

The Parable of the Prodigal Son; Its Lessons for Nation Building

P. E. Eluu and Okah Stephen U.

Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Faculty of Education,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

ABSTRACT

The level of disintegration, bloodshed, untold hardship and general social upheaval experienced currently in our nation is alarming. The pluralistic nature of our society demands a strategic attempt to unify the diverse ethnic, religious and other pluralities that characterize our society hence, the need for nation building. This paper examined the parable of the prodigal son, highlighted the moral lessons drawn from it. It was observed that religious intolerance, value degeneration, insecurity, tribalism and corruption were challenges to Nation Building. This paper therefore strongly advocates that if Nigeria would imbibe the moral lessons of love, forgiveness, assurance of competence before assumption of any leadership position, tolerance, etc taught by Christ through the parable of the prodigal son, it would save the nation from the quagmire of hardship the nation is currently going through in the similitude of the prodigal son prior to his home coming. Based on these, recommendations were also made.

Keywords: Parable, Prodigal Son, Nation Building

INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons for teaching religion education is because of the vital roles it plays in the development of individual moral life through the acquisition of the right values and belief. Its value in the socio-economic transformation of any society cannot be underestimated [1].

Christian Religious Studies curriculum is developed in such a way that it embodies the basic teaching of the Christian faith that if properly taught, assimilated and applied shall go a long way in developing the individual self, enhancing inter-personal relationships among people of diverse backgrounds and facilitate Nation Building. Hence [2] opines that education without the knowledge of Christian religion would encourage ethical emptiness in the society.

Nation Building according to [3] is a dialectical phenomenon in which the individual and society interact with their physical, biological and inter-human environments, transforming them for their own good and that of humanity at large and being transformed in the process. [4] opines that Nation building is especially used in relation to countries in

Africa and Central Europe where territorial habitation of people forces disparate nationalities to belong to a country and yet feel no common sense of shared identity among them. So, in basic terms, one could say that nation building aims at unification. The heartbeat of the Nigerian leaders from the pre-independence years was to build a just, egalitarian and progressive society but for some external forces from the colonial masters and internal forces such as poverty, corruption, lack of contentment, selfishness among others made their vision and mission to continually remain a dream, hence the emergence of religion as alternative measure for nation building [5]. Christian religious studies themes and topics such as parables provides a moral foundation for the society and if the moral lessons imbedded therein are carefully gleaned and applied in our contemporary society will help to avert a moral collapse of the society, [6].

The significance of this paper is therefore sacrosanct because our nation building process has been extremely dismal in outcome. Our independent Nigeria does

not yet act like a nation after over five decades of existence. The inability to achieve a consensus necessary for nation

What is parable?

Gleaned from [8], "parable is a story that teaches a moral lesson". From the scriptural perspective, parable is an earthly story with spiritual or moral lessons. It is an illustrative story by which

Xray of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

The parable of the prodigal son fell under the classification of the parables that illustrates God's love. In this classification also were the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin.

It was Jesus Himself who told this parable of a certain man who had two sons. The youngest of them demanded a share of his father's wealth and his father obliged without hesitation, (vs 12). Diverse interpretations have been given to the action of this young son by many scholars and interpreters. Some said his request was as a result of youthful exuberance while others considered him rude, arrogant and a freedom seeker. All these were on the ground that it was not customary within the context of their tradition for a son to demand a share of his father's wealth while the father is yet alive. Father's wealth were always inherited by his children at the demise of the father. So the son was considered to be wishing his father dead by his action. Desire for independence, youth restiveness and so on were all deduced from the boy's action, hence his label as a sinner. However true that could be, we see a son who knew he has a right of inheritance in his father's house and was bold enough to place a demand on what was legitimately his, regardless of timing. His father's non-hesitation to grant his son's request points to the fact that he was already of age to make such request. Shortly after he got his portion, he gathered them together and travelled to a far country where he wasted it. No sooner that he wasted his resources in frivolity than famine struck. Having neither investment nor savings, he forced himself upon an unwilling employer and was

building has robbed us of the fundamentals of shared identity, vision and values, [7].

the familiar idea is cast beside the unfamiliar idea in such a way that the comparison helps people to understand and grasp the unfamiliar idea.

feeding swine. This is the most degrading occupation any Jew could engage bearing in mind that swine were considered by the Jews as unclean animal. He not only fed swine but would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the swine ate and no one gave him anything else. He was in serious want. This was the first time in his life to experience such a malady; he always had plenty in his father's house but now, his want will only increase.

