day Tea Partiers' anger was notable, it would pale, when compared to the white heat of the Judeans' in

the Roman time. The Romans conducted the census on the population of their occupied territories. Based on this census, the Romans made sure that no one left home without paying taxes.

Having to pay taxes directly to the Romans, the Judeans harbored a tremendous resentment against the occupying army of the unclean Gentiles. The Romans collected taxes on assets, on the house, on the agricultural products, on other products of the land, and on salt. And besides these, there were customs and crown tax. The emperor Vespasian even added his genius on collecting tax: the Jew tax, just for being a Jew.

It was no wonder that the Hebrews felt that they had become virtual slaves of the Romans. When people feel that they are being enslaved by a foreign force, two things happen eventually: either submit and eke out the living, or put up the fight. There were frequent insurrections in Jesus' own time.

Barabbas, who was set free instead of Jesus, was one such insurrectionist, and there was a good reason why the crowd favored his release over Jesus'.

If you thought the taxes collected for the Romans were heavy enough, there were more. The Judeans were required by law to give to the religious establishment. Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, counted at one time 14 tithes, including a tithe to the priests, a tithe consumed by the farmer in Jerusalem, a tithe for the poor every third year. Then there were offerings—the first fruits offering, the temple tax, various sin offerings, and purity offerings, such as after child birth. In fact, the people had to satisfy two distinct tax systems. (Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine, Jack Pastor, pp. 123, 124).

Of course, there were consequences to this double taxation. The small farmers and landowners could not keep up with the taxes, and they frequently lost their properties.

In ancient economy, land was everything. Since the ancients did not have the "socialist" safety nets as we do today, when they lost their land, they had no choice but become indentured servants.

Comparable to the ancient Judeans, people nowadays lose their houses to foreclosures. Average Joes do not get the tax breaks and bail-out money like the large corporations do. They bear the burden of the tax, pay for the health insurance, survive the unemployment, endure service cuts, and finance the two wars. On top of this, the corporations have taken jobs to overseas, shrinking the job market even further for the Americans. Then the issue of immigration complicates the matter even worse, whether it is real or imagined. Do people believe that kicking out the incumbents will bring back the good ole America? What do Americans ask Jesus to do, in order to fix America?

Did the Judeans, too, believe that

they could solve their problems by replacing the tax collectors with the gentler and kinder ones? Or, did they believe that only the armed insurrection would do? Did they believe that they needed a Savior who could kick out the Romans? While the Jews panted for air under the Roman occupation, what did Jesus do? Was Jesus so high on religion that he failed to notice the sufferings his people endured under the Roman taxation? What did people ask Jesus to do, in order to fix their nation? What did Jesus propose to solve their problems?

According to the Gospel of John (Ch. 6), people wanted Jesus to be their king. They thought that Jesus as the political savior would drive out the Romans from their land and restore the old glory of the Davidic kingdom, and solve their economic woes. But Jesus walked away from the crowd.

His disciples believed that, when the kingdom of God comes in power (Jesus talked about the

kingdom all the time), Jesus would make them the ministers in the cabinet. The disciples kept one another in check, by arguing among themselves who was the greatest. But that was not the reason why Jesus came.

Jesus proclaimed the reason why in verse 10: "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Jesus preached repentance (Mt. 4:17) for the forgiveness of sins and God's grace for the sinners. Jesus saw something was behind the manifestations of these economic and political problems. And that something was present in everyone—in the fellow Jews, in the Romans, also in Zacchaeus, the man of our story.

So, what did Jesus propose to do about the taxes and economy? Well, surprise, surprise: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mt. 22:21). You know, Jesus would never make it even to the primary, if he ran for the governor's office on that platform.

The Romans did not want to bother with the bureaucratic burden of actually collecting taxes. So they used publicans, the tax collectors known as the "tax farmers", who intended to make profits from their investment activity. Tax farmers would pay the Romans in advance the required amount of tax, and reaped the interest from the Romans. The publicans could keep whatever was collected over the required amount, but also risked losing money, if they could not recoup the amount paid to the Romans.

