



My Servant Moses is Dead, But You Still Live

A Meditation on the Life and Death of Senator Jovito R. Salonga
(June 22, 1920 - March 10, 2016)

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Text: *Deut 34: 9-12 - Joshua 1:1-2*

Let us pray:

“O God of truth and wisdom and power: . . .

Help us to be what we really are, without any pretence, but always aspiring to be what You want us to be - serving you and serving our people with integrity, courage, and dedication. Teach us to follow the dictates of our conscience, regardless of the applause of the crowd or the heckling of cynics. We know that if we are with You every step of the way, nothing else would matter.

In Jesus name, Amen.”

A lot could be said of a person’s character by what he or she asks for in his or her prayers. I led you in a prayer uttered by the Senator Jovy Salonga on March 27, 1990 - a man who aspired to be what God wanted him to be, a man who served God and our people with integrity, courage and dedication, following the dictates of his conscience, irregardless of whether there be praise or opposition or even antipathy. Here was a man who knew that if he

was with God every step of the way, nothing else would matter. This is the kind of a man we honor tonight. This is the man whose life inspired us, whose life we celebrate, but most of all, a life we should emulate. Even as we mourn our nation's loss of a man so noble, we thank God for the gift of Sen. Jovy to us, to our Church, and to our people.

As he was taken from us, much has been said about him in the newspapers, in the television and in social media about

- how his life and dedicated service has ennobled us, how he in his courage and commitment, "he lit a candle during the deep darkness of the dictatorship,"
- how, in his love of country, he became a guerrilla during the Second World War; was captured and tortured, and again during the Marcos dictatorship and Martial Law, he was imprisoned
- how, in the lack of plenty, he sold ice drop and newspapers, shone shoes, fetched water for neighbors, and went on to finish his schooling and topping the Bar,
- how, in his Senate bids, he managed to top the field, not once or twice, but thrice,
- how he shepherded the Senate, even amidst pressures from Malacanang, to deny the renewal of the lopsided US Military Bases Agreement, thus re-asserting Philippine sovereignty over these bases,
- how he came back to serve our people after his studies abroad instead of accepting offers to teach there, and how he returned again after his exile in the USA to once more serve our people.
- a patriot and a statesman only a few can equal or surpass. His name will be uttered and enumerated with awe with Lorenzo Tanada, Pepe Diokno, and Claro Recto

But for us in the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and UCCP Cosmopolitan Church (his local church), he was

- a Pastor's Kid. Son of Pastor Esteban Salonga, one of the pioneering pastors of Rizal.
- in the early 50's, he chaired the Industrial Life Committee of the UCCP which studied the condition and plight of workers
- he, together with Pastor Cirilo Rigos, and other ecumenical personages started in the UCCP Cosmopolitan Church along Taft Ave., the Wednesday Forum when discussions of socio-political issues during the Marcos dictatorship was still dangerous
- he represented the UCCP and the Philippines in the World Council of Churches Commission of International Affairs
- and while he lost his presidential bid to another UCCP member, Fidel Valdez Ramos, he was unanimously elected as President of the 1993 UCCP Constitution and By-laws. In this Convention he actively pushed for a system of conflict resolution and exhaustion of all remedies within the Church before going outside to the civil courts.

The accolades can go on and on and on.

But my task tonight is not just to give a eulogy but to preach a sermon as well. The passage that was read earlier talked about the death of a well-respected leader, a statesman, so to speak, who like our beloved Sen. Jovy, also stood up and became a beacon of hope during the long dark night of his people's oppression. Like our beloved Sen. Jovy, who became part of his people's movement to liberation from bondage, he would not "see the dawn". The Promised Land was still a work in progress. Like our beloved Sen. Jovy, no matter how long and arduous the struggle may take, he never lost hope but continued to labor on till the end. He was Moses.

"Moses, my servant, is dead," the Lord said. He lives no longer, but you still do. And while the Israelites were allowed to mourn his passing from their midst (at the end of Deuteronomy) yet at the beginning of the next book, we see God calling Joshua to proceed to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

The people were not just to mourn over the lost of this great leader, they were to continue what he had begun. They were to proceed; they were to bring into fruition the battle-cry of Moses: "Let my people go."

There is a word for us from the Lord tonight. There is a message for us to heed: Sen. Jovy is dead but you and I still live. If we want to truly honor him not just in tongue and in words, we are to proceed; we are to continue his legacy; we must cross our Jordan to bring our people to a land flowing with milk and honey. Sen. Jovy is dead, but you and I still live.

In his youth, he joined the guerrilla movement to fight invaders to our shore. He suffered for it. He was tortured. At the height of his political career where he built a reputation of being "Mr. Clean." Amidst systemic graft and corruption his name was untainted, unsullied, unstained. But again he suffered, a victim at the Plaza Miranda bombing.

In his narration of that bombing, he wrote:

"The doctors removed the bandages
and I saw with one eye my hideous wounds;
They counted the bits of shrapnel on the x-ray plates
and told me I had more than a hundred.
Horrified, I closed my eyes and wondered how long the journey would be.
How long, O Lord, how long?"