When he came to himself, fully admitting what he was and who he was, he asked himself a self-examining question " *how many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spear, and I perish in hunger*" vs 17. Pondering upon this all-important question in his most lowly estate of loneliness, rejection and starvation triggered a revolution in his mindset that spurred up a decision for an immediate action; the gravity of his offence and the distance away from home notwithstanding, he decided to return home. At this point, all were lost except hope. He said " *I will rise and go to my father, and will say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. And I am no more worthy to be called your son, make me as one of your hired servants*" vs 18-19.

The young man did not plead extenuating circumstances, neither did he lay the blame on others, nor plead wrongs done to him, he placed the blame squarely to where it belonged; upon himself. His decision to return to his father was far from going to take up an exalted position. He wished he could be counted least in his father's house. He admitted his

unworthiness by the act of humility he planned to demonstrate.

On his way home, his father saw him afar off, had compassion on him and ran to him and kissed him not minding his detestable appearance. As he pleaded for forgiveness, his father interrupted him, demanded for a robe, a ring and a shoe for his decoration. He went further to slaughter a fatted calf and called friends to make merry. The celebration given in his honour was fitting for a son, not for a servant. The prodigal son wondered in bewilderment as his father did all that. The sudden call for celebration, coupled with the initial warmth reception preempts his father's state of heart; he was happy. The reason for his father's joy was on the ground that his son was considered dead but now is alive.

As the merriment continued, his elder son returned, refusing to enter his own compound. He was very sure he had no plan for celebration with his father before he left the house. Since he neither knew nor understood what was going on, did not consider it necessary to enquire from his father, he enquired from one of the

Moral Lessons from the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Every parable has at least one moral lesson it teaches. The following lessons can be drawn from the parable of the prodigal son:

1. There should be assurance of competence before assumption of any responsibility. The young son showed incompetence in handling what he received from his father, hence his prodigality. Competence is an indispensable ingredient in Nation building. Nigerians who are not competent enough to handle any leadership position should not take it up because competence is needed to handle the various ethnic, religious and socio-political diversities that characterize the Nigerian nation.

2. We should learn to admit our mistakes. When the prodigal son tried his best and yet failed, he realized his mistakes, apportioned the blame squarely to where it belonged; to himself. He neither

servants. Servants were the ones giving him details of what was happening in his father's house. He heard it and was very angry, his fathers' joy notwithstanding. This shows that morally, he was as much lost in his father's house as his younger brother had been. His father's joy meant nothing to him as he never shared in it. He began to recount his loyalty and service to his father without earning "a kid" from his father to celebrate and merry with his friends. He showed the hatred of his heart to his father and to his brother and wished that instead of making merry on the reunion, his brother should be punished severely or better still rejected by his father. Only then that his father decided to give him a fatherly counsel, correcting certain wrong impression he had and impressing on him the lesson of forgiveness and love. His father said to him, "*son, you are ever with me, and all I have is yours. It was necessary that we should make merry, and be glad: for this your brother was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found*" vs 31-32.

complained against the economy nor blamed others for what they failed to do, he realized it was entirely his fault and accepted his weaknesses and inabilities and never made excuses for them. Sincerity and high moral standard is required to do this. Nigerians should emulate from the prodigal son not to blame our inadequacies on others; Christians or Muslims should own up their mistakes, inadequacies and faults where necessary for the interest of peace and unity.

3. We should learn to always forgive sincerely those that offend us and also teach others to do same especially when our offenders acknowledge their faults and plead for forgiveness. The father of the prodigal son forgave and accepted back his son, reinstating him to a son position as against what his son thought. He also taught his elderly son to forgive too. Sad enough, unforgiveness,

retaliation and witch-hunting one another is the quagmire upon which the peaceful co-existence and unity of the Nigerian nation is trapped. Learning to forgive and forbear with one another will make for the building of a united, strong and egalitarian nation.

4. We should learn to show concern for others and be accommodating. The brother of the prodigal son was bent on the rejection of his prodigal brother, not considering his father's joy on the return of his dead son of any importance. We should learn to shun discrimination, upholding the popular saying that "united we stand, divided we fall". If this is upheld in Nigeria, the Igbos will live happily with

his Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba brothers in peace and harmony and vice versa.

5. Above all, we should learn to love and tolerate one another. The major moral lesson taught by Jesus Christ through the parable of the prodigal son is the lesson of love. The Holy Bible outlines the characteristics of love thus; "Love is kind, love does not envy, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not think evil towards another, endures all things..." (1corinthians 13:3-7). The pluralistic nature of the Nigerian nation demands that the moral lesson of love be imbibed. We should love one another regardless of religious inclination, political affiliation and cultural background.