Since Zacchaeus was the chief of the publicans, there was a good chance that he amassed his wealth by over-collecting tax and earning the interest income from the Romans. He was like a government contractor, venture capitalist, investment banker, revenue, traitor, and sinner, all rolled up into one evil entity. There were few worse villains who could outdo Zacchaeus, at least in the eyes of the Judean public.

This tax farmer, Zacchaeus, who had been operating on behalf of his own economic interest over that of the nation, suddenly flipped. Usually, it is the other way around: people routinely sacrifice their religious ideals for their own economic interests.

That is why the incident in Tibet was a puzzling one. That was against the common practice of impressing religion into the service to individual's own economic interests. For Zacchaeus, his religion overcame his economic interest—largely on the account of having met one stranger on the street.

Zacchaeus knew what was inside himself. He had been struggling with his life that contradicted the way he was raised in his religion. His religion clashed with his own selfish concerns. Zacchaeus longed to be restored to the household of Abraham, to be made upright with God. But that meant giving up his job, or, at least losing the wealth he had accumulated. He probably grew attached to his wealth, so

Zacchaeus must have continued to struggle with himself as a conflicted soul.

When Jesus spotted Zacchaeus, Jesus saw through Zacchaeus' struggle. So Jesus invited him, while Zacchaeus was yet a sinner, to fellowship with him, while every one else in the nation wanted his head on the platter.

God's grace is always ready to come to any one who wants it. Our thirst for God's grace, even in the state of inner conflict and torment, makes it easier for God to make way into our lives. But the unwilling heart to repent will block out God's grace.

What Zacchaeus did next must have shocked everyone: Zacchaeus volunteered to cede half of his possessions, and if he had defrauded anyone, he would pay back four times as much.

That was the pledge in spirit with Torah. Exodus 22 stipulates the compensation amount when one person defrauded another. As a matter of fact, Zacchaeus was

confessing in everyone's hearing that he sinned against God and his own people. How many people have the courage to do that? Because of that public confession, Jesus proclaimed to the town that Zacchaeus is now a member restored to the household of Abraham, no longer the hated traitor/sinner.

Repentance goes beyond mere words. Repentance takes place in action. Sin and repentance are ugly words to most people. Those people who say that they are spiritual but not religious hardly ever talk about sin or repentance. It is impossible to be spiritual, if one does not repent of one's sins. Salvation came to Zacchaeus' household, because he not only repented with his mouth in public, but also pledged in everyone's hearing to compensate according to Torah those whom he had defrauded.

Here we need to ponder about what repentance means for us. Unless the repentance follows with action, as in the restoration of the damages, it is very

difficult to break the cycle of revenge and violence, and achieve peace with the victims. It is almost impossible to forgive the offender without the restoration of the damages. Sometimes, there is nothing in the world that can compensate for the damages—how do you compensate lost lives, lost years, and lost opportunities?

I see nowadays that the Christian theology tends to package itself in a happy, celebrant religion that eschews painful introspection. It likes to shower the sinners with God's grace for forgiveness, despite the absence of repentance. Then, it gladly hands out salvation to anyone who pays a lip service that they have accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

Repentance is never a feel-good, uplifting session; restoration of damages is going to hurt the checkbook. We should realize that the day salvation had arrived at his household, Zacchaeus gladly chose to become poor, by giving up his wealth: he repented

in action and in public. What kind of pain do you think that action caused?

Somehow, modern religion prescribes the aspirin theology that bypasses repentance, jumps to the forgiveness, and affirms the offenders. The offender is hardly required to pay for the damages. And in the process, the plight of the victims is entirely overlooked; the society ignores the cause of the injustice and maintains the structure of oppression. This way, the church may remain popular to the people who are weary of the ugly words such as sin and repentance, but also contribute to prolongation of injustice in this land.

We are called to be the disciples of Jesus. In our small way, we can live the gospel, when we as the Body of Christ collectively strive to repent, and restore the damages we have caused to one another. When we do that, we will surely witness the kingdom of God in our midst, and the salvation will arrive at our households.