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me

"Slowly, the wounds healed, one by one;
But the scars, like canyons, are ugly and deep
In my mind's eye, I saw His wounds
Then the scars on His hands and feet;
I heard His words - "I came not to be served but to serve . . ."
Almost twenty-two years have gone by
Since that dark night in the valley of death;

Forgive me, Lord, now I know why I live.”

(a poem recited during Easter Sunday - April 11, 1993 -
slightly modified for emphasis - rnom)

Sen. Jovy knew why he lived? Do we?

Sen. Jovy knew that a life well-lived is a life of service. To God. For country. For our people. Service which knows no age. He would often say in various ways: “You are as young as your dreams. You are as old as your fears.”

From youth till his body could not take it anymore,
from classroom to the courts,
from House of Representatives to the halls of Senate,
from Wednesday Forum to Kilosbayan,
from church to our body politic,
from fighting against abuse of power
to fighting for ethical standards and good governance ---
. . .his was a life of service.

Amidst the struggles he went through in life, He once was asked: “Is life worth living?” He replied:

“Yes, life is worth living. . . It is a privilege to be alive. My bones may be broken, but that is alright, as long as we allow no one to break our faith in God and our love for our fellowmen. Verily, it is in losing our life in a cause bigger than (life) itself that we find the meaning of life and the real joy of living.”

Sen. Jovy knew why he lived? Do we?

“Moses, My servant is dead,” said the Lord. But much was expected of Joshua and his people to do. We are told that it took a protracted struggle to be able to see their dream come true. It was not accomplished overnight. The people had to work hard and labor long to bring it about.

And so it is with us today: Sen. Jovy is dead but you and I still live. So like in one of his prayers quoting Scripture he prayed,

“Teach us, therefore to number our days so we may use our time on earth wisely and well.” He urged his fellow Senators in that prayer that they may “work together as one team, working for but one nation, one people, one dream, one aspiration - to serve the interests and priorities of the lowliest and the most deprived among our people.
(October 18, 1989)

Unfortunately, many who have uttered and posted words of praise and accolades to our beloved Sen. Salonga, will leave and soon go back to the daily routine of life, forgetting what he stood for, what he longed for our country to be, what his hopes were. To paraphrase Pres. Obama on his eulogy of the Rev. and Senator Carmeta Pinckney, a victim of the spate of gun violence in the US, killed inside his church: “. . . it would be a betrayal of everything (Senator Salonga) stood for, I believe, if we allowed ourselves to slip into a comfortable silence again. Once the eulogies have been delivered, once the TV cameras move on, to go back to business as usual -- that’s what we so often do to avoid uncomfortable truths . . . that still

infects our society. To settle for symbolic gestures without following up with the hard work of more lasting change -- that's how we lose our way again." To honor the man with just words and forget what he stood for is an empty symbolic gesture. To honor the man with just words and not continue the things he fought for is an empty gesture.

Senator Jovy, often talked and prayed about the fragility of our democracy, even as Moses the great servant of God often struggled at how his people lived and behaved.

"The credibility of our political institution is on trial - now more than ever before. Remind us of the fragility of our [new] democracy. Help us, dear Lord, to fortify it with the qualities that make a nation great: self-discipline, integrity, hard work, moral courage, and a willingness to sacrifice."

Like Moses not wanting his people to forget their bondage in Egypt, Sen Jovy did not want us to forget the dark days of Martial rule, he prayed:

"Never allow us, dear Lord to forget the sacrifices of our martyrs who fell in the long dark night of oppression and misery. Help us to remember the young men and women who left the comforts of home and the fellowship of friends and family to give their all for the sake of a free, open and just society" (Sept. 13, 1989).

The good Senator, together with 11 others, re-asserted Philippine sovereignty by rejecting the renewal of the US Military Bases. But Sen. Jovy is dead. Is to honor the man for us just to sit and do nothing while our national sovereignty is trampled? Shall we just remain silent while EDCA and the VFA are rammed down our throats? Shall we just remain silent in the light of China's incursion on our waters?

May we honor the man we love, not just in words and in tongue but deed and in truth, as I John 3:18 would put it. For the UCCP, especially his beloved UCCP Cosmopolitan Church, may we light a candle of hope again in our land by reviving the Wednesday Forum he initiated, where issues of the day are openly and freely discussed. It rends my heart that sometime back, past Councils of the Church have questioned the holding of similar fora, forgetting that once that corner of Taft Avenue blazed the light of truth and prophetic witness - one of the very few places in the Philippines that courageously did so during the darkest period of the dictatorship. More than ever there is a need for such a light for our nation.

At the back of the book we were given at his 90th birthday celebration (now a priceless treasure for us who have it), hardly readable until you put it directly under a light is this quote from Senator Jovy Salonga: "With humility and compassion, we might be able to do something about the suffering of our fellow human beings and in our little way, serve as salt of our earth and the light of our world, to God's greater glory."

Moses, God's servant, is dead. But there is still need for Joshuas to rise up and continue the work. Our Sen. Jovy is dead, but you and I still live. May we take up his cause. May we continue his legacy. May we live a life well-lived, just as he did. Amen.