Challenges to Nation Building

1. Religious intolerance: Intolerance means disapproving or not willing to accept ideas or ways of behaving that are different from your own, [9]. Intolerance is synonymous with prejudice, fanatic and arrogance. Religious intolerance is an ill wind that blows no one any good. Peace is necessary for nation building and for [10], there can be no peace among people of the world without peace among the religions.

Christians should be able to tolerate Muslims and vice versa. The various religions in Nigeria should be able to create allowances for their varied opinions on issues. The various religious persuasions should be able to replace tolerance with intolerance which can come in the form of religious dialogue. Nation building is not feasible in a situation of religious tussles and crisis as its presence will jeopardize unity and national development. There should be a sharing of ideas from different religious traditions with the aim of enriching ones knowledge of other peoples religion and appreciate the values of other people's religious belief and be willing to co-exist with them, [11].

2. Tribalism: Tribalism is a word that is used to indicate tribal consciousness which exalts ones tribe more than any other tribe. Tribalism is a serious cog in

the wheel of socio-political and economic development of Nigeria; Where an Hausa man can hardly accommodate a Yoruba man in an office and vice versa, where a politician favours people of his immediate tribe, ignoring people of other tribes who may be better qualified than his tribes' man. We see a situation where one particular tribe is considered superior and born to rule while others are considered inferior and are born to remain in servitude. This is not far from the immediate problem of Nigeria. This discriminatory practice called tribalism hinders nation building.

Presently in Nigeria, the "state of origin syndrome" alone has done more irreparable damage to the cause of the unity of the nation than any other single factor. It is from this tribal-oriented ill that clannishness, nepotism and unequalled selfishness of Nigerians trace their origin and sustenance, [12].

3. Insecurity: There is currently a general insecurity in our country, states and communities. A situation where killers will invade a country, killing, destroying and rendering people homeless and the security agencies will either claim to know nothing about it or that they will investigate to find out who the killers were is a thing to be worried about. Kidnapping is now a business. People are

no longer safe in their places of worship, farms and homes. Activities of insurgents, militants, armed robber, hired assassins, Fulani herdsmen all challenges the effort for peaceful coexistence of people in our society.

4. Corruption: The enormity of corruption has forced many to ask whether Nigeria will ever be free from the malady called corruption. In 1999, Obasanjo passed an anti-corruption bill which later became unfruitful as we still talk about it today. President Muhammad Buhari came into power in 2015 with another strong agenda to make Nigeria corruption free yet, there has been cases of looting, embezzlement, misappropriation of public fund among government officials, Liza fair attitude to government work, bribery and so on. In Short, corruption is in every facet of our society today. According to [13], adults and children live with it even in their families, worship places, in schools, in neighborhood, in military and paramilitary formations including the police. Corruption is anti-nation building.

5. Value Degeneration: Another strong challenge to nation building is value degeneration. Nigerians were known to be value minded people. Values are used as standard gauge to determine whether

Implications of the Lessons of the Parable of the Prodigal son for Nation Building.

For proper understanding of the implications of the lessons of the Parable of the Prodigal son for Nation building, the purpose for which the Parable was told must be borne in mind. Jesus told this parable to vindicate himself of the allegation of the Jews that he receives sinners as against the idea of "*loving your neighbours and hating your enemies*" Mt. 6:43.

Nigeria is a pluralistic society that is characterized by so many scourges and disintegrating factors that Nation Building discourse becomes a necessity. The primary aim of Nation Building according to [3] is to unify diverse people of ethnic, religious and other pluralities who have found themselves living together in a globally recognized entity known as a United Nations member country. The

something is good or bad, right or wrong. [14] explains values as the guiding principles for acceptable behavior in the society. [7] laments on the erosion of traditional Nigerian values as a result of the importation of Western cultures. There is no more respect for hardwork, filial piety, sanctity of human life, truthfulness, patience, hospitality, dignity of labour, honesty to mention but a few. Human lives are now taken without recourse, get-rich-quick syndrome has forced to the front burner killings, dishonesty, disrespect for elders and those in positions of authority, and so on. Moral laxity that was abhorrent in Nigeria of old now receives ovation. The violation of human life was believed to be the greatest crime anyone could commit. Life for the traditional Nigerian was the greatest gift from God and therefore should not be interfered with by anyone. It was believed that God punished infringement of human life instantaneously, [8]. Killing and killers are now celebrated as individuals or groups are respected because of the number of people they have killed. These of course repel nation building.

process of attempting to unify the diverse nationalities within a territorial construction to make it politically viable and stable, is something that would resonate for all Nigerians seeing how much it describes our story after 58 years of independence of our country.

Some of the menace that characterize our nation include corruption, intolerance, tribalism, killing, destruction of lives and properties, bokoharam and Fulani herdsmen onslaught, poverty, unemployment and in fact total social upheaval. [5] observes that from the historical point of view, the bitter experience of the civil war compelled Nigeria to make effort(s) towards Nation Building. This period saw the promulgation of the Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (3Rs),

establishment of National Youth Service Corp scheme, introduction of unified examinations and unity Colleges, etc. These were all immediate political responses to the quest for Nation Building but observation shows that it was an unwholesome step hence, religion becoming a veritable remedial step for Nation Building. The moral lessons drawn from the parable of the Prodigal son contains sufficient recipes for Nation building.

There should be assurance of competence on the side of our leaders before assumption of any leadership position in Nigeria. Incompetence seems to be a bigger problem of Nigeria than corruption and this of course threatens the ideology of unity and national development. The current problem of Nigeria is attributed to President Muhammadu Buhari's incompetence and bigotry, (vanguard News, Jan 28, 2018). If melting together the various tribes, languages and religions in Nigeria could be a step toward nation building, why will the current President demonstrate incompetence by being unable to equitably distribute political appointments? It is clear that the ministries of petroleum resources, Justice, Defense, Interior, Agriculture, Education, Water resources, Environment, Information and Culture are all headed by Northerners. All cabinet rank appointments including the security of the government of the federation, Chief of staff, National security advisers, etc are all Northerners.

There have been several occasions of Fulani herdsmen onslaught in Enugu, Benue, Taraba and so on that renders many children orphans, women turned to widows, parents are made childless and many others rendered homeless. Indigenous people became refugees in their own land yet, those in positions of authority claims ignorant of those things and the only argument was the right of the herdsmen to operate anywhere in the country, (vanguard News, Jan 28, 2018). [13] asks, "does that promote peaceful coexistence and nation building"? The

answer is of course in the negative. The incompetence demonstrated by the prodigal son landed him in penury, his initial family background notwithstanding. Nigerians and her leaders should sit up. Competence should spur a leader to listen to the cry of his people, caution appropriately those who have no regard for the sanctity of human life and ensure peaceful coexistence among his countrymen, only then can nation building be possible.

Furthermore, Premium Times reports how Hon. Abaribe lashed the President Buhari, describing him as incompetent. "Constantly denying responsibilities when things go wrong is a height of incompetence. Channeling the killings to invaders from outside Nigeria and yet there is a commander-in-chief validates his own incompetence". The Lawmaker further states, "Why do we still indulge this President that everywhere goes along to tell everybody outside this country that he is totally incompetent"? (Premium Times, Thursday April 12, 2018). Those who have examined themselves and realize that they are not able to handle whatever position of trust that is bequeathed to them should honourably resign because nation is above self.

To achieve unity and peaceful coexistence that will guarantee national development in Nigeria, individuals or groups that have failed Nigerians should acknowledge their faults and make up their mind to turn a new leaf in the similitude of the Prodigal son. Giving credence to this fact, the former President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo said:

"I do not believe that God has created a bad situation for Nigeria or for any particular section of the country or for any particular country in Africa. So why are things not going right? We must blame ourselves. It's an issue of leadership, governance, development, and values. These are things that we must take seriously and make sure we get them right," (Daily Post, March 6, 2018).

Accepting your true self is a sure way towards becoming a better person. Those

who engage in corrupt practices in politics, education sector, religion, even groups and individuals should have a rethink and turn a new leaf. Those who have embezzled public funds should willingly return whatsoever they may have taken and not to carry on with their activities at the detriment of the poor without realizing that we are one Nigeria and that the nation is making no headway in either bringing development or unifying the diverse people of the nation. This paper also advocates forgiveness as a veritable tool for nation building. It is often observed that people vie for political positions in order that they may find grounds for retaliation. Others are seen witch-hunting either their political opponents, attacking other religious groups, other tribes, family enemies and so on. It is only true forgiveness that can guarantee nation building. The father of the prodigal son regardless of his son's prodigality ran to welcome him with a warm embrace and a kiss which were all ways of showing genuine forgiveness. He not only forgave his son, he taught and compelled his other son to forgive his prodigal brother. Our nation will celebrate and merry again if we are able to forgive and accept one another in love.

Being accommodating and shunning discrimination will guarantee oneness, promote peace and development in our

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regardless of how disintegrating the Nigerian nation is, the situation is not hopeless. This paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Leadership positions should not be a platform for experimentation. Before anyone assumes any position of trust, Nigerians should ascertain the person's level of competence before voting or appointing such person and not using leadership positions as compensation.
2. Government should immediately dismiss anyone who does not demonstrate competence in his or her duty regardless of tribe or religious affiliation.

nation. A set of people insisting on taking power by all means in order to mete vengeance on others should be unheard of a country that wants to make a headway. Retaliation and vengeance are disintegrating elements that rather divides any nation. Some of us with the same attitude of the elder brother of the prodigal son who insisted on the rejection of his brother should learn to forebear, accommodate and accept one another. Finally, love, which is the central lesson the Parable of the prodigal son aims to pass across seems to have been overtaken by hatred in our nation. Whether our neighbours are dying or living no longer concerns people. People in one religious group now celebrate over the destruction of lives of her sister religious people. Filial piety is now a folktale. There is neither affection nor empathy. People's action best describes apathy which is the reason for the heightened killings and destruction of lives and properties in Nigeria today. Nigerians have gone through a lot of hardship and bloodshed in recent times as a result of hatred, intolerance, disunity, tribal mindedness and so on which wouldn't be so if she would uphold the lesson of love that Christ taught through the Parable of the Prodigal son. We have gone astray as a nation; it is time to return home.

3. Nigerians should imbibe the spirit of forgiveness, accommodation and acceptance as this will guarantee the peaceful coexistence needed for Nation Building.
4. The government should ensure that there is no punishment for anyone who willingly returns stolen property (ies) or fund, either as a politician, religious leader, civil servants and the general public, instead, there should be a reward.
5. Religious groups and organizations should intensify teaching on tolerance and give more room for dialogue and cross-fertilization of religious ideas.
6. Parents and families should revive and teach their children those traditional

Nigerian values that are gradually fading away into extinction such as sanctity of human life, filial piety, honesty, hospitality, hard work, etc

To achieve a global community of a sustainable development is to enhance peace and harmony. The moral lessons of love, forgiveness, acceptance, tolerance, etc drawn from the parable of the prodigal son have been observed to be veritable recipe for nation building. It will

CONCLUSION

Eluu and Okah
7. All and sundry should embrace love. It should be at the epicenter of our actionplay. We should teach it and live by it.

also enhance socio-political and economic stability in Nigeria if imbibed. The current suffering, maiming, bloodshed, tribalism, intolerance and so on are all disintegrating forces that can only dispel national unity and development.

REFERENCES

1. Abaribe, E. (2018). Premium Times, Thursday April, 12.
2. Dele, S. (2018). Vanguard News, Sunday January, 28. Volume 3, Issue 2.
3. Eluu, P. E. (2006). Religion Education: A Panacea for Tolerance and Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria. *Ebonyi Setae University Journal of Education*, 4(2),139-146.
4. Ezekwesili, O. (2015). The Role of the Church in Nation Building. *The Nigerian Voice*: <http://www.theNigeriavoice.com>.
5. Hornby, A.S.(1999) Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary Britain: Oxford University Press
6. Ibenwa, C.N (2014) "Religion and Nation Building: A Critical Analysis" *International Journal of African Society Cultures and Practices*. 1(2) 1-12.
7. Jimmy, S. (2013). *The King James Expositor's Study Bible*. Baton Rouge: LA.
8. Kanu, R.C. African Traditional Morality and Nation Building. In Okwueze, M.I. (ed) Religion and Social Development: Contemporary Nigerian Perspectives. Lagos: Merit International Publishers.
9. Nwabiusi, E. M. (2000). *Values and Education*. Onitsha: Spirit an Publishers.
10. Obasanjo, O. (2018). Daily Post, Tuesday March, 6. Vol. 20 Issue 10.
11. Okafor, M. (2007). *Teaching Morality and Religious Education*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
12. Okah, S.U (2017). Inhibititors to Effective Implementation of Christian Religious Studies Curriculum in Secondary Schools in Ebonyi State, An M.Ed Dissertation, EBSU. (Unpublished).
13. Okoli, E.U (2008). *Essential Christian Religious Knowledge for Senior secondary Schools*. Lagos: Tonad Publishers Limited.
14. Osaat, S.D (2011). *Education in Africa*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.